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## brief report

# The Embodied Art Therapy Process (TEATP): A Single Case Study Surfacing a Young Child's Voice

Lama Majaj , Ronald P. M. H. Lay, and Mahesh Iyer

### Abstract

*The Embodied Art Therapy Process (TEATP) focuses on the co-creation of embodied artistic expressions to promote self-awareness and autonomy for children. A case study describes how TEATP was implemented to support a child in gaining self-awareness and autonomy. Awareness of her own body, sensations, and feeling allowed her to assert her voice and practice agency.*

**Keywords:** Art therapy; embodiment; embodied expression; co-creation; child

Art therapy with children can be an empowering and exhilarating experience leading to self-discovery through authentic expressions allowing their individual voice to surface (Deboys et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2010). A child's autonomy is often influenced by their respective culture, their parents and caregivers, and by their immediate environments; each of which further impacts their behavior, movement, gestures (Bernardi, 2020). This observation extends into their experiences of therapy (Daniels & Jenkins, 2010). In our desire to situate a model of art therapy rooted in equal participation with children, this article presents The Embodied Art Therapy Process (TEATP). This emerging model respects children's agency and choice by prioritizing embodiment with creative practices in art therapy.

### Embodiment in Art Therapy

We use the term *embodiment* as a distinctive and underlying concept in TEATP. The model is primarily

informed by Eddy (2019) who defines embodiment as, “bringing awareness to the body through movement, touch and imagery allowing the consciousness of bodily sensations to make its way to the cortical parts of the brain” (p. 12). TEATP emphasizes embodied movement to understand the movement of the mind, “When the body is experienced from within, the body and mind are not separated but are experienced as a whole” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012, p. 1). The model further draws upon Levine's (2017) concept of the felt-sense and Porges' (2018) Polyvagal Theory to facilitate voice, autonomy and choice.

For children, it is particularly important to establish healthy patterns of “mindful movement” and “embodied being” (Eddy & Moradian, 2020). Bauer (2018) stated, “movement is an expression of our life-force, and our bodies are the source of that expression” (p. 19). The embodied experience then, is a continuous attentive feedback loop that flows between inner and outer awareness where one creates a narrative to make sense of their own world (Pena, 2019; Riviere, 2014; Tantia, 2014). Full-bodied experiences encourage presence and allow for the feedback from the inner and outer experiences to emerge, enabling clients to make choices consciously. Tortora (2005) emphasized that posture and nonverbal movement qualities may influence children's actions, behavior, and ability to learn. Helping children recognize and retrain healthy patterns of being in their bodies is critical to their development and sense of autonomy.

Embodiment in art therapy can deepen the experience because movement, perception, and emotions are sensed, processed, and expressed through the arts (Koch & Fuchs, 2011). TEATP intentionally combines movement with the creative process to facilitate children's agency. Therefore, a child involved with this process is empowered to explore their embodied creative expressions, resulting in the discovery and development of their authentic voice.

### TEATP Framework

TEATP provides a model for art therapists to use the body as a therapeutic tool and a foundational access

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point for inner and outer self-awareness. The therapist and child create experiences together. In this relational space, the nonverbal exchange between the art therapist and the child is optimized to create a neuroception of safety (Dana, 2018). Once this safety is observed in the children's interactions, they are guided through intentional movement based activities with art making to learn to self-regulate their fight, flight and freeze responses back into a parasympathetic state. In this process, children also gain a more comprehensive understanding of their body (Eddy, 2019). As children develop these realizations, they instill an increased awareness and respect for their bodies that lead to healthier behaviors with others (Bauer, 2018). To support autonomy, children are empowered to be agents of their own therapy; for example, they have the choice to invite their parents to join them in the session.

TEATP is suitable for children who are able to express their thoughts and make safe connections with their bodies. As with any therapeutic model, caution must be practiced with children who have experienced trauma. Art therapists interested in this model require experience with embodied approaches such as somatic awareness, breath work, Polyvagal Theory, and movement-based practices. TEATP includes four phases that are designed to attune and mirror the child's actions to ensure a deeper relationship is built over the course of time.

### Phase 1: Safe and Center

To help a child gain autonomy through TEATP, establishing safety and a strong therapeutic alliance is paramount. During this phase art therapists are required to be consciously aware of their own physiological states to center themselves. To achieve this, the therapist can opt to use the following as prompts or as guiding questions: What is my body telling me? What state is it in? What is the quality of my breath and heartbeat? What is my body language communicating?

Art therapists are invited to be open, playful, receptive and match the child's nonverbal actions and expressions through mirroring and attunement. From this place of relating and communicating, art therapists observe the child and wait for the right moment to enter their world. For example, the art therapist kneels down to greet the child at their level and pay attention to their interests. This non-threatening body posture enables connection and co-regulation since the physiological states of the therapist influences the child's emotions and behavior (Porges, 2018). Any type of engagement that the child presents is also consistently witnessed, celebrated and acknowledged verbally.

### Phase 2: Movement and Art

The child is given the autonomy to choose one of three options: 1. Explore movement first which leads to

creating art about it; 2. Create art first which leads to exploring it with movement; or, 3. Use movement while creating art. The child is invited to use her/his full body as a way to explore space, shape and effort through art making. Explorations in TEATP occur in a relational space where the focus is on body awareness through balance, stability and mobility. Fused with art making, children are invited to experience their body in space and document their body in motion using colors, shapes and lines. The intention of the session is to slow down the mind and allow for an embodied state to emerge.

The child's movements may range from breath to more complex movements such as shifting body weight, moving toward and away and playing with speed and rhythms. Once the attunement is formed the therapist introduces new challenging and supportive movements to enable the child to explore, expand and develop creative process. During this phase it is important that art therapists raise their awareness by relating and observing how nonverbal and multisensory experiences may influence the experience of the child. Art therapists can ask themselves: What is the purpose of my experiential intervention with this child? How will the child's body feel this experience and what will they learn? How can I optimize and anchor the embodied experience? How is the child becoming more aware of their body and themselves? How will follow-up sessions anchor the experience so that the child can learn to re-access this state at will?

### Phase 3: Voice

After they completed their embodied creative expression, children are asked to pay close attention to their body and identify any sensations, feelings, colors or change in temperature. As children become more aware of their bodies, they can shift from nonverbal communication to verbal. The art therapist supports the child's experience and invites them into a reflective space through questions that can include: What was your most enjoyable part of the session? What did you learn about your body? How does your body feel after moving?

### Phase 4: Documentation

Documentation is multitiered and involves the inputs and reflections of the art therapist, the parent or caregiver, and the child. In addition to conventional surveys, feedback forms, and assessment tools; documentation includes digital photos, videos and written reflections at various intervals throughout the duration of the therapy. The visuals are uploaded and dated after each session onto a secure digital platform. Children and their parents are provided with a set of open-ended questions and invited to create response art to facilitate their reflections. The parents are requested to provide genuine feedback from their observations. The child is encouraged to recall their sessions and write about their

experience. Parent support sessions are scheduled to ensure that parents facilitate genuine conversation to elicit the child's perspective after receiving the digital platform. If the child has special needs or is nonverbal, the caregivers are requested to share the visual documentation with the child and record any observations in affect or words.

## Case Study

A case study facilitated by Majaj (first author) with a female adolescent exemplifies TEATP. Janelle (pseudonym) was referred to art therapy as she experienced difficulty relating to others and presented low self-esteem. Sessions were held weekly over a period of 4 months and followed the four phases of the TEATP model. Through movement, art, and reflection she became more aware of her body and learnt to regulate her physiological states, nurture her voice, and reinforced her inner resilience. Janelle provided assent and her mother, Mrs. Sim (pseudonym), provided written consent to publish this case.

### Phase 1: Janelle's Safety and Centering

During the first few sessions, Janelle insisted on wearing her backpack to feel safe and invited her mother to join her. I mirrored her posture to feel what she was feeling and reflected on my own inner experiences. Noting her gentle demeanor, I approached Janelle with softness and openness. Gradually, she made more eye contact with me and relaxed into her posture suggesting that she was comfortable and at ease.

In the course of art therapy, Janelle developed her own centering practice and defined her personal boundaries. The practice began by; first, standing on both feet and sensing how she is supported by the ground. She then repeatedly narrated the words "my space" while drawing invisible boundaries through slow intentional lateral arm movements while stepping from side to side. Finally, she brought her awareness to how parts of her body is moving in relation to one another.

### Phase 2: Janelle's Movement and Art

Janelle used movement and art to explore her body and discover new ideas about herself. The following example demonstrates the three ways options for practice. These anecdotes illustrate how she explored the interplay between art and movement in TEATP.

**Art Leading to Movement.** During the first session, Janelle first used art and introduced herself with a drawing of a little girl crying underneath a blue cloud (Figure 1). I acknowledged and supported her courageous act of sharing her vulnerability and asked her if she felt any tension in her body. "My head," she answered in a soft



Figure 1. Janelle, *Self-Portrait*, Acrylic Paint on Paper

voice. I invited her to lie down on the floor by my side and feel the contact of her body to the ground. We commenced a movement exploration that enabled Janelle to bring her awareness to her head by feeling its size, weight and shape. Our movement began by gently lifting our heads and rolling it from side to side. We then curled into a child's position and rolled over the top of our heads to feel the relationship between the head and neck. From this position we spiraled, pushing through space into a standing position. The intervention was playful and interactive, allowing Janelle to arrive in the present moment and release her tension in her head, marking a significant shift in her state.

**Movement Leading to Art.** In one of the sessions, I observed Janelle's standing posture and noticed that one of her hips was higher than the other. This observation was further confirmed by a physiotherapist in a consultation at a later time. When Janelle found out about this, she came into the art therapy session feeling sad about her spine and expressed her worries. I began this session with education by explaining anatomy, supported by diagrams and drawings, to describe important functions of the spine in protecting the spinal cord.

I then invited Janelle to explore the relationship between her spine and hips through movement. We started in the standing position. Beginning with her head, I asked her to slowly roll down and fold into her spine feeling each vertebrae at a time, bending at the waist, and the knees going down as far as her body feels



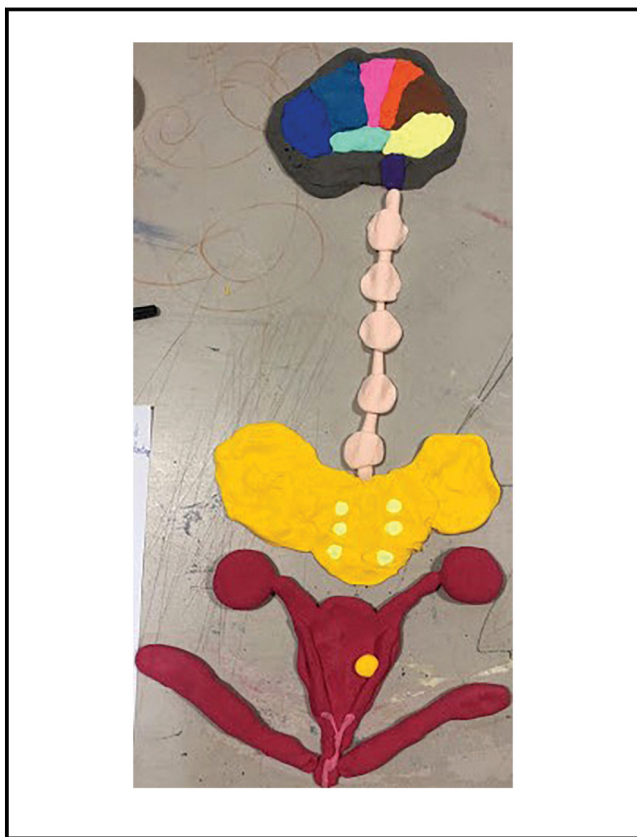


Figure 2. Janelle, *Colourful Body*, Air Dry Clay

comfortable. Following head, neck, shoulders, arms, chest, abdomen, then bending at the waists and knees. We then reversed the exercise in slow motion. Paying close attention to the quality of movement, Janelle was guided to notice any sensations and visualize colors. This activity was followed by a self-guided touch where Janelle explored the surface of her vertebrae, sensing how her bones are aligned to support her movement. I guided her to breathe in and out slowly, directing her breath to areas in her spine that she felt she needed to pay attention to. I invited Janelle to feel grateful for each vertebra and create a sculpture representing her unique spine using air dry clay (Figure 2).

In another session, Janelle was invited to explore the felt sense in her body after tracing her body outline. I guided her to pay attention to the perceptions of her inner and outer experiences through movement and breath. The process helped her gain awareness to the part in her body that felt most heavy and tense. She was asked to inhale for three counts and exhale for five counts while simultaneously observing the part without judgment. Janelle was then asked to describe the emerging qualities of her observations in colors, tones, sounds, textures, smells, vibrations. Janelle pointed to her stomach as a tense area in her body, focused her attention to the quality of these sensations, and described them in words. She named feelings of pain, disgust, hunger, exposed, anxious, and scared and used finger paint to

create an image using different colors on a strip of cardboard (Figure 3). After this session, she no longer experienced these feelings or sensations in her stomach.

**Movement With Art.** Movement with art was explored during a session when Janelle invited her father to join her. I invited them to describe their relationship as father and daughter visually on a large sheet of paper. Together, Janelle and her father explored the floor in comfortable positions and used their bodies to make marks with mindful movements. They were guided to use their full body and express their movement in different positions. This ranged from lying flat and moving both arms together in the opposite direction to form a circle and kneeling down to move from the waistline to notice the head-tail connection (Figure 4). As they explored the space with these movements, they gradually moved in proximity and interlocked their arms toward the end to draw side by side. Through this playful and engaging session, Janelle and her father used their bodies to interconnect and overlap with each other to create a visual representation of their bond.

### Phase 3: Janelle's Voice

In all TEATP sessions, Janelle was asked to notice how her body felt in comparison to the beginning of the session. This helped her become aware of changes in her felt sense at the end of each session which she described in her written reflections. For instance when she released the tension in her head through movement, Janelle expressed:

Dear myself, although sometimes many people yell at you, there is no need to think that you are a useless weakling. You are a winner and a hero. You show an act of kindness to those that are new. If you are a weakling, you would not have been in the world. Remember "be yourself."

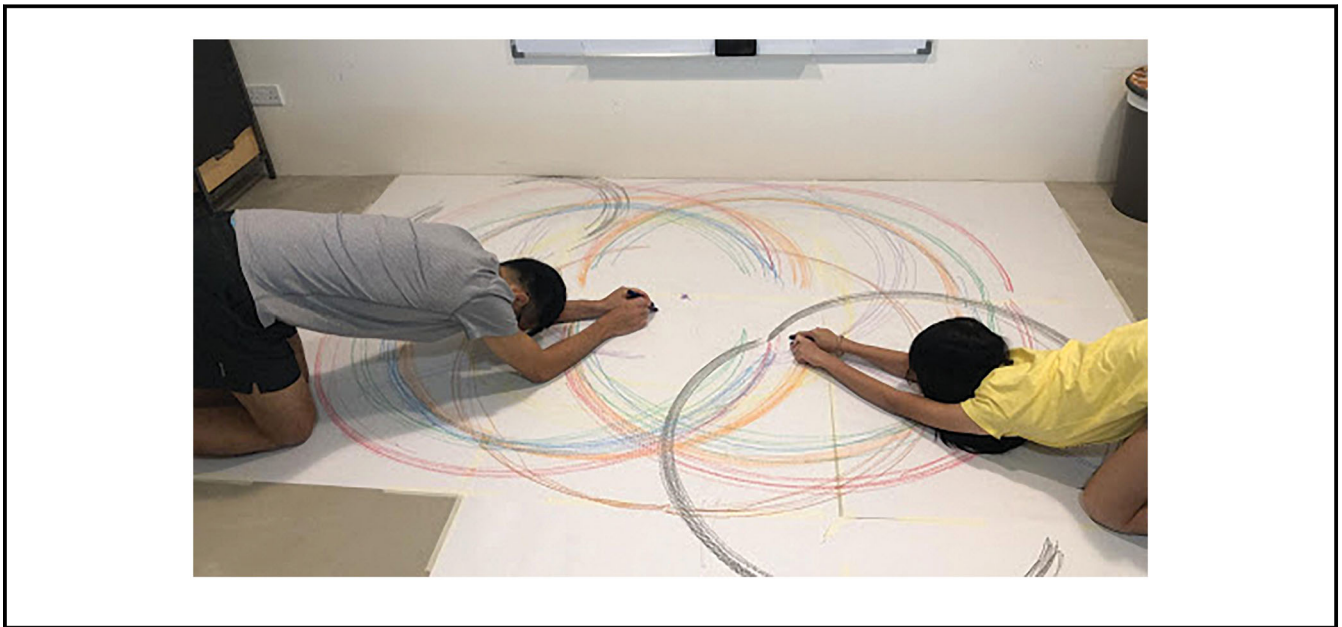
Similarly when Janelle reflected on her movement exploration of her spine and created a sculpture she expressed, "the body is more colorful than u think. The colors are symbols of feelings, and even though our spine is slanted, it is not malfunctional or wrong. We don't make mistakes and so does not our body [sic]."

### Phase 4: Documentation

Janelle's reflections through the sessions documented her journey from self-doubt to self-acceptance and empowerment. Her words of self-affirmation honor her inner experiences and authentic ways of being. With awareness, Janelle was able to grow and connect more to herself as she explored her different body states. For example, Janelle reflected, "When I worked with my dad on the circular lines using my body and crayons, we made the



**Figure 3.** Janelle, *Feelings in My Tummy: Disgusted, Pain, Anxious, Scared, Hunger and Exposed*, Finger Painting on Paper



**Figure 4.** Janelle and Her father, *Two Bodies*, Oil Pastels on Paper

drawing together. on a large piece of paper stuck together from smaller pieces, this represented the bond between me and my dad.” In a drawing about herself as the most important person in her life (Figure 5) Janelle wrote:

When I did the drawing of me in a stick girl version stating “I want to eat some chips by myself” I realized that I was expressing myself and not hiding my thoughts! I am the most important person in my life. Seriously mom I need those chips.

In her concluding reflective process, Janelle shared, “art therapy helped me express myself among people. I know I can be who I am and that no one can judge me no matter what as there will always be ME.”

Learning to express her inner voice also created a window into her world that allowed her parents to better understand and relate to her. One of Mrs. Sim’s reflection stated:

Though it has only been a few months since we started the therapy, the results on my girl are more than amazing! Her social connections have also started to show positive improvements in school. And most importantly, I’m a happier Mother with a happier Daughter.

In her concluding remarks, her mother expressed:

Through the meaningful conversations created from her artworks, I learnt so much more in the last 4 months than ever. I was able to see (literally) and hear her voice through her creations and reconnect with her at an emotional level we never had before!

In a parallel process to documenting Janelle’s journey, I engaged in somatic reflexive writing to track my embodied sensations that informed my perceptions and understandings. I used information from my senses

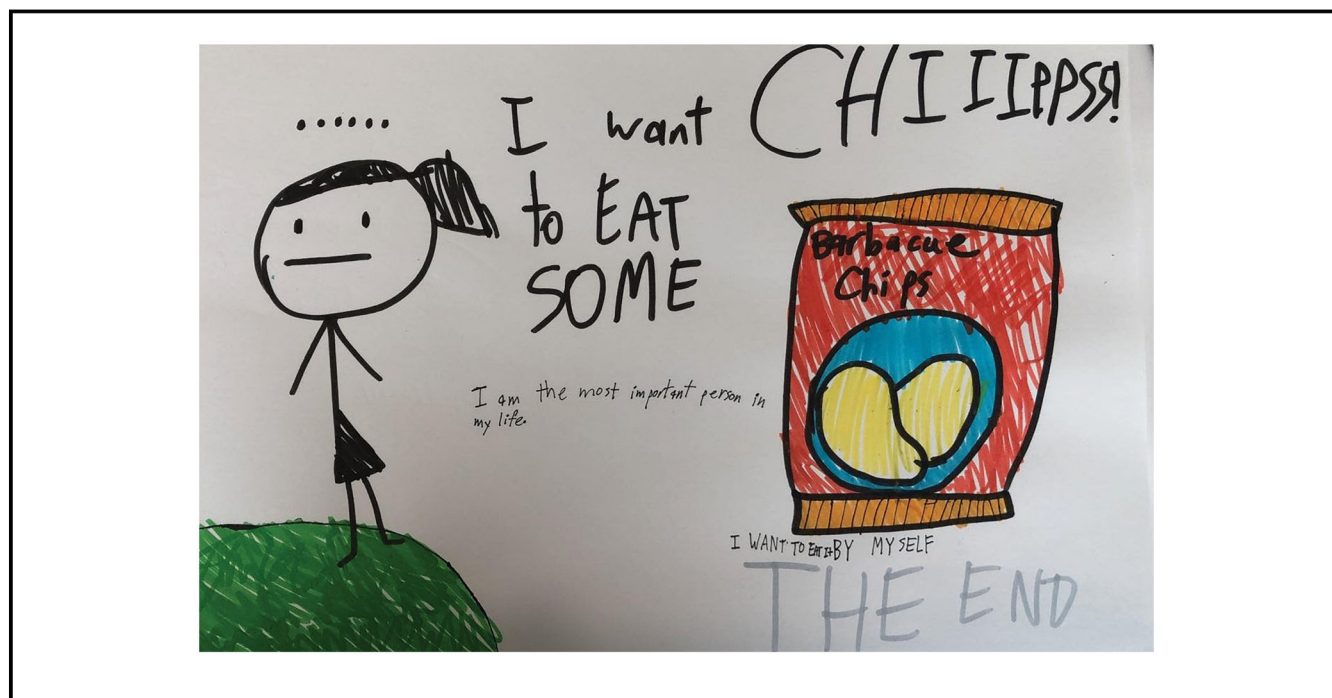


Figure 5. Janelle, *Chips*, Felt-Tip Markers on Paper

(touch, smell, proprioception, sight, imagination, hearing and internal awareness) to tune into my own experience bringing it into conscious awareness. During the sessions I was able to *feel* and witness Janelle's vulnerabilities and the chaos in her stomach at times of social isolation.

## Implications

Childhood is a developmentally critical time. Along with bodily changes and the ever-present distraction of screens and social media, children are most often found to be disconnected from their bodies (Bauer, 2018). They are constantly bombarded with an invasive stimulus as they strive to articulate their own self-determination, autonomy, dignity, and integrity. In my reflective practice as an art therapist, observing children with such a disconnection has been consistent. Children who are not aware of themselves are typically not aware of their choices, which most often results in difficulty communicating their needs. In this case, I witnessed Janelle build her resilience as her awareness of her body increased. With this new embodied knowledge Janelle was able find her voice and express herself better.

With Janelle, we created an equal shared space where she explored her inner voice to express ideas about herself and the world around her. As Janelle felt safe, she learnt different means of exploring her body, gesture, and posture to naturally create a state of integrated body awareness. For example, she gradually let go of her backpack and moved freely. Her mother reported that she was a lot more focused when doing homework and was practicing breathing during breaks in school. Part of

what helped establish this co-created space was how I adopted a stance of inquiry and remained inquisitive to learn about Janelle's interest and internal world. I used my body as an access point to understand Janelle's experiences through mirroring and the use of movement then art as a form of expression. This helped me connect with Janelle as we both explored the intersubjective space between us.

## Conclusion

This case study contributes to existing approaches in art therapy that emphasize working with children in ways that are more body-based to support self-regulation, autonomy, and voice. TEATP actively encourages embodied artistic expressions to emerge and guide the child to their voice and choice. It provides insight and understanding of the use of the body in art therapy and augments it to a reservoir of embodied knowledge to amplify the voice of the child that are otherwise unheard. TEATP is an emerging model that is having a profound impact on the lives of children. As such, it is hoped that others will be inspired and interested to collaborate with its ongoing development.

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