

Going on a journey: a case study of nature therapy with children with a learning difficulty

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Therapy is usually described as an indoor activity, centring on verbal dialogue between therapist and client(s). Based on a qualitative study conducted with a group of children with learning difficulties, this article presents a way in which therapy can take place creatively in nature, which serves not only as a therapeutic setting but also as a non-verbal medium and partner in the process. Using participants' voices to highlight the programme's protocol and impacts, the article presents elements from the innovative framework of nature therapy, offering practitioners concepts and methods that can be incorporated into their practice.

Keywords: nature therapy; creativity; nature; ritual; learning difficulties; therapy

Introduction

Most classical methods used in psychotherapy are based on cognitive, verbal, and/or symbolic means and are not well suited to children with late development or learning disabilities (Berger 2006; Butz, Bowling, and Bliss 2000; Nezu and Nezu 1994). Such clients often experience difficulty with therapies that focus on cognitive channels and neglect physical, social, and imaginative mechanisms (Berger 2006, 2007). As part of the growing use of art therapies with these populations, to work through creative experiences using non-verbal and non-cognitive methods (Berger 2006; Polak 2000), an innovative framework has been developed for working in creative ways where nature is both the setting and a non-verbal partner in the process.

Drawn from a larger research project, the present article includes the facilitator's voice to highlight the protocol of the programme and the potential impact creative methods, rituals, and direct contact with nature have on the therapeutic process of such children. The article challenges some basic assumptions of conventional psychotherapy, while seeking to broaden them to include additional dimensions.

The article begins with a short presentation of the innovative nature therapy framework, the 'Encounter in nature' programme, and the methods that underpinned the study. This is followed by a description of the programme and the results of the research, incorporating participants' voices to highlight different elements. The concluding discussion includes some recommendations for future work in this field.

Nature therapy: an innovative framework

Nature therapy is an innovative, experiential, therapeutic framework that takes place in nature. It seeks to broaden the static, constantly controlled environment of

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'therapy' (Barkan 2002; Bleger 1967) to create a dynamic therapeutic environment (setting) that is a partner in shaping the process (Berger 2007; Berger and McLeod 2006). In this new field concepts and methods are being developed to create a dynamic and open environment, using nature's healing elements to support therapeutic processes and discover additional dimensions (Berger and McLeod 2006). Nature therapy integrates elements from art and drama therapy, gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, shamanism, and body-mind practices. The approach is based on the author's personal and professional experience, as well as research designed to conceptualize, analyse, and further develop it. It has been implemented with individuals, groups, and families in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Training is provided in several academic institutions in Israel and is currently being developed in Europe. This article presents some of the concepts and methods of this innovative framework, using a case study to illustrate them and offers ways for their implementation in practice. Due to space limitations, a full presentation of the framework cannot be included (for an in-depth and detailed description and all case studies see Berger 2007).

Setting the scene: 'Encounter in nature' – a nature therapy programme for children with special needs

'Encounter in nature' is a therapeutic educational programme developed by the Nature Therapy Centre and adopted by the Israel Ministry of Education. The programme is conducted in schools for children with learning difficulties and/or special needs. It operates in 'natural' spaces within or near school grounds (small groves, parks, or gardens) for two hours a week throughout the school year. The programme is facilitated collaboratively by a therapist and a teacher, who had participated in a week long training course that taught the programme's basic theory and methods. The facilitators receive bi-weekly supervision in a two hour nature therapy-oriented session. Since the programme's founding in 2002 it has been employed with hundreds of schoolchildren from the entire 'special needs' spectrum – developmental delays, autism, learning difficulties, ADAH, ADD, severe behavioural and emotional (psychiatric) disorders. The following case study is taken from this national programme.

Aims of the programme and research

The main aim of the programme was to help the children adapt to their new school and internalize its norms of behaviour while developing non-violent communication skills. It also aimed at improving their ability to work as a group, to strengthen their self-esteem, and expand their life experience and overall perspective. The research that accompanied the program was part of the author's PhD – conceptualizing and developing the nature therapy framework. It seeks to connect practical experience and theory generation and to use the latter to influence the further implementation of programmes. It used an action research strategy, integrating grounded theory principles informing the construction of theory. Reflexivity was also incorporated to highlight ways in which the researcher's standpoint may have influenced the research and its outcome.

The case study ‘Going on a journey’ aimed specifically to explore therapeutic and educational influences that nature and specific nature therapy-oriented interventions may have on these children, i.e. to see what personal and group issues were triggered and/or supported and to explore specific ways that nature and nature therapy may have had an impact on them. Based on a grounded theory analysis of participants’ experience this evidence was used for theory construction and for further development and implementation of programmes.

Method

Data were collected based on established principles of qualitative research and case studies (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; McLeod 2002; Yin 1984), using open-ended questionnaires that were distributed to the group facilitators after the training (just before the programme began) and at the end of the year long process. The second set was used as the basis for a three hour interview, in which the participant was asked to reflect upon the year’s process. In addition, routine process logs were analysed in order to broaden the data. In order to generate concepts the data were analysed using grounded theory techniques; they were coded into ‘meaning units’ aimed at generating a theory (McLeod 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998). After the data were analysed a draft paper was sent to the group facilitators for their reactions, which were then integrated in the writing of this article. This process, connecting theory generation with practical experience, researcher and practitioners, and related to basic principles of action research (McLeod 2002; Reason 1994), ensured the trustworthiness and ethics of the research. This relates to Brydon-Miller’s saying about action research, which claimed that it:

goes beyond the notion that theory can inform practice, to a recognition that theory can and should be generated through practice, and that theory is only useful insofar as it is put in the service of a practice focused on achieving positive social change. (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003, 15)

The real names of the facilitators have been used; the children’s names have been altered to protect their privacy. The researcher had no direct contact with the children; the facilitators were the only research participants. The Israel Ministry of Education (which ran the programme) and the ethical research committee of the researcher’s university approved the research and its procedures.

Setting the scene

Galim is an elementary school for children with learning and behavioural difficulties, located in northern Israel. The children who attend Galim represent a wide range of diagnoses, involving learning, emotional, social, and communication difficulties, usually accompanied by behavioural problems. The programme took place in a class consisting of nine boys and two girls, aged 7–9 years, all in their first year in this school. The programme was administered in the ‘natural’ territory of the school, including a small grove and a wide, grassy space. It was facilitated jointly by Yara Shimson, a 42-year-old therapist, who incorporates animals in her work, and Ayelet Kan-Levi, a 33-year-old homeroom teacher, who specializes in working with children with special needs. The work was supervised by the author.

An overview of the year's programme

In the light of the aim of the programme, and taking a ritualistic, perhaps 'rites-of-passage' standpoint, the programme was built around a (fictional) story of a group of Native American children about to embark on their traditional coming of age journey alone in the wild. During this voyage the children had to face and cope with physical and spiritual challenges – successful coping would earn them the respect of the tribe and recognition of their transition from childhood to adolescence.

This choice of theme was based on the approach using a story as narrative and metaphorical framework for a therapeutic process (Gersie 1997; Lahad 2002). In this case the entire journey may be included, placing the process in a larger context that not only defines and normalizes the voyage but also helps give it meaning. The incorporation of story-making techniques and use of metaphors is consistent with drama therapy concepts of 'distancing' and 'as if reality'. It helps to convey a therapeutic/educational message in an indirect way, without intimidating the group and building resistance (Jennings 1998; Lahad 2002; Landy 1996). Here, for instance, the narrative related the challenges the Native American children met and not those that the participants experienced.

All sessions began inside the classroom. After the facilitators retold the Native American story and reminded the group of their contract everyone was invited to go outside and walk in a line (a custom in this school) to the 'nature room'. The opening ceremony took place in this room, which was reserved only for this programme. Using a 'talking stick', participants shared their feelings and their expectations for the day. Then the group was invited to leave the room and start different outdoor activities. The structure of the opening ceremony was maintained throughout the year.

The purpose of using a ritual was to help the children cope with different transitions within the programme and with vague and uncertain episodes during the process. This is similar to Jennings's (1998) use of rituals in drama therapy, 'rituals guide us through changes in a very specific way' (p. 103), and Hazan's (1992) belief that 'the purpose of the ritual is to create order within the chaos' (p. 91). Based on these quotes and other references highlighting the potential of incorporating rituals in therapy (Al-Krena 1999; Berger 2006; 2007; Grainger 1995; Jennings 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 1998; Jerome 1993; Jones 1996; West 2004), the ceremony was used as an 'organizing' element; the repetitions giving the participants a sense of control and confidence.

Yara: The opening and closing rituals drew a clear line between the educational classroom environment and the programme's therapeutic one. It created order and gave the time we shared a special meaning. The 'talking stick' ritual allowed us to keep order in the hectic group, using the known structure of the ritual as an outline for boundaries and authority.

Ayelet: The ritual created a safe structure in which the kids could express themselves in any way they wished: talking, vocalizing, dancing. ... Having a clear, well-known ritual freed me from the fear of losing control, of creativity turning into anarchy.

Following the metaphor of the Native American coming of age journey, the year long programme was built in phases. Each phase took place in a different location and used a different mode of work. The idea was to form a cyclic, year long journey, beginning and ending in the same place. Seeking to unite the group and help it develop non-violent communication skills, the first phase in the programme focused

on challenges and adventure games, using activities such as crossing a river (a winter puddle) or going through a rope course. These elements were borrowed from adventure therapy, using challenging activities and a task-oriented process to develop communication skills and improve group work (Ringer 2003).

Yara: 'Crossing the river' (a large puddle made by the rain) was a difficult assignment, as the children found it hard to keep in order and plan ahead. When Ben was pushed into the water and got quite wet, we stopped the assignment and reflected on it. In the following session, a week later, we tried again. Ben agreed to share his feelings of humiliation while the others listened and asked his forgiveness. This time they kept in line, helping and cheering each other as the bridge was successfully crossed. That was fun.

In the next phase, which aimed to put the children in touch with their strengths, develop creativity, and support their individuation process, the work was extended to include creative modes. It included art activities, such as building power symbols and totems, to help the children overcome different challenges on the journey. To help the group take more responsibility for the process we integrated exercises such as making gifts and preparing food over a fire.

After the group had become consolidated and violence had decreased we proceeded to the next step, in which a new mode of work was introduced. Remembering the Native American story, the group was invited to build a 'home in nature', a place for everyone to gather and 'be', before the last phase and conclusion of the journey. Using this symbolic yet concrete method the process of planning, building, and maintaining a home in nature can promote a parallel process of building a safe, personal, inner home (Berger 2004, 2006, 2007). It enables participants to work on personal and interpersonal issues, such as boundaries, partnerships, and belonging (the home location compared with other homes, cooperation in its building and maintenance) and other issues related to the broad psychological concept of 'home' (What does a home include? What is inside and what remains outside? What gives the home strength? What materials is it composed of? What is its relationship with the environment?) (Berger 2004, 2006, 2007; Berger and McLeod 2006).

During this phase a remote and unfamiliar 'nature' space within the school's territory was selected as the group's space. The children marked it off with ribbons, defining its boundaries for themselves and for others who might pass by. The discovery of a cave-like space, under a willow tree on the edge of the marked territory, got the children very excited as they worked together to turn it into their secret group home.

Yara: This was the first time I could actually see them working together, planning, listening, and taking decisions in a logical and non-impulsive manner. As the place was cleaned up and reorganized, fights gave way to active creation. The children found a carpet, gate, chairs, and ropes, which they brought to create a pleasant and homey atmosphere.

To conclude this phase a name giving ceremony was performed as part of the Native American journey. This was a different kind of ritual, aimed at connecting the children to their strengths and supporting their individuation processes, so that they could be seen and recognized as individuals, within the larger group. Here, each child received a new name, based on a positive characteristic that he or she had displayed during the previous sessions.

Yara: This was very important, as it gave the children a chance to adopt new, empowering names. Since the names that were chosen, such as Open Sore, Fast Runner

and Thoughtful One, were based on positive social behaviour that they had displayed during the programme, it gave the children something to strive for and look forward to.

As the end of the year long ‘coming of age journey’ approached the fourth and last phase was introduced. The group was assigned its most important mission: to take care of a pair of falcon chicks that had fallen out of their nest and been injured until their successful recovery and return to the wild. This mode of work was based on nature conservation therapy (Berger 2003, 2004, 2007), in which the therapist tries to match a relevant nature conservation need or project to the therapeutic needs of the individuals and the entire group. Using the story of an animal, landscape, or plant creates both distancing and identification, which can help people unfold and share complex stories while normalizing their experience and broadening their narratives (Berger 2003, 2007).

Ayelet: Two weeks before the arrival of the birds, when we told the group about the project, personal issues began to unfold. One boy asked whether the chicks’ father had pushed them out of the nest, while another asked if their mother and brothers missed them and, if so, why they didn’t pick them up? Hearing these questions, I felt that the children were finding a way to voice some taboo issues. Although I could not answer them, I felt that sharing these questions with the group had normalized some of their pain and strengthened the children.

Yara: For some of the children, the idea of setting the birds free was very difficult. Some were sad and angry because they felt abandoned, while others felt guilty about abandoning the birds. Some were worried about their physical survival, while others asked whether they would come back to visit or nest. This episode allowed them to experience and practice endings. Opening the cage door and seeing the birds fly back to nature gave the separation new meaning. Suddenly it all made sense.

Ayelet: Not only did the rehabilitation project allow them to feel special and capable, but assuming the role of caretaker also allowed them to encounter and process such issues as responsibility and empathy, as they identified with the birds’ injuries and vulnerability.

The year ended with a ceremony in which the group hosted all the school’s pupils and teachers for a special event in which the children retold the story of the journey and returned the healed birds to nature.

Results

Three major categories emerged from the grounded theory analysis, each containing several sub-categories:

1. Issues related to nature
 - a. The influence of nature on the process – challenging, opening doors, changing situations.
 - b. The difference in atmosphere created by nature.
 - c. Nature as supplier of materials.
 - d. The children’s attitude to nature.
 - e. Other issues.
2. Issues related to group and individual process
 - a. Strengthening self-esteem and confidence.
 - b. Group building and development of positive communication skills.

- c. Processing personal issues regarding parenthood, anxieties, death, and abandonment.
 - d. Developing responsibility.
 - e. Developing the option of planning (as opposed to impulsive action).
3. Issues related to other elements
- a. Training and supervision.
 - b. The use of rituals to support the process.
 - c. The personal processes experienced by the facilitators.

In the light of the scope of the present article and space limitations the discussion of results focuses on the first two issues only. For a full analysis see Berger (2007).

Nature's role and influence on the process

Analysis revealed that the incorporation of nature had a strong influence upon the process. One of the most prominent results was the way in which the independent dynamic of nature influenced and shaped the process.

Yara: As we were organizing and cleaning the 'home' (the cave-like space) one of the kids found a centipede. This caused a panic: the kids shouted and ran all over the place. After I caught the centipede and calmed them down, they agreed to look at it from a close distance. Then, as we released it, a spontaneous 'fear-coping' ritual took place. The next time we found a centipede, there was hardly any hysteria.

Ayelet: Planning the activities was complicated, as we never knew exactly what to expect. There was always the fear that we would wake up on the morning of the activity and be faced with heavy rain in winter, or a heatwave in summer. This made it very demanding: it challenged us to be creative and alert, to be ready to invent relevant activities that would suit both the group and the weather. Working in this uncontrolled setting evoked options for activities that we had never thought about. For example, one rainy day we accepted the group's suggestion and walked together under a big plastic sheet, to keep ourselves dry. This was funny and enjoyable, and at the same time it required group cooperation, leadership, physical intimacy, and creative thinking.

These variable situations, dictated by nature, created special circumstances in which the counsellors and the children shared an ever-changing environment that was not within their control or ownership. It appears that this was one of the most significant elements of the process, as it raised the issue of coping with the uncontrolled and unexpected, promoted flexibility, and expanded coping mechanisms. The independent dynamic of the setting challenged not only the participants, but also the facilitators, raising the question of whether this 'uncontrolled' element should be addressed as an obstacle.

An alternative way to address nature, based on the concept of the three way relationship client–therapist–nature (Berger 2004, 2007; Berger and McLeod 2006), is to relate to it as a partner in the process, shaping and influencing it in various ways. In the above examples nature provided an element that gave the group a chance to work on the issue of fear and called for work on issues such as cooperation, intimacy, and leadership.

Another element emerging from the research findings was the potential that lies in the qualitative difference between the natural environment and indoor settings.

Yara: There was a considerable difference between the way the children behaved in the classroom activities and their actions in nature. Apparently, nature raised their level of motivation and cooperation; they played, worked, and created together in a more spontaneous way. It seems that work in nature called for 'creative doing', which gave our children, who come from wide-ranging experiences of failure, a chance for a positive experience, working and expressing themselves in ways that are not exclusively verbal or cognitive.

Hence nature, as a living, sensual place, evokes work that involves all the senses and communication channels; physical, emotional, imaginative, and spiritual (Abram 1996; Roszak 2001). In this respect nature therapy expanded communication channels and helped develop coping mechanisms that improved the participants' overall functioning.

Another element that emerged from the research data was nature's contribution as a supplier of materials.

Ayelet: I remember how they insisted on going on an expedition to collect herbs for tea on a day of heavy rain. In fact, it turned into a bravery mission as they all returned wet but quite happy. ... I think that this aspect of taking care of basic needs – a sheltered place, a warm fire and herbs for tea – was very important. It gave the children a chance to prove their ability to take care of themselves, by using materials they find in the here and now.

This finding suggests that nature had a major impact on the process. Not only did it provide the physical space and materials for the encounters, but it also created experiences that allowed learning and development that might have not taken place indoors.

The process of group and individual development

According to the research findings a meaningful therapeutic process was provided on both the personal and group levels. Apparently, the strongest effect of this work was development of the children's self-esteem and self-confidence. This achievement was made possible by the empowering approach, which provided an opportunity to succeed and be acknowledged as 'good and worthwhile'.

Yara: It was very exciting to be with them and observe them during the ceremony in which the birds were returned to the wild. The entire school came to watch, and respected them for their work and their process. It was beautiful to see the way they proudly took the stage, reading out their year long story, and finally opening the cage and letting the birds fly free.

Ayelet: Seeing them there, I felt sad and proud at the same time. They were so excited. For some, it was probably the first time that adults recognized their taking centre stage as a positive thing.

Group development

Another aspect of the work was the process of group building, including the development of positive communication skills.

Yara: At first, they were constantly bickering, using hands and bad language as the main means of communication. Arguments were mainly about their place in the group: who would sit next to us, who would light the fire, and so on. In time, through the adventure activities and the construction of the camp, this sort of behaviour decreased, more positive ways of communicating were developed, and the group began to bond.

It appears that strict maintenance of the contract supported the internalization of collective behavioural norms, while the active physical and creative orientation of the activities helped to expand previous communication patterns into more positive ones. Another element that contributed to this development was maintenance of the session structure and the rituals.

Yara: The opening and closing rituals were very important, because they provided order and security. The fact that the children knew what to expect gave them a feeling of control and calmed them down.

Another important accomplishment of the work was the development of personal and group responsibility. This was achieved mainly through the design, construction, and maintenance of the camp – making group decisions regarding questions such as: what will it look like; what materials will we use to build it; what rules will be kept; who will be allowed to enter?

Ayelet: As they were designing and building the camp, I saw them plan and think things through, talk about what needed to be done, by whom and when. This was the first time I actually saw them thinking and working together as a group.

This process was further developed in the work with the birds, as the children were committed to caring and feeding them, as well as cleaning the acclimatization cage.

Yara: Although some of the children were disgusted by the dead chicks (fed to the falcons), they insisted on taking part in the feeding, as this was part of the group's voyage.

Personal development

Personal learning was also achieved, in parallel with group learning.

Yara: Ron was a poor student, who found it hard to cope with verbal and cognitive class assignments. He arrived in the group with severe behavioural issues. He was not popular, and suffered from lowered self-esteem. During non-verbal and physical activities, Ron got a chance to do something he was good at and, in some cases, even best in the class. In the bridge crossing mission he took the role of leader, using his physical abilities to help others. Over the course of the year, Ron changed his position, from being one of the disturbing children in class to being one of its positive and popular leaders.

Ron's story highlights the potential of working experientially in nature as a medium for change. In this case the qualitative difference between the natural environment and the indoor setting provided a kind of learning that the classroom probably could not have offered.

David's story illustrates another example of a personal learning process that took place during the programme.

Ayelet: At first David found it very difficult to cope with the changes that the programme involved: going out of the classroom and entering the nature room, coming out of it into the open space, going back to the nature room, and then to the classroom again. He expressed this difficulty by bursting into tears, or outbursts of anger or aggression towards anyone around. In time, through the insistence on maintaining the structure and behavioural norms, along with the changes that being in nature generated, David learned to cope better. Apparently, the development of flexibility allowed him to let go of some control and to be more relaxed.

David's story illustrates the potential that lies in the approach, combining maintenance of the contract and the use of rituals, together with the independent dynamic that nature creates.

Concluding the journey – summary and discussion

In its description and analysis of a nature therapy programme this article presents a creative and non-verbal approach in which nature-oriented therapeutic work can take place with children with learning difficulties. It highlights a way in which such work can be implemented and facilitated by the staff in a school setting, within a natural, semi-urban environment. The article reveals the potential that lies in creative modes of working, in general, and the way in which a direct encounter with nature can support and extend the therapeutic/educational process, in particular. Very little research has been published to date on nature therapy or its application with children with learning difficulties (Berger 2007).

I am currently engaged in evaluative research on the effectiveness of such programmes with different groups and in various natural settings, as well as the issues involved in designing professional training programmes. In developing this framework my basic assumption is that nature has resources that can support emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical personal well-being, which in turn can be used for psychotherapeutic purposes (Abrams 1996; Berger 2007; Berger and McLeod 2006; Beringer and Martin 2003; Burns 1998; Davis 1998, 2004; Hartig, Mang, and Evans 1991; Roszak 2001; Totton 2003). I believe that the intentional use of nature as a resource can be effectively integrated into work with any kind of client seeking to develop and be healed. In particular, it can help promote the positive health of people with verbal difficulties. I also believe that this approach can help to (re)connect people and nature, fostering love and care for it by means of personal engagement (Berger 2007). In this respect the four modes of work included in the programme described here characterize the human–nature relationship aspect of the nature therapy framework. It begins with an adventure approach, relating to nature as an obstacle to be overcome, continues on to an artistic approach, relating to nature as a strength-giving partner and addressing it in a symbolic and less concrete way. It then proceeds to building a home in nature, relating to nature as a safe place to be in – a home. It concludes with the bird rehabilitation phase, as the children use their strength to take care of another creature and help nature.

My hope is that as more practitioners develop and disseminate their own ways of doing therapy in nature a broader set of studies will emerge, facilitating the construction and presentation of a more fully articulated theoretical framework.

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