

Art Therapy in Schools:
A Group Mosaic Mural Project

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20

Abstract

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This paper provides a descriptive overview of an applied arts-based group project that took place with students at an elementary school. The group of students worked towards the construction of a mosaic mural with assistance from two art therapy interns who acted as facilitators for the group. As a clinical case review, the paper aims to offer a descriptive overview of the therapeutic process of the group. An additional objective of the paper is to document the mural group process in order to inform school professionals about potential benefits of such a group as well as provide art therapists with a detailed resource for potential future art therapy group projects in schools.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
INTRODUCTION	
Overview	1
Literature Review	2
Art Therapy in Schools	2
Art Therapy and Art Education	3
Art Therapy Groups	5
Expressive Therapies Continuum and Mosaic	6
METHODOLOGY	8
GROUP DESCRIPTION	8
DESCRIPTION OF SESSIONS	10
Session 1: Theme	10
Session 2: Theme and Images	13
Session 3: Mural Template	15
Session 4: Smash Tile	17
Sessions 5-8: Tile Placement	18
Session 9: Mortar	22
Sessions 10-11: Grout and Polish	25
Mural Celebration	27
DISCUSSION	28
Uncertainty to Investment	30
Challenges and Collaboration	32
Sharing in Accomplishment	34
Personal Reflection	36
Conclusion	37
REFERENCES	39
Appendix A: Consent Form	44
Appendix B: List of Materials	45

List of Figures	Page
Figure 1	13
Figure 2	15
Figure 3	16
Figure 4	20
Figure 5	25
Figure 6	28

Art Therapy in Schools: A Mosaic Mural Project

Art making as a creative process may be utilized for its inherent therapeutic qualities as well as to gain insight by accessing unconscious material. Art therapists employ the creative process to assist individuals in attaining numerous goals aimed to promote overall well being. Art therapy may be implemented within various settings including hospitals, correctional facilities, hospices and schools just to name a few. Art therapy is adaptable and numerous populations may find benefits through the use of countless materials that can be used in the creative process. Though many age groups utilize the creative process, art making as a form of expression has perhaps typically been associated with children and adolescents. Perhaps this is due to the fact that art making can be helpful for children to make sense out of their inner thoughts, feelings and fantasies (Rubin, 2005). Describing art, Elinor Ulman (2001) states, “It is a means to discover both the self and the world, and to establish a relation between the two. In the complete creative process, inner and outer realities are fused into a new entity” (p. 26). The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) describes that having the opportunity to create art in the presence of a supportive art therapist within the context of a school can perhaps provide children with the chance to foster social and emotional growth (as cited in Stepney, 2001).

This paper will describe an art therapy group comprised of elementary school students who worked towards creating a mosaic mural with the assistance of two art therapy interns. The objective of the paper is to document the mural group process in order to inform school professionals about potential benefits of such a group as well as

provide art therapists with a detailed resource for potential future art therapy group projects in schools.

Literature Review

Art Therapy in Schools

Art therapy has traditionally been practiced in mental health centers and hospitals (Bush, 1997). However, art therapy has extended services to schools where its benefits have been noted. The AATA states target populations in schools may include children who experience difficulties at school as a product of social or emotional problems and art therapy assists students in achieving an “appropriate level of social and academic performance” (as cited in Stepney, 2001). In the 1979-80 school year, The Dade County Public School Board in Florida introduced a pilot art therapy program (Bush, 1997). The school board recognized the strengths and advantages of art therapy to address difficult behaviors in students (Bush, 1997). The pilot program confirmed the unique benefits art therapy in schools might offer. In reference to art therapists Bush (1997) asserts, “They are specially equipped to explore the personal problems of the children and the potential revealed by individual children, and then develop pathways for learning that are not feasible with traditional methods of instruction” (p. 3). This statement suggests that art therapy can offer vocational benefits and contribute to the child’s overall psychological wellbeing. Art therapy in a school setting also provides a place where therapy can be viewed by students and their family as non-threatening. French and Klein (2012) add, “Because of being located in the familiar setting of the school, the stigma that some children, parents and school staff associate with therapeutic services will be reduced” (p. 61). In addition, schools are likely to serve as the most consistent outlet for mental health

services for families living in an inner city (Camilleri, 2007, p. 61). French and Klein (2012) note, “The majority of schools have incorporated emotional and psychological learning into the curriculum as an acknowledgement of the importance of learning about our relationship with ourselves, each other and within our wider environment” (p. 55). Schools therefore provide a unique opportunity for access to mental health services (Camilleri, 2007). Though therapeutic services may be beneficial within schools, it is important to note that all schools have their own culture and the degree to which schools welcome therapy into the curriculum will vary (French & Klein, 2012).

Art Therapy and Art Education

The role of the art therapist often includes helping others develop skills to create art and therefore there is an educational component involved (Rubin, 2005). Kramer (1971) notes:

The art therapist who works with children’s groups, will as a rule, base his program on methods developed by those educators who have profoundly influenced the art education of our time, even though he may modify them considerably according to the children’s specific needs. (p. 6)

Kramer discusses influential educators who presented new approaches to teaching art. For example, Kramer describes how Viktor Lowenfeld (1952, 1957) considered art as a means to strengthen identity and Florence Cane (1951) emphasized engaging the whole body in movement while art making in order to facilitate relaxation, attention to memories and inner experiences. Art educators such as Florence Cane (1951) and Margaret Naumberg (1947, 1950, 1966) combined their knowledge of art with psychoanalytic theory, which gave rise to the practice of art therapy (Kramer, 1971).

While acknowledging the teaching component of art therapy, Rubin (2005) emphasizes that the teaching aspect is secondary to the primary therapeutic aim. Namely, while an art therapist may teach a technique, it is not for the acquisition of skill, but rather is part of an objective to assist the person in achieving, for example, an increase in self-esteem (Rubin, 2005). On the other hand, there are therapeutic qualities intrinsic in art education and an art teacher may foster student growth and a sense of self by providing a nurturing and supportive atmosphere (Rubin, 2005). Rubin states, “Art itself is in many ways therapeutic, for it permits the discharge of tension and the representation of forbidden thoughts and feelings in socially acceptable forms” (p. 348). The therapeutic qualities associated with art making relates to the art-as-therapy model of art therapy where the process of creating is highlighted. The psychotherapeutic position of art therapy emphasizes psychological theory and psychotherapeutic techniques as central to the profession (Moon, 2012). Both models seem to work in conjunction with one another, and perhaps the approach taken by the art therapist determines what model is greater emphasized.

While art therapy and art education activities may appear very similar on the surface, it is important to distinguish between the two (Rubin, 2005). The differences may be invisible on the surface, however, may be distinguished inside the mind of the therapist and eventually, the client (Rubin, 2005). The art therapist is trained to be in tune with all aspects of client behavior and aims to understand clients on as many levels as possible in order to assist them with whatever issue has brought them for therapy (Rubin, 2005). Rubin notes, “Eventually, the individuals involved in art therapy themselves become aware that this a different kind of art experience, even when the goals have not

been made explicit” (Rubin, 2005, p. 349). For instance, Rubin explains that young children on some level soon grasp the special nature of art therapy. British art therapist Roger Arguile also believes children know the difference between art in education and art in therapy (as cited in Rubin, 2005).

Art Therapy Groups

Significant changes such as puberty and entering high school occur during adolescence and therefore it is likely a difficult time. Peer relations are both valued and highly influential during adolescent years (Moon, 2012). Art making within an art therapy group may offer distinct benefits from individual therapy. When discussing his work with adolescent groups, Moon (2012) notes, “Art-based therapy groups can be an important treatment component for many suffering adolescents, because they combine the safety, structure and benefits of artistic self-expression and peer interaction with the acceptance and guidance of the art therapist” (p. 191). Moon (2012) believes art therapy groups may enable a reparative emotional experience. While making art within the structure of the group, a “social microcosm” inevitably develops that resembles interpersonal areas outside of the group (Moon, 2012). Relationship difficulties emerge and are enacted within the art therapy setting. This may allow for individuals to transform previous maladaptive patterns of behavior into reparative experiences through the practice and working-through of art making activities (Moon, 2012). Camilleri (2007) adds:

Group therapy by its very nature provides a sense of belonging that inner city children often do not experience in their families...Participation in group therapy

can fill this need to be identified as part of a group in order to develop a sense of identity. (p. 59)

Depending on the client, having a therapeutic art experience within a group may be facilitating or inhibiting (Rubin, 2005). Rubin explains. “Some children, for example, are painfully self-conscious when alone with an adult; often they have lost faith in grown-ups, but are still optimistic about trusting peers” (p. 219-220). The authors mentioned seem to agree that in the company of peers and an art therapist, group work may offer distinct benefits for some clients versus individual art therapy.

Expressive Therapies Continuum and Mosaic

The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) is a conceptual model for expressive therapies (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978). Within the framework of a systems approach, the ETC attempts to outline the commonalities shared between expressive therapy modalities such as art, drama, music and dance/movement (Lusebrink, 1992). The ETC is comprised of four hierarchical levels: Kinesthetic/Sensory, Perceptual/Affective, Cognitive/Symbolic and the Creative level (Lusebrink, 1992). The fourth level named the Creative level can occur at any level or “can represent an integration of functioning from all levels” (Hinz, 2009, p. 5). The levels represent a sequence that moves towards an increase in complexity and emotional development (Lusebrink, 1992). Johnson believes “the benefit of such a sequence is the continuous transformation of feelings and the development of a full range of expression across all modalities and all developmental levels” (as cited in Lusebrink, 1992, p. 396). Graves-Alcorn (2011) asserts that embracing the theory behind the ETC breaks through the dichotomy of art as therapy and art psychotherapy.

The medium of mosaic engages multiple components of the ETC such as Kinesthetic and Sensory (Hinz, 2009). Lusebrink (2004) describes the Kinesthetic component of the ETC utilizes action and movement to therapeutically express or reconstruct energy. Hinz (2009) notes that resistive materials increase the need for physical energy to perform the function and therefore resistive materials encourage an increase in the release of energy. Concentrating kinesthetic energy in creative construction projects may help clients increase levels of developmental functioning as opposed to eliciting chaotic emotional discharge that can lead to confrontations between group members (Hinz, 2009). In addition, Lusebrink (1990, 2004), Sholt and Gavron (2006) believe that engaging in art therapy on the Kinesthetic/Sensory level may be particularly useful in accessing preverbal material. This is significant because as Piaget (1969) theorized, children first acquire information about the world through sensory means.

The Cognitive component of the ETC may be activated during activities such as sorting and gluing precut shapes (Hinz, 2009). “Focused art processes have the effect of decreasing behavior problems because physical and mental energy is channeled into art making” (Slayton, 2012, p. 181). Having a structured art directive may be especially beneficial for students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Therapists may limit media choices in order to contain an activity for a child with AD/HD (Hinz, 2009). To ensure successful therapy Hinz comments, “therapists likely will use low-complexity, low-structured tasks at first, so that multiple or complicated instructions do not interfere with task completion” (p. 49).

Methodology

This paper describes an applied arts-based group project in the format of a clinical case review. An applied project uses the engagement in an arts process as the source for documentation. As a clinical case review, the paper aims to offer a descriptive overview of the therapeutic process of the group (Department of Creative Arts Therapies, 2013). Documenting this specific group process, the paper also aims to highlight the potential for future art therapy group work in schools.

Students were chosen by the school psycho-educator (who was also the on-site supervisor) to participate in the group. Students were selected for various reasons. For instance, students expressed a desire to participate in a group or an activity outside of the classroom, the psycho-educator felt that certain students would benefit or to create a balance within the group based on gender and/or personality. All of the students were required to obtain informed parental consent prior to the group (see Appendix A).

Group Description

The mural group reviewed in this paper consisted of eight students, aged twelve and in grade 6 (5 girls and 3 boys). The students attended a public elementary school where two interns had their art therapy practicum placement. The school can be described as an “inner-city” school that is predominately populated by Caucasian students whose families have resided in the neighborhood for generations. Many students at the school have challenges stemming from an unstable home environment that includes poverty, drug/alcohol abuse and violence (physical and verbal). In addition, numerous students at the school have challenges related to learning in this traditional environment and/or take medication for AD/HD (S. Sullivan, personal communication, January 14, 2013). It has

been noted that the school provides safety and consistency for students who may not otherwise receive such attention outside of school hours (S. Sullivan, personal communication, September 24, 2012).

Over the course of the school year, approximately one third of students in grades 5 and 6 participated in weekly individual art therapy sessions with the two art therapy interns, however the need for additional art therapy support for students was expressed by the on-site supervisor. For this reason, a closed student group was proposed. After conversations with the on-site supervisor, a group was formed that would work towards the completion of a large-scale art project. The supervisor and art therapy intern collaboratively decided to involve graduating sixth grade students in the project due to the fact that they would likely not receive such an outlet of support after entering high school. The group was also thought of as offering positive support during the likely difficult transition into high school, while at the same time, providing students with the chance create a type of imprint or *legacy* reminiscent of their time spent at the school.

The art therapy intern who was the primary leader in developing the project, proposed the idea of a mosaic mural to the on-site supervisor. With the approval and support of the supervisor, primary steps were taken in order for the group to take shape. Firstly, a proposal was made to the school principal and resource team. The proposal included a discussion outlining the project goals and objectives as well as practical considerations such as execution, time and materials were highlighted. To enable staff to better grasp the vision for the project, a handout was offered that included colorful examples of mosaic work. The group aimed to foster goals such as: increase a sense of trust, self-esteem, communication, decision-making and teamwork amongst group

members. The mural project also aimed to encourage a sense of belonging and pride within the community.

A local mosaic school, tile supply warehouse and staff members at the school, donated materials. Additional materials needed such as grout, adhesive and panels were purchased at a hardware store with funding allotted within the elementary school's art therapy budget (see Appendix B).

Description of Sessions

The mural group was scheduled to meet weekly for 1-1 ½ hour sessions over a period of ten weeks in the art therapy room. The duration of a session was dependent on the task planned for that day. Though working outdoors may be ideal for certain stages of such a project, it was necessary to hold all of the group sessions indoors due to the cold weather. After researching which mosaic application would be best suited for the project, the group leader decided upon the "indirect method" which will be described later within the corresponding session (Kelly, 2004). It is important to note that both group facilitators had very little experience with mosaic work and drew knowledge from library research and discussions with mosaic artists. The main facilitator constructed an outline for each session that provided objectives and served as a guide for both facilitators. The co-leaders of the group went to students' classrooms at the start of each session in order to gather the group members and walk to the art therapy room together.

Session 1: Theme. For the first session, the eight group members seemed excited to be a part of the project and were surprised at the number of students participating. The room was set up with two tables. This resulted in the boys and girls voluntarily sitting at separate tables. The session began with introductions although the students were familiar

with the group facilitators who had been art therapy interns since the start of the school year. The facilitators explained that the group was formed for graduating students to participate in a special mural project. Initial discussion involved murals and what materials may be used to construct a mural. The concept of *mosaic* was introduced and various tiles were distributed for students to see and touch. It was explained that each group member would eventually have an opportunity to “smash” a tile and sort the broken tiles by color afterwards. The primary step of theme development was introduced and examples were offered in order to encourage the process of deciding on a theme. The fact that the group members were all graduating was highly influential. The group took place in the second half of the school year and the students were preparing to graduate by getting their photos taken and planning for the graduation dance. Examples such as growth, community and beauty were offered as a starting point. Students offered suggestions such as *friendship* and *peace*. It was explained that the completed mural would be displayed on a wall on the outside of the school. Students had the chance to ask questions and bring up any potential concerns. Primary concerns involved vandalism and the potential for school staff to reject the image or theme created. The facilitators reassured students that if they were to try their best and collaboratively come up with appropriate images related to the theme, school staff would likely be very supportive of their efforts.

Following the discussion about a theme, the group was introduced to a “mandala exercise.” Two different kinds of shapes were passed around the room and each individual chose one. Students were encouraged to write or draw something about themselves with the colored pencils provided. When students completed their shape they

were instructed to glue it onto the large piece of colored paper that had an outline of a mandala. Students took turns gluing their shapes until the mandala was complete (see Figure 1). The group was free to share about their shape if they wished to do so. The mandala exercise was introduced both as a way to establish a sense of cohesion in the group and as an introduction to mosaic work. This activity is similar to Rogers' (2011) "Exploration: Word Puzzle" (p. 216). For group work, the puzzle offers the metaphor that each puzzle piece or person is a part of the larger whole (Rogers, 2011).

At the end of the session, mosaic books were distributed for students to look through and further their understanding of mosaic. Small journals were also given to each student in order to record ideas for the mural over the course of the week and between future sessions. Students were informed that at the start of the next session, ideas about the theme would be discussed and they were encouraged to record thoughts and images in their journals.

Following the first session, it became evident that guidelines for the group needed to be established, as some students seemed to be testing the boundaries of the group. In addition, the seating arrangement for the group needed to be re-worked, as there was a distinct gender division within the group (boys/girls).

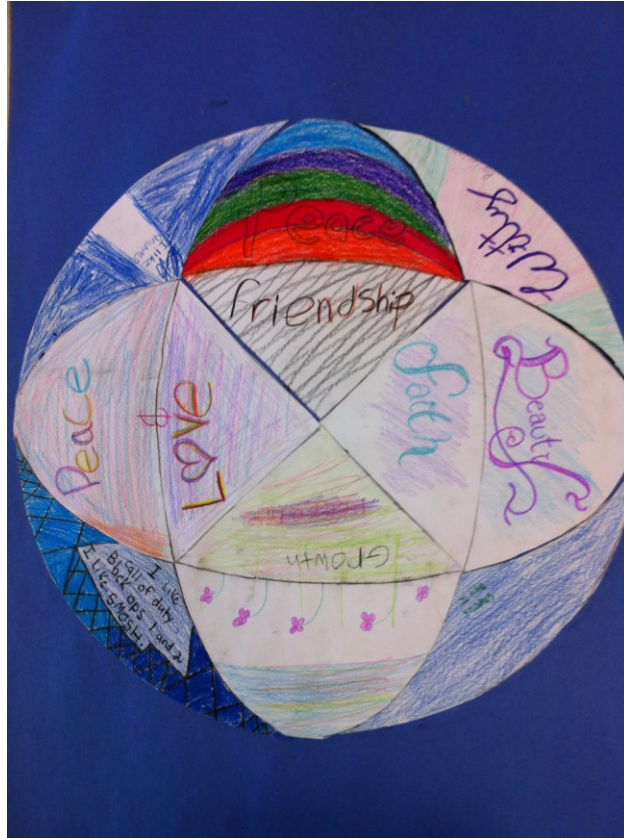


Figure 1. Mandala exercise. Colored pencil on paper, 18" x 24"

Session 2: Theme and images. For the second session, the room was re-arranged so that all of the group members could sit at one large table. At the start, both facilitators led the group in creating guidelines to encourage the time in the group to be positive and safe for all students. The students offered their ideas that centered on respect. This included: speaking one at a time, keeping hands to oneself and having respect for safety when working with materials. A school theme at the time was raising awareness about bullying, and students were reminded that bullying would not be tolerated in the group.

Some of the group members remembered to bring their journals with ideas regarding the theme, while others who did not have their journals shared ideas spontaneously. The theme of *growth* was a recurrent theme, and so the group agreed that

it would be appropriate for the mural. We briefly discussed symbols of growth before students each used paper and soft pastels to sketch images based on the theme. One of the group members arrived late and so the facilitators informed the student what fellow group members were working on. The student commented that he wished to draw an image related to his favorite video game, however the facilitators stressed that the images must be related to the agreed upon theme. Although he seemed determined to draw something from the video game, upon observation he was in fact drawing a graduation hat. When the drawings were complete, one of the group members asked if she could arrange the drawings on the wall. After she arranged the drawings, the facilitators asked the group to share in a discussion about similarities they could find in one another's drawings and what they would like to include in the mural. The group openly complimented each other's work and they especially enjoyed the graduation hat. The group asserted that the hat should be a central image in the mural. In addition, flowers created by one the students were praised and members' also wished them to be included in the mural. Some common objects included trees, clouds, the sun and stars (see Figure 2). Facilitators suggested naming eight objects that each group member could be responsible for in the final mural outline. Students named a tree, flower, cloud, grass, hat, sun, moon and stars as the eight objects to be included. This session lasted about fifty minutes before students became distracted and the facilitators decided to wrap-up the session by explaining the plan for the following week. It was explained that each student would be responsible for drawing one of the objects onto a transparent sheet that would be transferred and traced onto a large piece of paper using an overhead projector.



Figure 2. Symbols of growth. Oil and soft pastels on paper, 8.5" x 11" and 9" x 12"

Session 3: Mural template. After a brief “check-in” to see how everyone was doing, the facilitators explained the task for the session—creating a template for the mural. A large sheet of white paper was installed on the wall that was the full scale of the mural (5’x9’). After reviewing the objects, each person volunteered to be responsible for a chosen object. There was a brief disagreement as two members wished to do the same object, however they quickly came to a resolution. The facilitators explained that each individual draw a simple outline of their object in order to trace using the projector. At times, students were reminded to keep the image simple and without a lot of details. After questioning why there was a sun and a moon, the students responsible for the objects

decided to draw them as one image. When the drawings were complete, each student took turns placing their image on the projector to trace onto the large paper. Facilitators assisted in the process as objects had to be drawn in a certain order to ensure correct scale and placement for the images to fit together into a landscape. Students traced the images they had drawn and when finished, some group members chose to go over the lines with markers (see Figure 3). Others, who were finished, sat quietly and utilized drawing materials on the table to create personal drawings. To close the group, facilitators asked if the group would like to include their graduating classmates in some way into the project. Everyone found the idea appealing and it was suggested that perhaps the fellow graduating students could each write their names on separate tiles provided to them.

The group dynamic seemed to be more cohesive at this point and students appeared to be invested in the project. For example, the group would frequently inquire about the next steps for subsequent sessions.



Figure 3. Mural template. Marker on paper, 5' x 9'

Session 4: Smash tile. The group members sat down at the table with the facilitators while the task for the session was explained. The group members received the number 1 or 2 in order to divide the group in half. The groups were instructed that they would take turns at the “tile smashing station” where one at a time, everyone could use the hammer to break a tile. Students were also provided with safety glasses, gloves and the aid of a facilitator. The other group station divided the mural template into three sections that were taped onto the floor. Afterwards, the sections were covered with a plastic adhesive. Each group had time at both stations.

Participating in breaking the tiles was optional and one group member chose not to participate. Other group members expressed that they really enjoyed the experience. When at the template station, many students were distracted by the breaking tiles. The hammering of tiles also created a lot of noise, which made the template task harder to focus on. The students, who were waiting for their turn, took the opportunity to sort the tiles by color into separate containers. Some group members expressed how they felt the template station was “boring.” The facilitators addressed this by explaining that not all steps of a project are exciting, however all the steps need to be done in order to complete the project. During the session, there was a disagreement between two group members and it became clear that the group guidelines needed to be reviewed in order to ensure that everyone felt comfortable in the space. The session ended with a brief introduction to the next weeks’ task—arranging the tiles.

Sessions 5-8: Tile placement. Sections of the mural had been taped to the floor leaving limited space for tables. For this reason, chairs were arranged in a semi-circle for the start of the session. The facilitators checked-in to see how everyone was doing and

the majority of the group members stated they were either tired or sick. The group guidelines were reviewed and students were asked to make suggestions about how they can be followed. Throughout the discussion, individuals were disruptive and confrontational. As a result, facilitators chose to stop the discussion and outline potential consequences if the group guidelines were not followed. This included students receiving three notices about disrespecting the group guidelines before being sent back to their classroom. After the guidelines were stressed, the group seemed calmer and more cooperative. In fact, exploring the guidelines led into a discussion about bullying and all of the students shared that at times, they are all bullied.

The facilitators directed the group to choose a section of the mural to begin placing tiles. Many of the students chose to work on the objects they drew, while other group members assisted them. While placing tiles, the facilitators explained how the tiles should have a small gap in between each other. The concept of *contrast* was also described to the group and how contrast may be achieved with the colors they were using. Some group members worked very diligently on placing tiles, while others tended to watch, take a break or draw. Though the facilitators allowed a certain amount of freedom, students were re-directed and encouraged to contribute.

The consistency with tile placement was highly varied amongst group members and it seemed that the group needed a reminder about the time constraints to complete the mural. In addition, placing tiles for the mosaic was a novel experience for most students and this perhaps led individuals to be cautious or work slowly in order to make sure they were doing it correctly. At times, some students found it difficult to accept guidance from the facilitators. It's possible that they felt discouraged when the facilitators offered

suggestions. For the majority of the session, the facilitators circulated the room while providing guidance. However, one of the facilitators noted that students seemed most on task when they were receiving one-to-one assistance.

For our sixth session, the group was reminded to maintain respect for others upon entering the room. Students shared in a circle about their weekend before getting to work on the mural. The facilitators again emphasized the need for color contrast for the mural images to be distinguished from afar. Both facilitators took initiative to sit alongside group members and assist with the tile placement process (see Figure 4). This seemed to encourage student participation and a sense of cohesion within the group. Throughout the session, one group member had difficulty staying on task and seemed to distract other students. The individual was also critical of others' work and this created discord between group members. This session encouraged an emotional response from group members and near the end, half of the group attempted to leave the room. The facilitators did their best to mediate and insisted the group gather together to view their work and close the session together. The group was encouraged to share their thoughts on the progress of the mural. Some members stated parts they enjoyed while others articulated what parts they did not like in the mural. The facilitators mentioned that everyone is free to have their own opinion and are welcome to share their thoughts on how they feel the mural might look best.



Figure 4. Tile placement. Tile on adhesive, each 3' x 5'

The group re-convened for the seventh session after having a week holiday from school. Most of the students stated they did not enjoy their holiday and expressed that it was “boring.” One of the group members was absent, so students worked on areas surrounding the area the individual had been working on. This session seemed to mimic the previous session in that the same group member was critical of others’ and as a result one of the group members decided to temporarily leave the room. Upon returning, the individual appeared despondent. A facilitator worked alongside the individual, which seemed to elevate their mood. In addition, facilitators questioned how might the individuals solve their issue with one another and it was decided that they would no longer work near one another. The facilitator also explained that participation in the group is voluntary and if anyone did not want to participate they had the option to return

to class. This issue was further addressed when closing the session. Some students expressed they felt the group was “fun” while others stated it was “not that fun and tiring.” Another group member mentioned the group was beneficial because they missed math class. Several group members were vocal and seemed to have strong opinions, while other students remained quiet and did not offer any input regarding the group. To conclude the session, facilitators mentioned that during the following week, tiles would be provided for the group members and classmates to write their names on.

The objective for the eighth session was to complete the placement of the tiles. The facilitators informed the students at the start of the session, and they were all very surprised that it would be their last day to arrange the tiles. One of the group members began working immediately however soon appeared distraught when he thought someone had rearranged his tiles. The facilitator assured the student that no one had touched the mural and that they could easily adjust the tiles to the position he wished. Sitting alongside the student, the facilitator helped place the tiles. Soon the student asked the facilitator to stop putting the tiles on top of the ones already in place. It seemed that the student comfortably expressed what he needed and did so in a calm and polite manner.

The group worked diligently to completely fill the mural with tiles. At times, students took breaks and needed a reminder of how little time remained to complete the project. One group member seemed distracted and left the room after someone commented that he had placed the tiles too far apart. A facilitator spoke to the student in the hall and explained that everyone is learning together—even the facilitators, and we must be patient and work together through the challenges. The student expressed that he did not wish to return to the group moving forward due to the fact that a fellow group

member hurt his feelings. The student did return the room after some encouragement by the facilitators, however it was unclear whether he would return for subsequent sessions. The group stood together to observe the progress of the mural, as all of the empty spaces had been filled-in with tile. Facilitators explained the next step of the project where they would adhere sections of the mural onto the panels using mortar. The group was informed that this step would require the mural to be cut into small manageable sections and that the next time they saw the mural, it would be in pieces.

Session 9: Mortar. Prior to the group, one of the facilitators worked on dividing the mural into sections that would be manageable to transfer onto the panels. The process utilized for the construction of the mosaic is called the “indirect method” (Kelly, 2004). This process first involves sticking the tiles onto plastic adhesive and afterward, placing an additional layer of plastic adhesive on the top of the tiles (Kelly, 2004). The tiles are essentially *stuck* between two layers of adhesive. The original layer of adhesive that secured the tile in the initial positioning is gently removed leaving the back of the tiles exposed and ready to be placed on top of the bonding material and onto a surface (wall or panel). The mosaic ended up being divided into 48 pieces (16 pieces per panel) and each piece was clearly marked with a number. Each panel was associated with an object to distinguish the order. For instance from left to right: sun, hat, tree. Mortar specific for outdoor use was used to guarantee the mural would sustain freezing temperatures. The mortar was mixed with liquid latex and therefore precautions were taken such as wearing masks and proper ventilation.

The art therapy interns divided the mortar into three equal parts (each for the three panels) prior to the group. With all of the group members present, safety was emphasized

before entering the room and students were also reminded that the mural was in pieces. The facilitators felt the need to remind students of this fact in order to alleviate any potential anxieties from seeing the work in so many pieces. The mural was also indistinguishable as the colored surface of the tiles was turned over. The task of the day was explained and efficiency was stressed as mortar sets fairly quickly upon application. Students were presented with three bags that contained pairs of numbers. Each bag was labeled “sun”, “hat” and “tree” to correspond with each of the three panels. Students were instructed to choose a slip of paper from each bag. This process assigned which pieces each student was responsible for when placing the sections onto the panels (six sections of tile for each student). The students expressed that they felt the sections of tile were too large for them to handle and so the placement of the pieces became a two-person job—one student with the aid of a facilitator. To begin, students volunteered to mix the mortar with a facilitator. Wearing a mask and goggles, a few students took a turn in the mixing process. The mortar produced a very unpleasant odour and all of the students commented on this. After the mixing, students quickly spread the mortar over the panel with spatulas with assistance from facilitators. It was important to spread an even layer over the panel to ensure all of the tiles would adhere. The spreading was done with the panel on the floor and when completely covered, the facilitators lifted the panel and leaned it against the wall. In order according to the numbers provided, students took turns carrying their pieces over to the panel. With help from the facilitator, the piece was carefully tilted onto the panel and secured by pressing the tiles into the mortar. The process resembled that of an assembly line and the facilitators called the numbers of sections in order for students to be prepared. The pace was very quick and students seemed to take it very seriously.

Shortly into the process, students spontaneously took leadership in calling out numbers and helping everyone be prepared for their turn. Some individuals were more nervous than others about transferring the sections onto the panel. At times during the transfer, pieces of tile fell down, however could easily be picked up and put back in place. The facilitator assisting with the placement announced a much needed break after the second panel was complete. Although the time was nearing the end of the session, the facilitators decided to push through in order to complete the third and final panel. The students were surprised and excited that they would be able to finish adhering all of the pieces. To close, the group observed all of the work that had been done during the session (see Figure 5). Surprised at how much was accomplished, the group agreed that it looked great!

Between sessions, the facilitators removed the plastic adhesive from the surface of the mural in order to prepare for the next step—grouting.

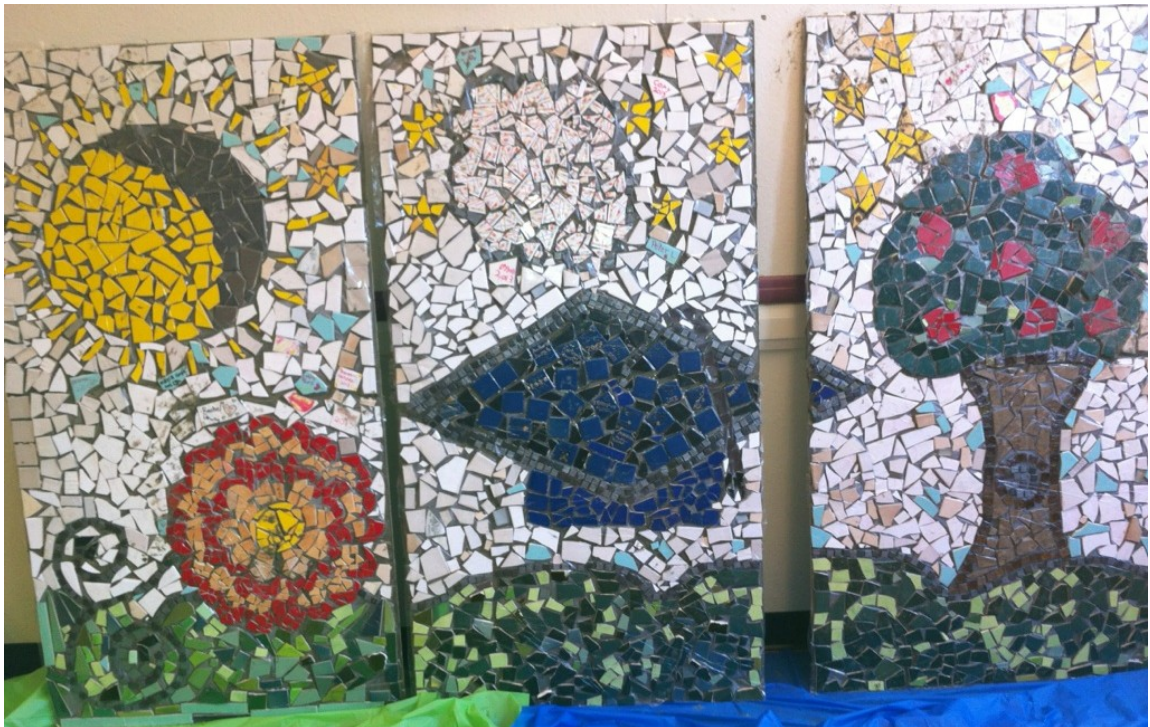


Figure 5. The tile is adhered to the panels. Each panel 3' x 5'

Sessions 10-11: Grout and polish. The grout was pre-mixed by the facilitators immediately prior to the group due to the mixture being very thick and difficult to mix. The students wished to experiment with the colour of the grout by tinting it blue. To avoid complications with the setting of the grout, facilitators did not want to add paint and so suggested food coloring. The students enjoyed the tone that the blue food coloring created, however the facilitators informed the group that it was very unlikely the color would remain once the grout was dry. This did not seem to bother the students. The panels were each set onto three tables and students divided themselves into three groups to distribute the grout mixture. The facilitators poured the grout evenly between the panels and students spread it into each crevice using their gloved hands. Some students mentioned that the grout felt “gross” although they continued to help spread the mixture. A squeegee was used to remove the excess grout and students had to wait their turn as there were only two squeegees. This created some disruption amongst group members since everyone wanted to use a squeegee at the same time. For the next step, students used a damp sponge to gently wipe away the film that was left on the tiles. Students required reminders to not wipe too hard or over wipe as this would remove a lot of grout that is meant to hold the tiles in place. At one point, a group member was continuously wiping a tile that had a classmates’ name written on it. The name was wiped off and needed to be re-written. The student later explained that it was an accident.

Spreading the grout created a large mess and students had grout stuck to the bottom of their shoes when they walked back to class. For this reason, the grout should be applied outdoors if at all possible. Also, measures to keep students’ shoes and clothing clean should be devised. For instance, attaching plastic bags to shoes will prevent the

need for excessive clean up. The students seemed to enjoy being able to make a mess and it was explained that it was part of the process and could later be cleaned up. However, the facilitators learned that further precautions might have been implemented in order to reduce the clean up time and more importantly to ensure students' welfare. Keeping the school environment clean is not only an important example to set for students, but also to ensure school staff welcome future art therapy projects.

The final group session consisted of students' polishing the tiles and having a small party to celebrate their accomplishment of completing the mural. Time was also spent discussing the process of constructing the mural and planning for a celebration after the mural was installed where they would present the mural to students and school staff. Throughout the session, two of the male group members were disruptive. After three warnings the facilitators chose to ask the group members to go back to their classroom as their behavior was disrespectful to the groups' session. The group appeared disappointed at the students' behavior that resulted in them having to leave the final group session. After the two students left, the group dynamic was relaxed and a few of the group members expressed that they wished to give a speech at the celebration. Suggestions for the title of the mural were offered by group members and after some deliberation, students agreed that they all liked the title "Reaching for the Stars." Individuals expressed that the title encompassed the theme of growth and trying ones' best in the future or when faced with a challenging task.

Mural Celebration

A couple of weeks after the completion of the mural, the building manager from the school board organized the installation of the mural on an exterior wall (see Figure 6).

In the meantime, group members who wished to say a few words at the celebration practiced with the help of a fellow classmate during recess in the classroom of the on-site supervisor. The celebration originally intended to include multiple grades of students, however it happened to be exam time and it was not convenient for some grades to leave their classroom. All of the grade six graduating students, grade six teachers, resource team and principal gathered outside to commemorate the mural. The principal opened the celebration by relating the project to the school's theme of the month "cooperation." Following, six out of the eight mural group members read the speeches they had prepared. The students' shared their experiences within the group and the process of creating the mural. They expressed both the challenges and rewards throughout the process and how they worked together to complete the project when at times they thought it would not be possible. The students also thanked the group facilitators for providing guidance and the opportunity to be a part of the project. Lastly, the group facilitators gave thanks to the school staff for permission to conduct the project and for their support.

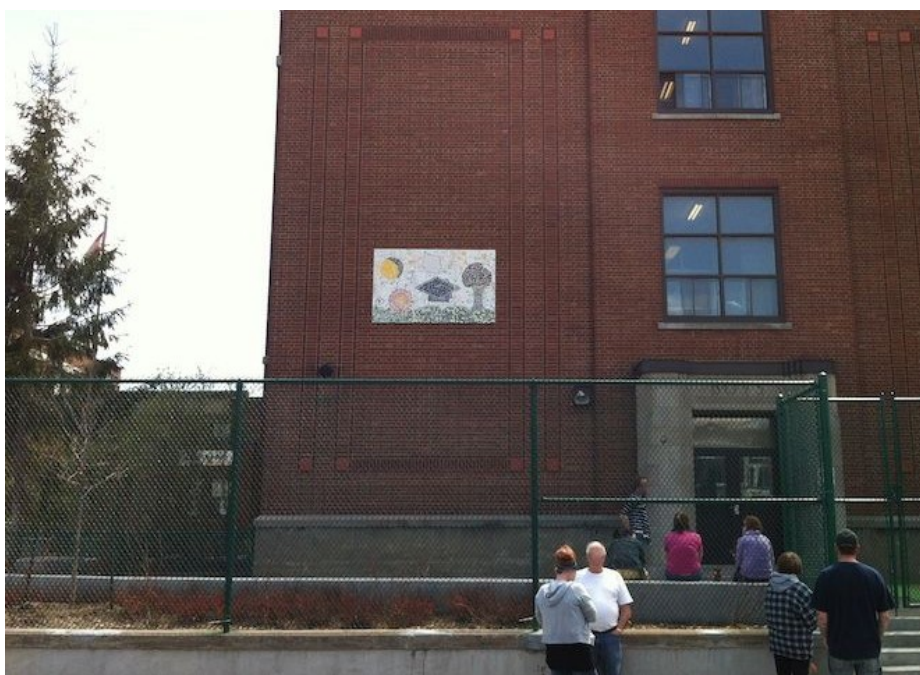


Figure 6. The mural installed. "Reaching for the Stars", 5' x 9'

Discussion

Initiating the mosaic project as a group was a time of uncertainty for all those involved—including the facilitators. The on-site supervisor was hesitant about the art therapy interns meeting with the entire group for the first session. She cautioned that since most of the students had yet to establish a relationship with the interns, it was likely that certain students would act-out and sabotage the group. The facilitators took this advice into consideration and as a result prepared as best they could. The facilitators felt that it was vital to meet as a whole in order to work towards establishing a cohesive unified group, and so the first session took place with all members present. It is understandable that the on-site supervisor cautioned against the art therapy interns meeting with the eight group members all together. Perhaps she was unsure of the interns' ability to lead and maintain safety and control of the group. This is an important factor for art therapists to consider when entering a school as they may be viewed as an

outsider. If art therapists are not well acquainted with the children, school staff may feel that forming an attachment will be difficult. Apprehensions were justified as the students outnumbered the facilitators. With only two facilitators, it would be a challenge for facilitators to divide their attention evenly and maintain awareness of everything happening within the group. The facilitators placed value in establishing their relationships with students and believed that the group process would soon lead to the development trust.

The mosaic project had necessary steps to be completed in sequential order. Similarly, the group process went through different stages from start to finish. Yalom (1995) notes that therapeutic groups go through stages of development that inform therapists about potential client reactions and what therapeutic interventions may be useful. Camilleri (2007) describes:

Moving from an orientation stage, during which structure and goals are established with more focus on the therapist, to a conflict stage, where interpersonal dynamics and issues of leadership are addressed, to group cohesiveness, where group members commit to the personal and group process, therapeutic groups provide a unique microcosm of group situations that children will experience in other contexts. (p. 57)

Though groups may go through stages of development, all groups undeniably have unique dynamics.

The following discussion will explore the process of the group from the point of view of the lead facilitator. The description of the process will be divided into three sections that represent the beginning, middle and end stages of the group. Having

separate sections aims to portray the development of the group as well as the development of the art therapy interns. Lastly, a reflection about the role of art therapist in this type of group will be provided as well as recommendations for future implementation of such a project within schools.

Uncertainty to Investment

During the early stages of the group, the students were likely becoming familiar with the art therapy interns and were perhaps testing limits. Two of the group members also attended individual art therapy and the other group members were aware of this. In fact, during the first group session, one of the individuals who attended individual art therapy told the group how he had been in the room many times. It seemed as if the student was proud that he could share his experience in the art therapy room with those students who were unfamiliar. Having two students who were well acquainted with the art therapy interns likely influenced the dynamic of the group because they had already established a therapeutic alliance. This factor may have informed other students that the facilitators are perhaps trustworthy and they are in a safe space. In contrast, the fact that certain students were familiar with the facilitators may have encouraged feelings of differential treatment and vying for attention.

After the first session it became clear to the facilitators that guidelines needed to be established and would be integral to the success and safety of the group. Bilides (1992) describes work with inner-city adolescent groups and how the groups each had a clear purpose and method. The groups required structure, limit-setting, modeling, emphasizing strengths and giving instructions. This coincides with how the facilitators approached the mosaic mural group. A detailed description of the project was provided to

students in addition to providing a detailed overview of objectives for each session. A mosaic provided an art directive for the group and therefore posed an alternative approach to art therapy groups than what the facilitators were accustomed to in their art therapy program, which emphasized a *person-centred* approach to art-making. The person-centred philosophy developed by Carl Rogers involves the therapist being empathic, caring and open (Rogers, 2001). In practice, this means following the client's lead (Rogers, 2001). Although providing a directive may not be favored with some clients or groups, the mosaic project offered structure and distinct steps for the students in the group. This may have enabled the students to achieve a greater level of comfort since they knew what they were working towards. The mosaic was based on the theme of "growth." Prokofiev (1998) notes that themes are frequently used when the group is time-limited. With a short time frame, Landgarten (1981) believes that theme-based groups facilitate empathy and relatedness.

Guidelines were established early in the group to ensure all students felt comfortable and safe in the group. For example "keep hands to oneself" and "listen to others." The students participated in the process of setting guidelines and this enabled them to contribute to the structure of the group. In reference to group art therapy work with adolescents Camilleri (2007) notes, "By giving voice to individuals within the group setting, the children developed a sense of importance and confidence" (p. 60). Adolescents in a group need some flexibility (behaviorally and verbally), however they also want to know there are boundaries, otherwise taking risks is too scary (Bilides, 1992). In addition to helping to establish guidelines from the start, students also had the opportunity to decide on the theme and content of the mural. These contributions likely

added to students' feelings of worth and confidence. Also, students were informed that the mural would be installed on an exterior wall of the school and this perhaps demonstrated to the group that not only did the facilitators support and trust them, so did the school staff and principal.

After the third session that involved creating the mural template, it was evident to the facilitators that students were taking ownership and becoming invested in the project. The students demonstrated excitement and also asked about subsequent steps to the project. This informed the facilitators about the group members' commitment to the project and also that it was effective to have a distinct format to the group. For instance, an opening check-in, work on the mural, followed by closing the session and giving an introduction to the task for the following week.

Challenges and Collaboration

The middle stage of the group extended for several weeks during which the group focused on the task of arranging the tiles. At this point in the group, students seemed to be getting more comfortable with the facilitators and with participating in the group. After a brief check-in, students were eager to begin work on the mural by arranging tiles. Two students in the group were diagnosed with AD/HD and having direction and structure within the group was likely beneficial. For example, during multiple sessions when a student forgot to take their AD/HD medication and was visibly restless and outspoken, the task of arranging the tiles seemed to offer relaxation and focus. As discussed in the literature, a limited choice of media provides a containing experience for a child with AD/HD (Hinz, 2009).

A turning point in the group took place when the facilitators decided to work alongside group members during the placement of the tiles. Working together seemed to encourage feelings of security and confidence in students when placing the tiles. The facilitators decided to make themselves available after noticing how working side-by-side seemed to provide reassurance to students that resulted in greater focus on the task at hand. Moon (2010) describes, “The *Being-With* process involves the creation of an *I-Thou* relationship among the group members. The process facilitates very positive moments when the group members and leader are working together as a team” (p. 112). Working together created a sense that the students and facilitators were meeting on common ground and working together to reach a common goal. Furthermore, this process enabled the facilitators to serve as role models to students. In reference to art therapy group leaders, Moon (2010) states, “they must demonstrate a willingness to take both personal and creative risks. They allow themselves to be vulnerable and to relate authentically with the members of the group” (p. 112). The group was a learning experience for both of the facilitators who aimed for the students to help inform them about what was needed. Creating the artwork together proved to be a rewarding experience for both students and the facilitators. Working together allowed for students and facilitators to be in closer proximity to one another and this encouraged greater empathy. Group art therapy may provide individuals with a positive experience that may transfer over to other group situations such as family or community. Rogers (2011) describes, “Then, by connecting to at least one empathic person in a supportive environment, we learn how to relate to the community” (p. 209). Being empowered in a

small community (such as an art therapy group), individuals are inspired to translate the experience to a larger context (Rogers, 2011).

The group guidelines were posted on the wall at the start of each session however, throughout the middle stage of the group, individuals needed frequent reminders to follow the guidelines in order to ensure respect for one another. At the start of the fifth session, the group convened and the facilitators reiterated the guidelines. In the discussion that followed, group members acknowledged with one another that at times they are bullied. Moon (2012) notes that the culture of the group is strengthened during times of powerful self-disclosures. The middle stage of the group seemed pivotal in that working together strengthened the therapeutic alliance and group members found a common thread to relate to one another.

Sharing in Accomplishment

During the final stage of the group, students focused on completing the mural. The group was time-limited due to the art therapy intern placement nearing its end. This factor influenced the group as the facilitators stressed the need to complete the project. The pace of placing the tiles increased, especially when the students were informed on the ninth session that it was the final day to arrange tiles. Though students were surprised and unsure if the task could be accomplished, everyone worked together to fill the mural with tile.

The steps involved completing the mural included working with materials not frequently used when making art within a school, such as mortar and grout. These materials may be considered to activate the Sensory component of the ETC as they have visual, tactile and olfactory qualities (Hinz, 2009). Piaget (1969) described that

throughout development, children gather information through sensory means. Riley (2004) and Schore (2002) note that this means that early information is stored in the right side of the brain before children have acquired language. For this reason, Malchiodi (2012) asserts art therapy activities that involve sensory experiences, effectively access right-brain memories. Damasio (1994), Lusebrink (2004), Siegel and Hartzell (2003) describe that Kinesthetic/Sensory information shapes our experience and as a result significantly influences our understanding of emotion and development of memory. The Sensory component of the ETC was mostly activated later in the group once students had developed a sense of trust and safety within the group environment. Perhaps by having a positive experience in the presence of supportive adults, the students were able to augment their understanding of emotions. Namely, enhancing feelings of self-confidence. Erikson (1977) believed that from infancy, experiencing a sense of trust and safety in the world and other people is the essential foundation for the development of self-esteem. In addition, work by Bowlby (1980) demonstrates how children thrive when provided with a consistent figure with whom they feel safe and can depend to explore the world. Weare (2000) states, “Paradoxically, it is only from the basis of such safe dependence that the child will feel able to move towards real personal independence and autonomy” (p. 64). The students’ graduation is parallel to moving from safe dependence to autonomy. It is an important life transition and a step towards maturation and independence.

Throughout the latter stage of the project, students demonstrated independence and autonomy on a number of occasions. For example, when a group member expressed to the facilitator what he wished to do with the tiles and also when adhering the tiles to the panel, the group members took control and ownership of the process by providing

assistance and guidance for one another. Another significant example of independence and autonomy is when the group members initiated writing speeches for the mural celebration. During the process of writing the speeches, students relied solely on their peer group for any assistance they required. Performing the speeches in front of their peers and school staff demonstrates tremendous self-confidence and represents students' desire to share their efforts with the greater community.

Personal Reflection

As the lead facilitator, I felt a great deal of responsibility to ensure that the group was a "success." I was taking a risk when I proposed the project to the resource team and the principal, since I had not executed a mosaic project such as this before. The school extended their support and trust in me to lead the group project and I felt obligated to provide the school with a positive and lasting impression of the potential benefits an art therapist in the school might offer since I was the first art therapy intern to work there. I felt the project could be considered successful if the students were able to work towards the pre-determined goals such as increasing their understanding of teamwork, communication and self-confidence. However, I also recognized that some of the proposed goals would likely be dependent on the successful execution of the mural—such as trust, confidence and feelings of pride. Though I had researched the medium of mosaic and felt that I understood how to facilitate the group, there was an underlying degree of uncertainty and anxiety. Similarly, Summer (2007) reflects on the process of a mural-making group and states "The anxiety stemmed from fear of the unknown" (p. 126). I relate to this sentiment, as it was my first time leading a group such as this and also my first experience with mosaic work. Carpenter, Taylor and Cho (2010) note that

their mosaic project was risky, imperfect and at times hard, however it was influential in so many ways. The mosaic project was very much a parallel process for the students and myself as an art therapy intern. Working together as a group we learned about each other, our limits and most importantly our inherent potential and ability to persevere when faced with a challenging task.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the process of an art therapy group within the context of a school setting and demonstrates how such a group has the potential to foster goals such as increasing self-esteem, teamwork, communication and a sense of trust. The detailed descriptive nature of the paper aims to provide a guide for those who wish to implement similar art therapy projects with students. The paper may also be utilized to inform projects in alternate contexts such as community centres, group homes or youth shelters. It is recommended that facilitators be mindful of the time necessary to complete the project as the facilitators of this group found the eleven weeks to be the minimum amount of time necessary to complete the mural and also to go through the various stages of group development. However, as mentioned previously, all group dynamics differ and therapists should use their best judgment as to what will be most helpful for their clients.

Schools provide a context that is accessible for children to receive assistance with mental health. Cohen (2001) notes how social and emotional learning is quickly in the lead of advancing educational practices. In addition Zins, Weissberg, Wang and Walberg (2004) state that increasingly, the understanding that when the social and emotional needs of children are addressed, learning abilities improve. Implementation of mental health services such as art therapy in school systems seems vital to the well-being and healthy

development of children who may require additional support to meet their needs. Rubin (2005) asserts that art making can assist children in making sense out of their inner thoughts, feelings and fantasies. It is my hope that more schools are able to provide art therapy as a therapeutic resource for children.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Hello, my name is Jessica and I am a student at Concordia University in the Creative Arts Therapies Department. I am writing to ask permission for your child to participate in weekly art therapy group sessions that will be offered from January 2013 until April 2013. The group will be led by Jennifer François (Art Therapy Student-Concordia University) and I.

The group will work towards making a mosaic mural that will be displayed at the school. Ceramic tile will be the main material used. The group members participating in the project are students graduating in 2013. Some target educational goals for the project are: teamwork, communication skills, learning a new creative skill, making friends and feeling good about himself/herself.

This mural is part of my final project for school. For this reason, I ask your permission to photograph the artwork. I will also write about the group process for my final paper, which will be for educational purposes only. The identity of your child will be kept strictly confidential.

I will work under the supervision of Shaun Sullivan (On-Site Supervisor), Janis Timm-Bottos (Art Therapy Professor- Concordia University) and Irene Gericke (Art Therapy Practicum Coordinator-Concordia University).

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to call Shaun Sullivan or myself. Please return the form to Shaun Sullivan.

Jessica Reid
Art Therapy Student
Concordia University

Shaun Sullivan
On-Site Supervisor

☐ **I permit my child to participate in the weekly art therapy mural group**

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Appendix B

List of Materials

The following were used to construct the mosaic:

- Porcelain and ceramic tile (various colours)
- Durock® cement board
- Mapei Keralastic flexible acrylic latex mortar system
- LePage PL premium construction adhesive
- Mapei sanded grout
- Aqua Mix finish seal
- Pébéo porcelain pen and outliners (multiple colours)

Tools and miscellaneous items required:

- Gloves (vinyl and latex)
- Safety goggles
- Hammer
- Containers for sorting tiles
- Clear adhesive plastic (DC-Fix)
- Xacto knife
- Tape
- Tile nippers
- Canvas bag (for breaking tile in)
- Buckets for water and mixing
- Squeegee and spreader for grout
- Sponges
- Plastic drop sheets
- Work shirts
- Rags