VISUALLY SPEAKING:
ART THERAPY AND THE DEAF

Photo by N. Bachrach.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Ellen G. Horovitz, Ph.D., LCAT, ATR-BC is Professor, Chair of Creative Arts Therapy, and Director of the Art Therapy Clinic at Nazareth College of Rochester. She has had over 30 years of experience with myriad patient populations and specializes in family art therapy with the Deaf. Dr. Horovitz currently is in private practice. She is the author of numerous articles, book chapters and the following books: *Spiritual Art Therapy: An Alternate Path*, *A Leap of Faith: The Call to Art* and *Art Therapy As Witness: A Sacred Guide.* As well, Dr. Horovitz has directed and produced over ten films available in DVD format (Dr. Horovitz's films are available though www.arttxfilms.com). Dr. Horovitz is past President-Elect of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA). For additional information contact: Dr. Ellen G. Horovitz, ATR-BC / Director of Graduate Art Therapy / Nazareth College / 4245 East Avenue Rochester, N.Y. 14618 / e-mail: ehorovi4@naz.edu or ehorovit@rochester.rr.com

VISUALLY SPEAKING

Art Therapy and the Deaf

Edited by

ELLEN G. HOROVITZ, PH.D., LCAT, ATR-BC

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

ISBN 978-0-398-07715-0 (hard)
ISBN 978-0-398-07716-7 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2006051120

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Printed in the United States of America
SM-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Visually speaking : art therapy and the deaf / edited by Ellen G. Horovitz.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-398-07715-0 -- ISBN 0-398-07716-9 (pbk.)
1. Art therapy. 2. Deaf. I. Horovitz, Ellen G.

RC489.A7V574 2007
616.89'1656--dc22

2006051120

Dedicated to my wonderful, albeit complicated children,
Kaitlyn Leah Darby and Bryan James Darby,
whose language I have yet to speak.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jacob M. Atkinson has completed his Masters in Creative Art Therapies (MCAT) at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. His collegiate career began at Snow College, were he studied printmaking, ceramics, and sculpture. Upon completing his Associate of Science degree from Snow College, he attended Utah State University where he received his Bachelors of Fine Art with an emphasis in printmaking. During his time at school, Jacob had the opportunity to study art in Switzerland, tour parts of Western Europe and live in Alaska, Hawaii, Florida, Utah and New York. Although his degree is in printmaking, Jacob also works in clay, wood, paint, glass, paper, and photographic mediums. Additionally, he has exhibited his art in the United States and Canada. Jacob believes the healing power of art comes from the creating and sharing of one's experiences and emotions through an individual's art. Jacob hopes to be more equipped and able to help others discover the healing power of art, as a practicing Art Therapist.

Sally Brucker, M.A., MSW., ATR received her masters in Early Childhood Special Education (1973) and in Art Therapy from George Washington University in 1978. Ms. Brucker has been practicing art therapy for over 20 years, has taught introductory courses in art therapy at Gallaudet University and has taught art therapy at Art Therapy Italiana (in Italy) for the last two years. Ms. Brucker has presented many workshops both throughout the United States and internationally on the Use of Art Therapy with the Deaf. She has also worked at St. Elizabeth's Deaf Program (Washington, D.C.) since 1980 and currently works in spearheading a special studio for disabled adults at www.studiodownstairs.org.

Sharon M. Duchesneau, M.A., received her masters in mental health counseling from Gallaudet University. She has over 12 years of experience working as a deaf psychotherapist in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan community mental health settings. She has led weekly group psychotherapy sessions for seriously mentally ill deaf individuals at a psychiatric day program, contracts with Deaf Abused Women's Network (DAWN), and teaches graduate-level courses at local colleges. Ms. Duchesneau works at the Alternative Solutions Center along with Dr. McCullough, providing therapy to deaf and hard of hearing individuals and their hearing family members.

David R. Henley, Ph.D., ATR has been an art therapist and art educator with exceptional children for over 15 years. He has authored many journal articles and has written *Exceptional Children: Exceptional Art: Teaching Art to Special Needs* and *Clayworks in Art Therapy: Plying the Sacred Circle.* Henley has worked with a variety of populations including emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, autistic, visually impaired, and most recently was an art therapist at the New Jersey School for the Deaf. He has consulted to a Very Special Arts in New Jersey, New York City, and Illinois, and has lectured widely at universities in the United States and abroad. Henley is currently chair of the Long Island University Art Therapy department; he is a practicing artist in bas-relief, paper canvas, plaster, and clay. This chapter on the multiply handicapped deaf child is one of a series of writings by Henley on the use of Art Therapy Education with children with special needs.

Ellen G. Horovitz, Ph.D., LCAT, ATR-BC, is a Professor and Director of Graduate Art Therapy at Nazareth College of Rochester. She has had over 30 years of experience with myriad patient populations and specializes in family art therapy with the deaf. Dr. Horovitz currently is in private practice. She conducts two art therapy clinics at Nazareth College: the Aphasia Clinic at Nazareth College for adults who have sustained a stroke as well as the Finger Lakes Regional Burn Association Clinic for children who have been burned. Dr. Horovitz is the author of numerous articles, book chapters and the following books: *Spiritual Art Therapy: An Alternate Path*, *A Leap of Faith: The Call to Art* and *Art Therapy As Witness: A Sacred Guide.* Dr. Horovitz has also directed and produced ten films. Her most recent 2-set DVD, *A Guide to Phototherapy: Artistic Methods*, is formatted for the deaf. Dr. Horovitz is past President-Elect of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA).

Carole Kunkle-Miller, Ph.D., ATR, is a registered art therapist, licensed psychologist and personal coach residing in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She directed the art therapy program at Carlow College and guest lectured at Vermont College of Norwich University, Naropa

Institute and the University of Pittsburgh, among others. Dr. Kunkle-Miller worked as an art therapist at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and served as art therapist and family art therapist at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. Dr. Kunkle-Miller was consultant for the Arts in Special Education Project of Pennsylvania, on the Editorial Board of the *American Journal of Art Therapy*, and was honored as American Art Therapy Association Clinician of the Year in 1999. She has been published in numerous books and journals, including a chapter in *Approaches to Art Therapy* edited by Judith Aron Rubin, and *Portrait of the Artist as a Poet*, edited by Carol Thayer Cox and Peggy Osna Heller.

Candace A. McCullough, Ph.D., is a deaf psychotherapist at the Alternative Solutions Center in Bethesda and Frederick, Maryland. Dr. McCullough received her doctorate in clinical psychology and her masters in mental health counseling from Gallaudet University. She completed her post-doctoral fellowship training at Springfield Hospital Center in Sykesville, Maryland, and her doctoral internship at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. McCullough has worked for over 15 years in the mental health field, in private practice, community mental health, university, judicial, and psychiatric hospital settings. She is an Adjunct Faculty in the Department of Counseling at Gallaudet University and also teaches at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland.

Rawley Silver, Ed.D., HLM, ATR, is author of *Developing Cognitive and Creative Skills Through Art*, *The Silver Drawing Test of Cognitive and Creative Abilities*, and many articles in professional journals. She has received grants from the U.S. Department of Education, the National Institute of Education and the New York State Department of education. In the field of art therapy, she has served as teacher, supervisor, consultant and lecturer and is an Honorary Life Member of the American Art Therapy Association.

Amy A. Szarkowski, Ph.D., received her degree in Clinical Psychology from Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. She currently serves as member of the Faculty of Comparative Culture at Miyazaki International College (MIC) in Japan. Her interests include Deafness and Deaf Culture, Positive Psychology, and Peace Studies. Dr. Szarkowski serves as the advisor to a Peace Studies Group and is involved in student development. She most recently published a book chapter on Sign Language and Service Learning. Dr. Szarkowski thoroughly enjoys traveling, exploring, and continuing to learn. Her latest endeavor is learning Japanese Sign Language and becoming involved in the Japanese Deaf Community.

FOREWORD

In my first job as an art therapist, I worked on an inpatient unit for youngsters who had been diagnosed with "childhood schizophrenia." Four-year-old Johnny was a sweet little boy who, like the others, seemed to be living in his own private world. He loved his individual art sessions, and quickly became attached to working at the easel with tempera paints on the largest size of paper available. Although he clearly enjoyed the process, he was rigidly stuck on using all of the jars in the easel tray, going from left to right, and moving the brush up and down to make a blob of each color. As this ritual was repeated week after week with no variations, I began to wonder how I could help him to give up such a compulsive way of working. So one day I suggested that he use the paper vertically instead of horizontally, showing him by placing it that way myself.

Because the paper was not wide enough for him to use each color above its jar in the tray, he was forced to work differently. For the first time, his brush moved in many directions, sweeping freely in horizontal, vertical, and diagonal arcs. And the colors, which had thus far been used straight out of the jar, began to mingle. Initially, the color mixing was involuntary, but as Johnny responded with pleasure to the new tones, he began to blend colors intentionally. The paintings became more interesting, and more attractive as well. Although Johnny did not talk, he was clearly happy with the results.

When Johnny–whose silent withdrawal had been attributed to schizophrenia–moved to Chicago, his parents took him to another medical center to be evaluated. Much to their surprise (and the embarrassment of the staff in Pittsburgh), it was found that he had a profound hearing loss. Instead of being treated as a youngster with a severe psychotic illness, he was then treated appropriately as a Deaf child, and given the kind of help he really needed to be able to relate to others. This kind of tragic misdiagnosis was not uncommon in 1963; alas, it even happens at times today.

It was a powerful lesson for me, as I was just beginning my work as a therapist, about the power of expert opinions and resultant expectations. Four years later, I was invited to start an art program at a place then called the "Home for Crippled Children." Because of my previous experience, when the administrators told me that only about ten percent of the residents would be capable of participating, I suggested that each of them be assessed for possible inclusion. Although it is no surprise now, in 1967 the staff was amazed that everyone could do something in art, given creative adaptations.

But the biggest surprise for the teachers and therapists was that the art assessments revealed talents and potentials they had not known about in a number of children. One was a girl named Claire. At age ten, she had been withdrawn from both school and speech therapy, since the staff was sure from her behavior that she must be profoundly retarded–unteachable and unreachable.

Claire's art evaluation was scheduled right after a visit to the dentist. She wheeled herself up to the table, grabbed a marker and paper, and drew a picture that–more eloquently than any words–told what it feels like to be invaded by the dentist's tools, to be open and vulnerable and terrified. Though helpless, like any patient in a dentist's chair, Claire could master the traumatic event by expressing her feelings in art, effectively turning passive into active (see figure P–1).

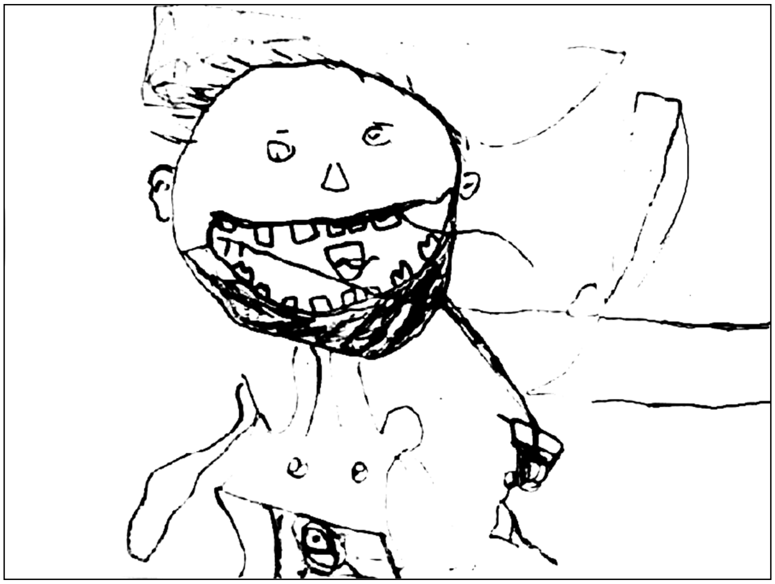

Figure P–1.

More important for her future, the age-appropriate drawing revealed that Claire's intelligence was much higher than anyone had imagined. As a result, she was put back in a classroom and resumed speech/language therapy. In both settings, she used a "talking book" to communicate with others (see figure P–2). The pictures were drawn by Claire and then labeled by the teacher or speech therapist, as in this drawing of the doctor and the nurse.

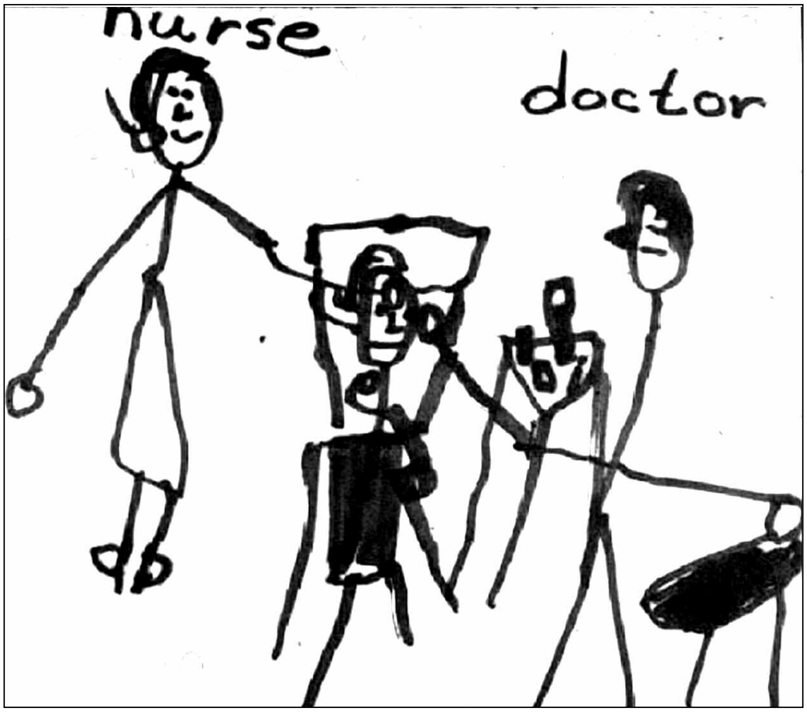

Figure P–2.

Unlike Johnny, Claire's Deafness was already known and her mute behavior was evident. But her drawings revealed an intellect, which had not been visible in any of the assessments then available. Thanks to her articulate art, Claire gained a new lease on growing, eventually learning gestures and sign language, through which she entered into the community of her peers (see figure P–3).

There are lessons to be learned from both of these stories. From Johnny, that a child who neither speaks nor understands may not be able to hear, an obvious but overlooked diagnosis. It was also clear that his defensive maneuvers were not psychotic, but that like many youngsters under stress, he had developed a compulsive ritual. He needed to find ways to create order, albeit rigidly, in a confusing and chaotic world in which he could not yet participate fully.

From Claire, we learn that Deaf is not "dumb," although it is all too easy

Figure P–3.

to assume that someone who doesn't respond can't process information. That fate had befallen Claire, who had been labeled as "profoundly retarded." Art that reveals potentials as often as it reflects problems gave her another way to speak. She was also fortunate that the director of speech therapy at the Home was creative enough to conceptualize the "talking book" idea, which worked amazingly well as Claire began the process of learning to communicate.

One more story . . . In 1983, I was invited to conduct a pilot art therapy program at a school for the deaf. The 16 children referred for diagnostic interviews quickly told me that what they most needed was a chance to express and cope with powerful feelings for which they had no words. Since an art education program was already available for cognitive and creative growth, I was free to encourage the children to use art and drama to express and deal with confused and conflicted feelings and fantasies (see figure P–4).

The intensity of their need for this kind of help was reflected in their ability to relate to me, despite my total lack of signing skills. I could understand some of the speech of the few who talked, and could use writing and drawing with some of the others, but I came away convinced of the need for an art therapist of the deaf to know sign language and, when appropriate, to use an interpreter. It was clear that I could have helped them much more had I been better able to understand their communications.

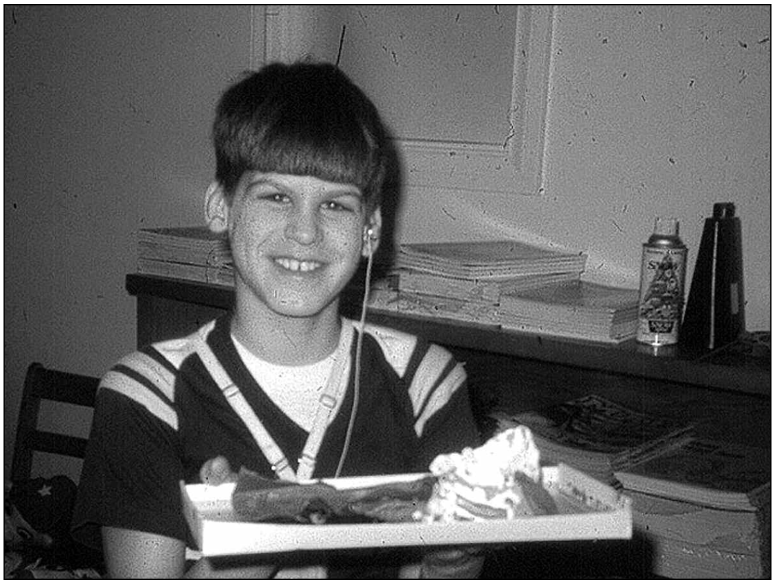

Figure P–4.

Sixteen-year-old Eleanor, whose suicidal impulses had been known to the staff for some time, had tried to cut her wrist the night before our fourth art therapy session. Realizing, after describing to me what had occurred, that she had hurt herself rather than the real target of her rage, she drew–with much excitement–a picture of what she would like to do to the grown-up, who had angered her (see figure P–5)

In the drawing a many-toothed, monstrous creature is holding a huge knife over a small, fearful person. She first said that she was the big one and the adult was the small one; then she reversed herself, explaining that in reality she felt helpless to deal with the power of those in charge of her. I suggested that she might also feel frightened of the extent of her own rage, of what she would really like to do to the grown-up in the picture. I wondered if she had turned the anger on herself as a punishment, as well as a way to protect the adult, who she then said cared a lot about her.

She spent the remaining time in the session drawing a volleyball net, perhaps to screen out the fearful imagery of her first picture, and then made four balloons tied together with colorful finger-paints. Eleanor was thus able to use the art therapy session first to express the feared impulse, and then to defend against it. Both were helpful to her in the ongoing task of self-awareness and self-control.

On the basis of the pilot study, which involved Eleanor and several others seen weekly for a term, a part-time art therapist who knew sign language

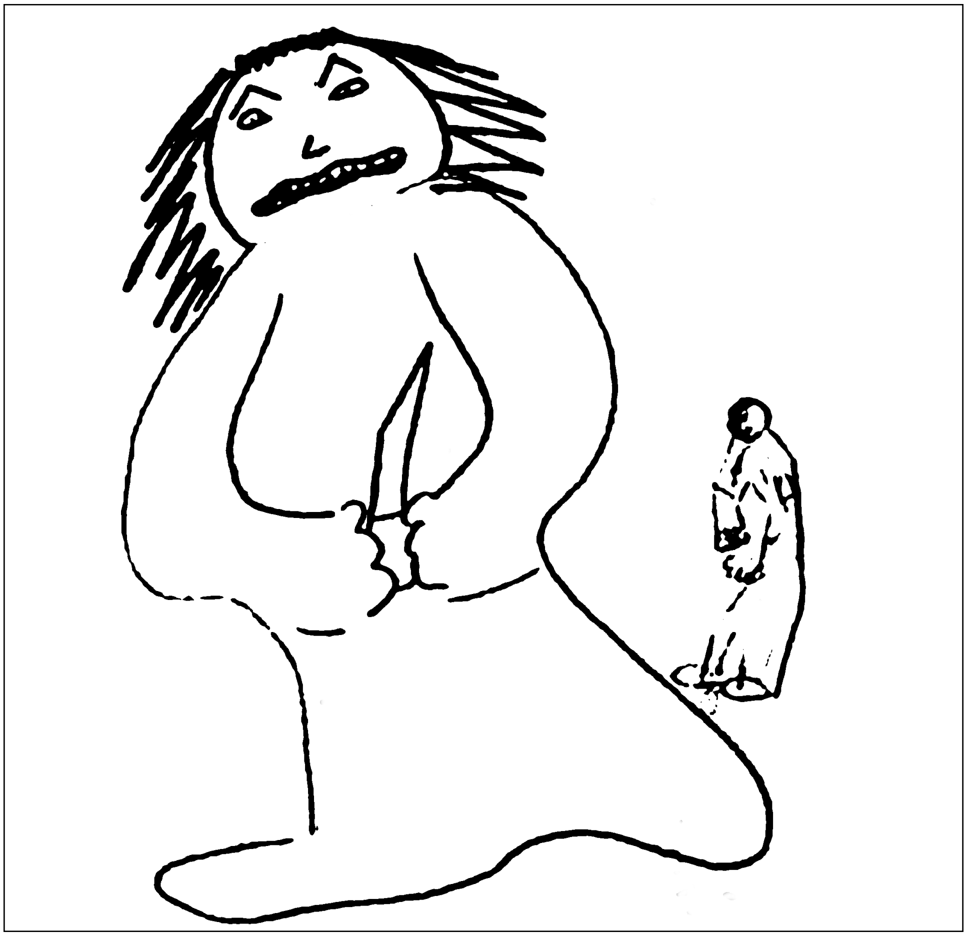

Figure P–5.

was hired and worked at the school for a number of years, seeing both individuals and group. Carole Kunkle-Miller's chapter about that work is one of the many valuable contributions in this book–a volume which was unthinkable when I first met Johnny and Claire in the sixties, and even when I met Eleanor in the early eighties. As many of the contributors note, there was a prejudice against Deaf culture and a reluctance to treat those who are Deaf in an appropriate fashion.

In addition to the mistaken conviction that Deaf individuals could not be creative or intelligent, noted by many authors in this volume, there was an equally insidious but widely-held notion that they were incapable of being helped through psychotherapy. As with those labeled retarded, the low expectations of the experts led to dreadful practices in the arts and in mental health. Either these were absent or, if available, were offered in such a way that the Deaf individual could not be creative and could not grow.

One of the most wonderful things about this book is that finally the Deaf are being recognized as the full human beings they have always been, who deserve full access to all of our resources. A recognition of their uniqueness rather than their deficits is found throughout the pages of this book, which presents an attitude that is both optimistic and realistic. And best of all, there are chapters, which will sensitize, inform, and inspire. Ellen Horovitz has done a service to anyone who offers art therapy to the Deaf. Through promoting better art therapy for the hearing impaired, those who are served will be able to live fuller, more rewarding, and more creative lives.

Judith A. Rubin, Ph.D., ATR–BC, HLM

PREFACE

For ages it has been thought that deaf children are nonverbal and are not capable of having any language. While this belief may still be widespread, a quiet revolution is taking place and changing these concepts. This revolution seems to be spreading.

Some of the insights behind this new thinking has come through the field of creative arts therapy. The creative arts therapists recognize that deaf children can image as well as anyone and perhaps better. There has been an increased awareness developing from the research conducted by Joe Khatena (1984) and others that the ability to image is a critical key to learning and thinking and probably as valuable as that of using words. Deaf children have also excelled in the visual arts where the skills involved are as available to them as to anyone else. Many deaf children have received recognition for the excellence of their work in the visual arts.

Recent developments in the area of kinesthetic learning have also brought a change in attitude about the teaching and learning styles of deaf children. Some children have learned these skills and have gone into creative dance and ballet and have excelled. Here and again the skills are as available to the deaf as well as to the hearing.

However, not all deaf children receive training in movement. Studies with deaf preschool children illustrate that children who have not had much experience with movement do not do as well as on tests of movement. This has been demonstrated using the test of Thinking Creatively in Action and Movement (Torrance, 1981). However, when these children are given training in creative movement, they make significant gains.

The tests that have been typically given to deaf children for placement in school programs have generally shown them to be deficient. This is because the tests do not make a demand on the abilities in which the deaf excel. Through the work of Rawley A. Silver (1978), Bill Kalstounis (1970), and others who have experimented with the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1984), it has been shown that deaf children succeed just as well as hearing children on tests of creative thinking skills. They perform best when they are permitted to respond and express their thoughts in a modality, which is more compatible with their abilities.

People like Walter B. Barbe (1985) are not looking at learning through the perspective of the visual, kinesthetic, and auditory modalities. Unfortunately, schools have tended to place almost exclusive emphasis on the auditory modality. The recognition of the importance of other styles of teaching and learning may lead to better learning experiences not only for the deaf but for all children.

A book such as this on creative arts therapy and language for the deaf gives emphasis to these neglected modalities of expression. As educators gain insights into the language of the deaf, increased understanding and opportunities for the deaf should take place.

E. Paul Torrance
Alumni Foundation Distinguished Professor Emeritus

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Generally I start off by thanking family, friends, colleagues, contributors and previous patients, (and of course I wish to acknowledge all), but in this instance, rather than be redundant and naming the contributors and aforementioned, the real thanks goes to three of my students, past and present: First, Christie Linn, who discovered a portion of the manuscript covered in dust on my bookshelf and inquired as to why it had not seen the light of day. Thus, began her role as taskmaster. Secondly, was Elizabeth (Lizzie) Brandt. She tirelessly digitized past files and notes of my clients, wading through my hand-scrawled notes–referring to this tedious experience as "accessing gold." (Indeed, even upon graduating, she offered to continue this work, just to have a window inside the recesses of my head and private wanderings. Imagine that–such dedication and loyalty to a project.) Thirdly, was Sarah Eksten, who in good faith, picked up the reins after Christie and Lizzie graduated and helped me pump this manuscript into fruition by doing the most arduous task, the subject/author index and galley proofing.

Yet, categorically, I need to thank two very important people: Dr. Robert Pollard, of the Deaf Wellness Program, Strong Memorial Hospital at the University of Rochester, who linked me to many of the contributors herein; as well, my dear friend and colleague from Cornell University, Dr. William D. Schulze, who not only read a good deal of this manuscript, but also offered thoughtful suggestions and corrections to the work; his support has been unparallel.

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VISUALLY SPEAKING:
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INTRODUCTION

ELLEN G. HOROVITZ

BACKGROUND

As in all of my books, there is generally a story, a tale that leads me to its beginning. In this case, it is deeply personal and had lifelong ramifications. At the age of six, I developed a very high fever, which consequently left me deaf for close to a week. Discussion was light around the house; my parents carefully tiptoed around the fact that I might indeed be deaf, if the illness had not lifted.

But most discordant for me was not so much the lack of sound, but the inability to hear my brother play the piano. “Close” pales as a descriptor when categorizing my relationship with my brother, Len. As a child, I spent hours listening to his talented fingers lilt across the ebony and white piano keys. What bothered me the most during this small sashay into deafness was my incapacity to hear the purity of this sound.

So one day, when feeling particularly sorry for myself, I leaned against the upright Baldwin piano so I could *feel* the sound since I was unable to hear it. And I cried. But in one miraculous moment, my ears popped, my head spun from the onslaught and I was once again in the hearing world. My pediatrician, Dr. Feinberg, never understood why this happened since he had just informed my mother two days earlier, to expect the worst (possibly an operation). And while my ears have remained ultrasensitive to sound, (sometimes picking up more than I wish) I find it fascinating that perhaps because of this, I oftentimes experience what I would coin auditory recall. So fascinated am I by sound that I have become adept at languages and relish when challenged to learn a new language system.

Ironically, I landed in Rochester, New York shortly after graduate school and secured a job in the metropolis that had invented finger spelling. Because Rochester was home to the Rochester School for the Deaf as well as

National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), it was fairly common to rub elbows with deaf people.

By 1981, I was working at PS 29 (then touted as the largest public school for orthopedically and perceptually challenged children). As a result, I began working with one child who relied principally on bliss boards and sign language for exchange. In order to communicate with him, I had to learn his language system. I signed up at Monroe County Association for the Hearing Impaired (MCAHI) in Rochester, NY in order to facilitate my communication with him.

Soon after, I continued my training at NTID and immersed myself in deaf culture–probably most memorable was a "silent retreat" coupled with a two-day experience of wearing "white-noise" hearing aids and attempting to function in a hearing world without the aid of sound. Most numbing was how difficult it was to not only be understood but also translate the mouthed words of hearing people. I relied on pencil and paper and the occasional word or two that I was able to decipher from reading a person's lips.

Thereafter, I worked with emotionally disturbed deaf children in a residential treatment facility and in time began to work with the Deaf in private practice. While I could never fully be accepted in the Deaf or hard-of-hearing world since I was not Deaf, I forged many friendships with Deaf clinicians and professionals. I found myself immersed in a world view that seemed incredibly fit for Art Therapy, a profession whose hallmark is indeed nonverbal communication.

A Word about Deaf versus deaf

Before discussing the contents of this book, I want to explain the reason behind capitalization of the word "Deaf." In order for the reader to understand this, I will quote from the chapter written by Dr. Amy Szarkowski:

> The use of *'Deaf'* in this chapter, consistent with the form often used by academics and researchers in the area, refers to individuals who identify with Deaf culture. The use of *'deaf'* is also used, in to the context of referring to those with hearing loss, who do not define themselves as members of Deaf communities. For some, Deafness is a social construction of identity involving the use of Sign Language, understanding the Deaf Culture of one's country or place of origin, and being involved in the Deaf community. Deaf people who adopt this identity are likely to be against the inclusion of Deafness in this discourse about disabilities. . . . [clarification of] the situation of persons who consider themselves *Deaf*, as well as those who call themselves *deaf*, and identify themselves as persons with a disability [is up for discussion]. Both realities are important and justified in the world as it is today.

In sum, Deafness may or may not be considered a "disability" by those afflicted with auditory loss. But, it is indeed a physical difference that has resulted in a language system. From language springs culture and Deaf language is indeed a cultivation that celebrates such ethnology. As a result, most of the authors in this book, will be capitalizing "Deaf" when referring to this culture.

Contents

In short order, sign language, (clearly a visual language) made abundant sense to me. This silent language of the Deaf vibrates through space as a three-dimensional language system, which arcs in past, present, and future just by mere body positioning and facial expression. It is a magical language, which crosses culture and is indeed classified, codified, and uniquely its own system.

Because of the complexity of this system, (from a developmental, cognitive, and emotional standpoint), I have invited contributions from some of the foremost authorities on Deafness. It is my intent to inspire other art therapists and mental health professionals through these readings. Coupling the exquisite complexity of this beautiful language system with the inner workings of Deaf culture is the bridge to transliteration, understanding and elucidation.

In chapter 1, McCullough and Duchesneau review the historical trends of the mental health Deaf person–who is a Deaf person, what kinds of treatment are available and have been readily accessible in the past, the psychology of the Deaf person, use of interpreters and finally implications of utilizing art therapy with this population. In chapter 2, pioneer art therapist, Silver reviews the use of SDT (Silver Drawing Test) with the Deaf population, vis a vis case studies and cross cultural analysis. Having been one of the first art therapists to work with the Deaf, Silver's contributions are both historical and scientific in nature. In chapter 3, Horovitz reviews family art therapy in the long-term treatment of a talented child and discusses the use of interpreters in this complex familial art therapy anecdote. In chapter 4, Brucker describes the use of art therapy as a treatment modality with Deaf/hearing-impaired adults who suffer from varied forms of mental illness. The majority of the persons described here were patients in a special mental health program for the Deaf at a psychiatric inpatient facility. The focus of this chapter is on the process and content of one art therapy group and the themes of the artwork of another over the course of a four-year period described in terms of the patient population, group characteristics, goals, and treatment effectiveness. In chapter 5, Atkinson and Horovitz describe working with a medically ill KODA ({Hearing} Kids Of Deaf Adults, very young children) who existed in a rather convoluted culture and world. This case was complicated