

A scoping review of art therapy for ADHD: What do we know?

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Background

Art therapy combines **psychotherapy** and **creative expression**¹ to support psychosocial wellbeing. Art therapists have **graduate training in art therapy**. The small evidence base for art therapy is growing, but there is **scant research about art therapy for ADHD**.

Because art therapists often support people with ADHD, I asked:

What is known about the use of art therapy (AT) for people diagnosed with ADHD?

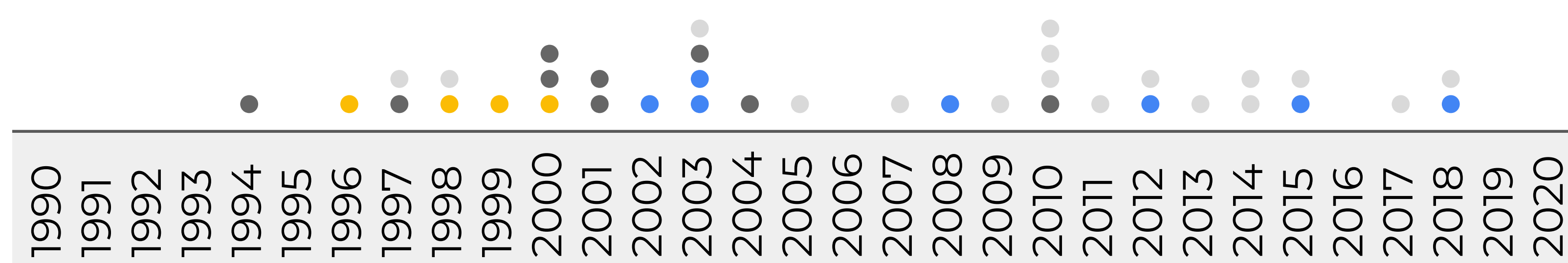
Results

Collection Themes

The 37 collected sources make up a bigger picture of research that is:

- **Outdated:** Only 4 publicly available works produced since 2010. Most work predates the DSM-5.
- **Hard to get:** Sources are mostly student works at libraries. Only 7% of student works produced 2006-2020 were available online.
- **Disjointed:** Intra-collection citations are limited to 6 core sources. There are no intra-collection links between 2003 and 2018.
- **Distorted:** Citation distortions⁴ give the impression of a strong research base by overstating the strength or breadth of existing work.

- Student Work in Digital Repository
- Unpublished Student Work



Limitations

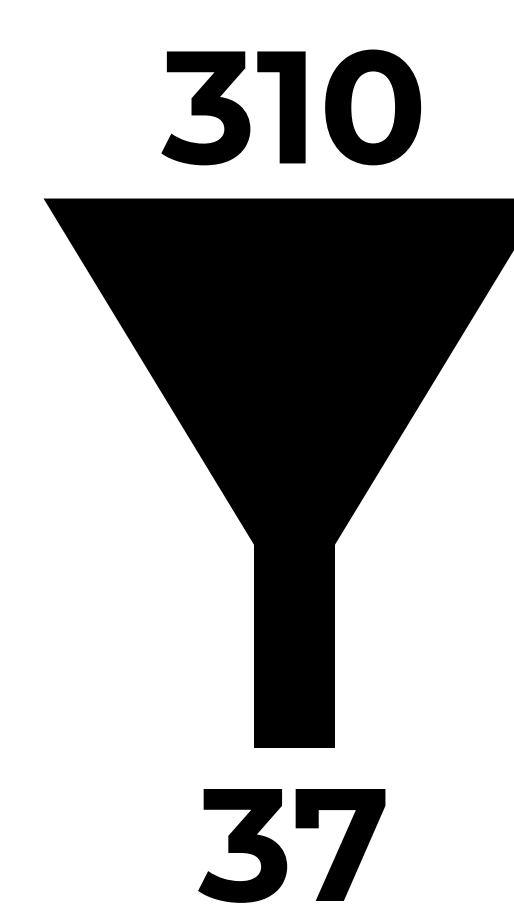
- Search comprehensiveness was limited by resources, access, and granularity of indexing.
- Institutions with affordable interlibrary loans or online repositories are over-represented.
- Some potentially relevant sources were retrieved after the deadline. Others have been published since.

Methods

I conducted a **scoping review**² of English articles, books, chapters, and student works from 1990-2020 reporting art therapy for people with ADHD.

INCLUDED

- AT is provided/supervised by an art therapist.
- AT is described in detail.
- Text is for a professional audience.
- Clients have an ADHD diagnosis.
- ADHD is addressed in therapy.

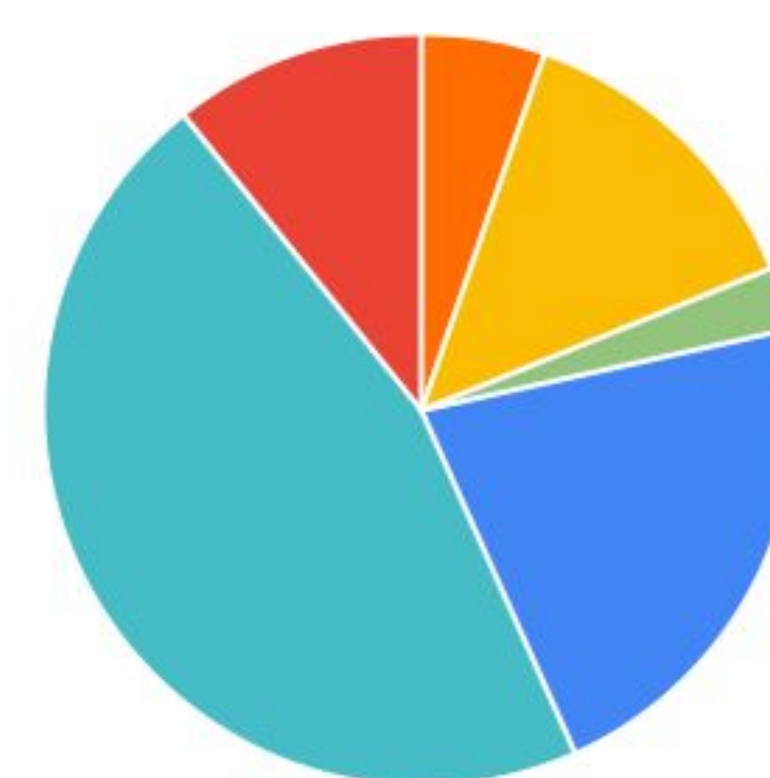


EXCLUDED

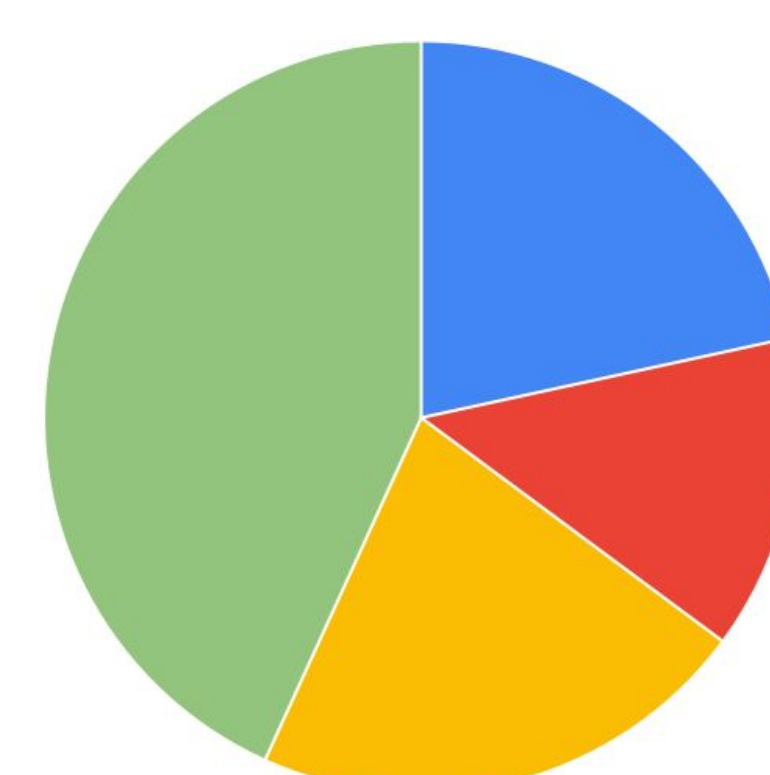
- Art education
- ASD, ODD
- AT assessments only
- Drama/music/play therapy
- Undergraduate works
- Proposals/reports

My search strategy included database searches and hand-searching of reference lists reached. I also used arts-based methods - ask me about autoethnography.

- Books (2)
- Chapters (5)
- Doctoral Project (1)³
- Master's Projects (8)³
- Master's Theses (17)
- PR Articles (4)



- Clinical Observation (16)
- Mixed Methods (8)
- Qualitative (8)
- Quantitative (5)



3

sources report AT for adults with ADHD

21

sources discuss female clients

Consensus Themes

Authors mostly agree that art therapy for ADHD should:

- **Balance structure and flexibility.** Sources recommend a consistent environment in terms of routines, expectations, cognition, and art materials. This is thought to reduce anxiety and behaviour problems. Authors also agree that freedom is important: therapists must be patient, flexible, and avoid over-structuring therapy.
- **Allow clients to practise success.** Many sources talk about self-esteem and success. Authors often report *group therapy* and discuss art therapy as a place to practice *social skills*.
- **Account for symptoms.** Authors agree that symptoms must be considered in art therapy, but symptoms are *defined ambiguously, interpreted inconsistently and accommodated unpredictably*.

Implications

- Research does not show or test the effectiveness of AT for ADHD.
- Available resources are outdated.
- Practice consensus themes are starting points, but there is room to explore almost anything in this area.
- This area might be better understood if student work were readily available.

References & Notes

1. <https://www.canadianarttherapy.org/what-is-art-therapy>
2. **Arksey, H. & O'Malley, L. (2005).** Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
3. I excluded student projects from the detailed thematic analysis, but they are still reported in the collection.
4. **Greenberg, S.A. (2009).** How citation distortions create unfounded authority: Analysis of a citation network. *BMJ*, 339, b2680. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.b2680>
5. **Godel, S.N. (2022).** Toward an illustrated understanding of art therapy for ADHD: A creative inquiry using scoping review, autoethnography, and visual methods [Master's thesis, St. Stephen's College]. Education & Research Archive. <https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-v2xv-2t56>

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Scan here for the full thesis, PRISMA diagram, search strategy, reference links, & more!

