

Spring 5-19-2018

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Brittany Haley

Lesley University, bhaley2@lesley.edu

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Expressive Arts to Promote Emotion Regulation and Empathy in the Classroom:

A Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 9, 2018

Brittany Haley

Specialization: Expressive Arts Therapy

Thesis Instructor: Denise Malis, PhD, LMHC, ATR-BC

Abstract

The use of arts in regulating emotions through mindfulness and strengthening empathy through story-telling is reviewed in this capstone thesis. Learning how to regulate emotions while in childhood could be beneficial in providing success in other skill related areas such as inhibitory control and academic skill around reading or math. A story-telling and mindfulness method was developed for children in a school setting to learn to form relationships with each other. Insight was gained around the students' own needs of emotion identification and expression as well as builds a sense of empathy. When a child has the ability to understand another person's experience and identify emotions around this, a greater sense of community can be seen. While in the classroom and during period of social time such lunch, students were observed to have a better understanding of social skills, regulation skills, skills of empathy and to begin building a relationship of attunement. These observations provided additional insight into the schemas in which the students actively participated in and how the group could benefit from using the creativity of story-telling and mindfulness techniques to impact executive functioning overall.

Keywords: emotion regulation, empathy, expressive arts, mindfulness

Introduction

Within this paper will be an arts-based discussion around the idea of introducing arts-based mindfulness to school-aged children and within the school system through a community project. The aim of using arts-based mindfulness is to increase emotion regulation skills that will encourage empathy in students individually and collectively as a classroom. The research introduced within this paper suggests using mindfulness and expressive arts in the form of play and story-telling provides individuals with positive experiences around emotion regulation and building empathy. Additionally, the research mentions the improvements of working memory, focus, social skills, self-esteem and a reduction in internalized and externalized behaviors for those participating in the research (Coholic & Eys, 2016). Lastly, conclusive studies state that there are positive benefits of mindfulness on academics and language development (Coholic & Eys, 2016).

For the purpose of this community based project, arts-based mindfulness will be conducted through the lens of expressive arts therapy (EAT). EAT is “defined as the integration or use of all of the arts in a therapeutic practice” (Kossak, 2015, p. 3). Additionally, EAT is the authentic expression of “who we are and how we feel” (Levin & Levine, 1998, p. 90). Images, sounds, rhythms, movements, acts, visual and spoken forms of expression can be included in EAT approaches (Levine & Levine, 1998). There is a multimodal approach that allows the arts to occur in sequence, simultaneously, or with a careful transition between each art form such as visual, sound, movement, stories or drama (Kossak, 2015).

Kossak (2015) identifies the overall need to express ourselves in any way possible. “We tell ourselves stories and live by the stories we tell ourselves” (Culatta & Westby, 2016, p. 260) including conversations, myths or folktales that can help with problem solving skills. In this

community project, each student's authentic and individual story is the weaving thread that connects the classroom as a whole. Results will occur through the perspective of relationship of student to student, attunement of the classroom, response by facilitator, and affect regulation throughout the community project. The use of EAT will create opportunities for the class to discover and integrate their mind, body, and emotions in an empathetic way with each other.

Literature Review

Emotion Regulation in School Settings

Day and McDonald (2017) define regulation as a process that allows people to control their own behaviors, cognition, motivation and emotions. Therefore, emotion regulation is a learned skill to assist people in controlling their own emotions. Coholic and Eys (2016) further explain that healthy emotion expression can lead to better choices and interactions at school. Additionally, Hinz (2009) identified emotions or affect as "multidimensional" and as a construct of states that include one's cognitive, experiential and neurophysiological input of experiences and stimuli. Individuals are taught emotions are a basic human experience (Hinz, 2009). Hinz (2009, p. 102) also iterates the brain can recognize six to twelve "hardwired" emotions such as joy, disgust, sadness, anger, fear, shame and surprise as they are the same cross.

Emotions begin early on in our life and continue to be an area of understanding as we get older. Children become more autonomous in handling situations when they enter preschool (Molina, Pons, & Sala, 2014). This is when strategies for regulation are crucial (Molina et al., 2014). Often, kindergarten and school classrooms happen to be the first social interactions with peers around regulation. As children continue to socialize with peers, they build an understanding of their own emotional experiences (Molina et al., 2014). Comprehension of emotions becomes apparent and plays a large role in how peer interactions unfold.

Cognitive reappraisal is a strategy of flexible regulation that changes one's way of thinking about emotions to modify (Molina et al., 2014). Responses can be classified as either antecedent-focused or response-focused. Antecedent-focused strategies are a response intervention before the emotions are displayed while a response-focused strategy intervenes before the pattern of emotion is apparent. Antecedent-focused strategies assist in modifying a situation to promote healthy affective, cognitive and social development (Molina et al., 2014).

Molina et al. (2014) researched different emotion regulation strategies that emerge in preschool in relation to gender and age. One goal was exploring influence on emotion regulation development in relation to cognitive development, verbal skills, non-verbal intelligence and ability to understand emotion, or emotion comprehension. Children's narratives or story stems were utilized to detect emotion regulation such as when a child plays and converses with dolls (Molina et al., 2014). Sixty-nine preschool children participants were separated into two groups, ages three to four and five to six with a hypothesis that as the children aged, their emotion regulation strategies used in narratives would increase (Molina et al., 2014). Each child was administered the story completion tasks and assessments individually for several sessions. Due to the narrative nature of the study, the researchers suggest that the narratives by the children can be influenced by verbal ability or lack of ability. Regulating emotions may be conscious or unconscious as well as automated or controlled. While regulation can occur intrinsically or be managed extrinsically, the sole focus should not be on negative emotion but also on the process of positive emotions. Reducing intensity or frequency of emotional states can help to support sustained balance of positive emotions (Molina et al., 2014).

Using narration and story-telling, children can acquire other skills such as turn taking and problem solving (Culatta & Westby, 2016). Additionally, children gain attentional flexibility and

an ability to block any unwanted stimuli to increase attention and focus skills (Day & McDonald, 2017). Culatta and Westby (2016) state life stories can support executive functioning, encouraging reflection and planning. Culatta and Westby (2016) noticed that with emotional and behavioral disorder, there is a high impairment of language in children 5 to 13 years old. Of the children mentioned in the study, there was 81% prevalence of previously unidentified deficits in language; and within this population, there was also difficulty with personal and fictional narratives (Culatta & Westby, 2016).

Working memory and inhibitory control are other skills which impact emotion regulation (Day & McDonald, 2017). Inhibitory control looks at the ability to stop dominant response to favor adaptive responses or environment (Day & McDonald, 2017). Children with limited inhibitory control are more likely to be impulsive, hyperactive or distracted (Day & McDonald, 2017). An example of this is a child aimlessly walking around the classroom, talking when they are not supposed to in the classroom, or playing with objects at their desk (Day & McDonald, 2017). In a study, Day and McDonald (2017) administered a Remember Rule and Regulation Picture Task (RRRP) assessment to 282 students ($N = 282$) that were 8 years old. Of these students, 45 % qualified for free or reduced lunch, 84% identified as Caucasian, 6% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian and 6% specified as “other” (Day & McDonald, 2017). Female students accounted for 57% while 43% were male students (Day & McDonald, 2017).

The RRRP could possibly be useful in school settings to identify the students that could also work on emotion regulation skills (Day & McDonald, 2017). While adversity in childhood can alter ability to regulate emotions (Coholic & Eyes, 2016), the research also points to impairments in working memory, inhibitory control, social skills, language development and

academic struggles. The research with children around regulating emotions and reducing these impairments is still continuing to grow (Coholic, 2011).

Arts-based Mindfulness

Art is defined as an expression or “application of human creative skill and imagination for ‘emotional power’” (Bogousslavsky, Boller, & Piechowski-Jozwiak, 2017, p.1). EAT honors art in all forms and uses the term “arts” as plural to characterize this as any form of art making (Levine & Levine, 1998). The practice of EAT includes the varied use of rituals of play when completing art forms such as story-telling and “one could say that imagination ‘speaks to us’ in modalities of imagination” (Levine & Levine, 1998, p.40). EAT theories are influenced from various cultures and traditions and cannot be separated from play and imagination (Levine & Levine, 1998). Healing traditions from the East are also utilized in theory and practice, such as attunement and mindfulness (Kossak, 2015). Mindfulness practices are integrated into the field as a way to attune to the individual or group such as stretching or making sounds. The voice is a primary means of communication in humans, yet it can be used as a therapeutic tool (Levine & Levine, 1998).

Having an awareness of breath, movement sensation and emotions can be linked to “psychological states of being” (Kossak, 2015, p. 37). Movement is the “very basis of life” and can be the “beating of our hearts, to each inhale and exhale of breath...literally move throughout our lives” (Levine & Levine, 1998, p. 133) even if we do not always realize this. The movement we create is storied on an unconscious level in our body, imprinting “our life experiences” (Levine & Levine, 1998, p. 133) to create stories. Levine and Levine (1998) suggest if these stories are not expressed, then our bodies create an emergence of physical, emotion or mental distress. The use of mindfulness in EAT can assist in the connection between mind, feeling,

body, and spirit, to not only be present, but release stories about “who we are, how we feel, and what we think” (Levine & Levine, 1998, p. 135).

Mindfulness is a “holistic philosophy” developed as a way of teaching holistically to relieve human suffering and increase compassion (Coholic, 2011). Within the study of mindfulness are “ever-shifting tides of the thinking mind” (Franklin, 2010, p. 162) that can assist with emotion regulation. Franklin (2010) also suggests that practicing mindfulness can create an increased capacity to have awareness, attention and concentration. Additionally, mindfulness can create a focus on the presence of moment to moment and being nonjudgmental when turning inward for attachment and attunement (Franklin, 2010). Practitioners can bring sensitivity to each client’s needs in order to help them become creative in solutions to their complexity (Kossak, 2015).

There are benefits of using creative approaches with mindfulness for emotion regulation, self-awareness, and other skills such as social skills (Coholic, 2011). When integrated into the school system and curriculum, mindfulness based approaches help build regulation skills, self-awareness and empathy (Starzec & Wisner, 2016). Franklin (2010) identifies five factors associated with mindfulness as being: (1) acting without reaction to experiences, (2) observing, noticing and attending to felt sensations, perceptions, thoughts and emotions, (3) acting with awareness of self and with nondistractedness, (4) labeling and describing experience with words and (5) not judging the experience. Mindfulness based approaches can help to transform thoughts, behaviors and emotions into positive relationships with peers, family, and the school environment (Starzec & Wisner, 2016). With the use of mindfulness in creating awareness and attention to emotion regulation, intrapersonal attunement can take place leading to intentional empathic experiences.

Coholic and Eys (2016) completed a mixed method study around vulnerable children or children faced with adversity and the use of mindfulness practices. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have a goal to make one fully aware of their moment to moment “stream of consciousness” and to accept their experiences (Coholic & Eys, 2016, p. 1). We, as human beings experience others like ourselves to build empathy (Kossak, 2015). This experience, also called affect attunement or embodiment assists in the acceptance of experiences (Kossak, 2015). The inability to have affect attunement and acceptance can lead to emotional and cognitive problems (Kossak, 2015). Additionally, the acceptance empathic experiences can provide improvement of concentration, emotion regulation, attention, compassion and self-understanding (Coholic & Eys, 2016).

Coholic and Eys (2016) utilized a qualitative study that discussed a total of 50 children ($N = 50$) identified as facing adversity within child protective services were referred to a seventeen week group. The groups were broken up with mean ages of 10 and 14 over three years (Coholic & Eys, 2016). A fourth year was added to include three more groups with twelve children ($n = 12$) eight to twelve years old. The groups used mindfulness in collaboration with other interventions including mindfulness cognitive behavioral therapy (MBCT) and mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR). Quantitative data was collected from 77 children ($n = 77$) 10 years of age that were placed into small peer groups (Coholic & Eys, 2016). These students were taught mindfulness and focused based intervention including art-based projects to understand and cope with emotions and self-esteem (Coholic & Eys, 2016). Although not all of the enrolled children followed through with the groups, the study showed mindfulness interventions to be effective in improving emotion regulation and self-awareness (Coholic & Eys, 2016).

Starzec and Wisner (2016) also provided a school-based mindfulness study for a tenth grade curriculum. The study was a seven month based program that engaged students aged 15-17 years in mindfulness twice a week during class time (Starzec & Wisner, 2016). Breath awareness, and walking and lying meditation were taught. Journal processing was integrated into regular class assignments to detect themes. The resulted themes were categorized in themes of (1) self-awareness, (2) self- regulation including cognition, emotion- anger management, emotion- happiness, emotion- coping with emotional challenges, behavior managing stress and sleep, and (3) relationship building including with peers, family, teachers, and learning to trust (Starszec & Wisner, 2016).

Reflections of their own characteristics bridges connections between experiences and goal setting in addition to effective problem solving, and having responsibility for their life choices (Culatta & Westby, 2016). Starzec and Wisner (2016) noted there were strides made intrapersonally and interpersonally that could help identify the students social workers could support. Finally, Starzec and Wisner (2016) suggest that when integrated into the curriculum, focus on self-regulation and self-awareness skills transform thoughts, behaviors and emotions to improve relationships with peers, parents and teachers.

Empathy and the Expressive Arts

Attuning within a relationship can provide the same response as a caregiver and a baby to provide healthy development and contain “affective states” (Franklin, 2010, p.161). Kossak (2015) mentioned that while in “infancy” the understanding of how the brain works continues to develop. Franklin suggests that the arts in therapy paved the way for art-based methods that address relational challenges or lack of skills. The arts can be used as empathic interventions as they mimic the mirror neurons system (MNS) that was discovered fifteen years ago which Jeffers

(2009) identified as fundamentally. MNS sit adjacent to the premotor cortex in the brain (Jeffers, 2009). When a visual stimulus is triggered in the brain, either by observation or imaginations, the motor neurons are then activated creating a connection between people. The motor activation can allow humans to experience their own actions and to experience others' actions (Jeffers, 2009). The MNS allows individuals to understand what other feel and is activated when any kind of interactive play has been engaged (Kossak, 2015).

The MNS provides space for the study of empathy to take place due to these connections. In understanding empathy, as a "biological drive to understand others" (Jeffers, 2009, p. 20), appreciation for empathy as a foundation to development takes place. Jeffers (2009) discusses how the discovery of MNS is used in observation of how students in multiple grades and one university perceive empathy through the use of arts. In this study, observation of when facial muscles became activated by emotion in observance on the face of another person, scores on an empathy inventory questionnaire correlated with a higher score and "connections arise out of emotional cognitive engagement" (Jeffers, 2009, p. 18). Art in relation to the MNS related to mirroring of visual data into motor neuron activities and create "empathetic response/engagement" (Bogousslavsky et al., 2017, p.5). Art provides a universal message that can be an "important element of our civilization" (Bogousslavsky et al., 2017, p. 7).

Neurons die when connections to others are not made as the MNS is hardwired for connection and empathic responsiveness (Jordan, 2010). Connections or relationships are needed to "flourish" and are a foundation of life span growth; without connection, personal and cultural suffering takes places (Jordan, 2010, p. 1). Relationships that foster growth fundamentally require empathy to meet the needs of each person. Jordan (2010) identified empathy as the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes, to feel and understand the other person's

experiences. With empathy, there is a possibility for growth, change and openness to learning. Disconnections occur when a person in the relationship feels unheard and misunderstood. Chronic disconnections can create hopelessness and isolation, leading to challenges with emotion regulation and ability to empathize. Jordan (2010) stresses that there is more control over wellbeing and response to the world if relationships are fostered with empathy, and recommends mindfulness as an important personal tool to accomplish this. In translation of this to EAT, inner feelings are expressed by creating outer forms (Levine & Levine, 1998). Empathy needs to be “conveyed through words and body language” (Levine & Levine, 1998, p. 124). The more an individual feels accepted and understood when having feelings of fear, rage, grief or jealousy, healing can occur to create change (Levine & Levine, 1998).

Bertling (2015) studied empathy and awareness with students in middle school through experiences of attachment and understanding in an art education class. Students used visual art and writing as outlets to explore their experiences and attachment to nature. The study aimed to make an embodied recognition of connections with other living beings (Bertling, 2015). Students participated in making ceramic pots and caring for potted plants as part of their 18 week class curriculum (Bertling, 2015). Data was collected into the insight of the students’ real life experiences within the classroom (Bertling, 2015). Place-based programs looked at how empathy can impact place attachment, academic achievement, and critical thinking due to limited research. Further research is needed to continue to support arts-based research, the study encouraged perspective and empathy building skills (Bertling, 2015).

Play is thought to be a crucial step in healthy development as a significant contributor to cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development (Palmquist & Smith, 2013). Dore et al. (2013, p.1) mentioned the definition of play is “difficult to pin down,” but offers the ideas that

play includes flexibility, positive affect, intrinsic motivation and non-literality. Kossak (2015), aligned with theorist Piaget, mentions play as imaginative and exploratory. When children are playing together, it can look like conversations. In expressive-arts, play could mean using sound and musical rhythm (Kossak, 2015). To further this definition, play could be improvisation, to discover living in the moment and accepting what is not known.

Dore et al. (2013) identified there are three ways to look at play: crucial, equifinality and epiphenomenon. Equifinality relates to the idea that play is only one possible route to development while epiphenomenon adheres to the idea that play is not a contributor to development (Dore et al., 2013). For the purpose of this discussion, we will look at play through the lens of expressive-arts and acknowledge that play allows “children to create and explore a world they can master” (Dore et al., 2013, p.2). As mentioned throughout this discussion, EAT “cannot be separated from play and imagination” (Levine & Levine, 1998, p. 39). Often discussed in EAT theories, Carl Jung brings forward the idea of archetypes and active imagination where imagination is a medium to be used for interventions because it can take place “with non-verbal sounds” as well as other modalities, like story-telling (Levine & Levine, 1998, p.90).

There is value placed on creativity within our school system at an early onset in education (Kossak, 2015). “Children are adept at engaging the imagination and understanding the language of play” (Kossak, 2015, p.75). Mandatory testing limits the interactions of creativity and creates an “imagination deficit” (Kossak, 2015, p. 27). School environments are taught to paint in a certain way instead of through expression or exploration. By the end of grade school, we, as students, are separated from our ability to either be artistic or not. However, if creativity is acknowledged and engaged with playfulness, teambuilding, productivity, trust and

innovation occurs (Kossak, 2015). From the beginning, imagination and creativity have been with us as Kossak (2015, p.25) suggests when he says “creativity nurtured us when we took our first step and spoke our first words”.

The use of Narration and Story-telling

The uses of myths and folktale stories have been used for centuries to teach skills and lessons (Kossak, 2015). Self-awareness and problem-solving skills have emerged as skill sets gained with stories aligned with societal needs. In addition to myth and folktale stories, stories can be used to tell a great deal of information about a person, diagnostically and as an assessment. “We tell ourselves stories and live by the stories we tell ourselves” (Culatta & Westby, 2016, p.260). Culatta and Westby (2016) look at stories such as fictional narratives, personal narratives, and autobiographical narratives while Bozkurt and Vuran (2014) discuss the use of social stories. Similar to the use of story-stems used with preschool aged children, there is a sharing of stories as a social interaction component (Culatta & Westby, 2016).

Fictional narratives have been linked to a student’s literacy and academic skills (Culatta & Westby, 2016). Personal event narratives can assess language impairments using the memory to tell about an experience which is acquired early in childhood when children in kindergarten through third grade begin to socialize (Culatta & Westby, 2016). Activities such as show and tell, writing objectives, and reading can develop personal narratives as they all have goals and outcomes within the story (Culatta & Westby, 2016). Autobiographical stories come from memories of reminiscing, such as when a toddler talks about their trip to the zoo or an interaction with a caregiver (Culatta & Westby, 2016). As adults, working with students to prepare them for school settings or working within a school setting, asking open ended questions and encouraging

story-telling helps develop better memory, autonomy and freedom without pressure to explore thoughts and emotions (Culatta & Westby, 2016).

In 1991, Carol Gray developed social stories to be used for social skills with children on the autism spectrum (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). They included short stories to teach healthy responses to certain social situations and emotions (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). The stories emphasize using first language in perspective of the student (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). Social stories were identified as effective because they can be repeated, visual, gain students' attention, easy to write and apply, cost and time effective and place focus on other children's thoughts, emotions and actions, or empathy. Social stories can be effective when presented alone as well as with other interventions such as music therapy or art (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). When social stories are coupled with other interventions, verbal and visual cues for healthy behavior and emotions are seen with the student population (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014).

Additionally, social stories encourage healthy play, initiating communication and conversation, and reduce disruptive behavior in the classroom (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). By encouraging a healthy social interaction due to emotion regulation, increased self-awareness and increased social and play skills, students will have an increased acceptance by others within the community or social setting (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). It is important to consider the community or social setting's perspective as well as the individual student's perspective when initiating social stories in order to build success (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). Taking perspective with stories is an important skill as each sentence is intentional and serves a different purpose; the meaning can also be interpreted and processed differently. Similarly, Dore et al. (2013) identified, the social stories as allowing children to master their own worlds in order to navigate others. Language should always be reviewed and assessed to make sure that students are not limited due

to impairments (Day & McDonald, 2017). The use of story-telling in narratives and in play can help with this assessment. By providing assistance with language, we are also increasing strategies for emotion regulation and building empathy within the students so they can become more self-aware.

A resource used within the EAT field, *The Expressive Therapies Continuum: A Framework for Using Art in Therapy* (Hinz, 2009), provides guidance on creative assessment of clients within spectrums. The spectrums range from cognitive to symbolic, perceptual to affective, and kinesthetic to sensory (Hinz, 2009). These spectrums are based on human development and ways a person can process information. The goal is to use art mediums to assist the client in finding a meaningful creative experience, and bring them to balance on the spectrum. For the purpose of discussion, the perceptual to affective spectrum will be focused on.

Perceptual thinking is accustomed of verbal language (Hinz, 2009). When children can shift between affective and perceptual spectrums, they can maintain an awareness of their boundaries and limits but also be able to organize stimuli (Hinz, 2009). Perceptual activities that include highly structured directives can help children create schemas to process the information they are receiving (Hinz, 2009). This can provide containment for emotions and safety of expression so children can continue to learn. Children are able to use mental imagery for visual expression and translate this mental activity into concrete expression and language (Hinz, 2009).

Overall, when students are able to manage their emotions and build empathy for self and others, the research has shown that students are able to do better in the classroom socially and academically. Relationships are formed naturally in social interactions (Dore et al., 2013) and it is important, for children, that this is continued to be fostered and grown. Using creativity within our own self-awareness, as a companion of authenticity, and increasing of sensory output, we

can help children gain authenticity and empathy of their own emotional experience. To creatively expressive themselves, “those who use the arts therapeutically provide an opportunity” (Levine & Levine, 1998, p. 89). Finally, the capacity for a person to have empathy is important in connecting with a community (Jeffers, 2009).

Method

A community project was designed to support emotional regulation for school-aged children to increase empathy within a classroom. This project manifested with curiosity of, what if we give students the language of emotion and a means to express this mindfully, could it increase their empathy? Helping students to learn mindfulness to promote empathy and increase emotion regulation can be beneficial for their interpersonal development and intrapersonal development leading to increased success in all areas of their experienced life. The healthy expression of emotion also increases positive interactions and experiences within the school setting socially and academically.

Demographics and Participation

Participants in this community project were located in a public elementary school in the Middlesex County of Massachusetts. The selected town and school name are left out of this discussion for the privacy of the students; however, as discussed with the school adjustment counselor, the population of the town is 42,683 ($N = 42,683$) citizens. Over 95.5% of the town identifies as white, 1.11% as African American and 2.76% as Asian. Within this town there are six elementary schools in addition to two middle schools and one high school. Overall, the town educates 4,882 students ($N = 4,882$). The school adjustment counselor provided information that within the town there are 887 students ($N = 887$) receiving special education services through

IEPs and out of that number, 124 students ($N = 124$) are located at the selected elementary school.

Demographics for the school include 507 students ($N = 507$) enrolled as reported by the school adjustment counselor. An estimated 24 % of the student body is receiving services for learning disabilities with females being under-represented at 18 % and males over-representing at 31 %. Within the school, 75% identify as white, 5.9% African American, and 10.5% as Asian. The identified public school offers 21.5 % of the student body with free lunch and 2.6 % receiving reduced lunch in the past five years, the school population has grown by 27 %. Gender remains almost equal with 52 % male and 48 % female.

The public school offers four third grade classrooms with participants in the community project located in one of these classrooms. The classroom has a total of 24 students ($N = 24$) with 11 girls ($n = 11$) and 13 ($n = 13$) boys. There is one assigned teacher in the classroom with intermittent assistance throughout the day from 3($n = 3$) special education teachers around IEP services and reading assistance. At this time, the number of students with IEPs in the classroom is unknown. The classroom was identified by the school adjustment counselor, the teacher and this facilitator for a twenty minute group once a week due to difficulty with transitions within the classroom and with regulation skills.

Procedure

Due to the school calendar and schedule, only three groups occurred. Three sessions took place creating a beginning, middle, and end to discuss. The classroom met for twenty minutes once a week in the morning, before classroom curriculum began. Each group began with an opening, had an activity, and closed. The opening and closing included mindfulness related activities such as meditation, deep breathing, stretching, or using the voice. Additionally, the

opening began with continuing the closing activity from the previous group to aid in keeping a connection between groups. The activity included story-telling activities through movement, verbal communication, and written words.

For three weeks over the course of January and February 2018, the third grade classroom participated in short EAT based activities that utilized mindfulness skills of deep breathing and story-telling. Each group lasted twenty minutes and encouraged full participation from students and staff present. The limited time did not allow for processing with the students or for transitions between arts-based activities. Before the groups began, students were observed in the classroom twice, and once a week ongoing during lunch time to identify areas of empathy and emotion regulation needs and growth. The school provided a positive behavior intervention to encourage safe, kind, responsible and respectful behavior when in the school, classroom and cafeteria. There were six earned rewards for the classroom exhibiting this behavior in the cafeteria for the month of December, 2017.

Week 1

The class was greeted and asked three times to raise their voice to copy the greeting in a call and return dynamic. This was used as a mindful opening activity as it included a deep breath between each answer from the students and utilized the voice to create an attuned environment. Students were then introduced to the group, EAT and mindfulness. The activity during this group included a game called "*Where the Wind Blows*" to build attunement in the classroom. In this game, one student identified something about themselves and if it was true for other students, they would cluster together near the first student. Students were invited to state their names, an emotion and identify something about themselves during the game. In this activity, the story telling occurred through the use of self-narration, movement and sound. When the game ended,

students were asked to give a sound in response to the game before sitting down. In closing of the group, students were informed that time had ended and that they would transition back into the classroom to begin academics. Students were invited to breathe in deeply and upon release of breath, to make a silly laugh and to repeat this three times.

Week 2

The class began with a call and response greeting three times. Students were then asked to remember the introduction from the previous week and how the group closed. In the opening activity of the group, students were invited to take a deep breath in and upon release of breath, to make a silly laugh. An explanation about the use of sound and using voice to encourage mindfulness and how this positively impacts the body then occurred. The activity invited students to fully participate in a game called “*What Are You Doing?*” Students were instructed to stand in a circle to begin. In the game, a student completes a movement before the next student asks “what are you doing”, whereas the student completing the movement assigns a movement or activity to the questioning student. Students were instructed to assign movements or activities related to the one they were doing to encourage connection, empathy and community attunement. In this activity, the story unfolded through the use of movement, sounds and words. In the closing of the group, students were instructed to send an audible clap around the circle. Students were asked to listen for the clap with their eyes closed until it completed the circle. The group closed with taking a deep breath in, and exhaling with a low hum three times. As the previous group, students were instructed that group was ended and that they were transitioning into academics.

Week 3

In the third week, the class began with another call and response greeting three times. The greeting changed with each return before students were asked to reflect on the activity and closing from the previous week. The opening of group invited students to take a deep breath in and exhale with a low hum. The activity for this week invited students to find comfortable space in the classroom and to close their eyes. Students were read a passage from one of the *Harry Potter* books around the character of the 'sorting hat'. Students were asked to imagine themselves sitting on a wooden stool with a "too big, dusty hat on their heads" and that the hat was reading this particular passage to them. At the end of the reading, students were provided descriptions of the four "houses" associated with the story. Slytherin was for students that sometimes got mad and teased others but felt they were still positive people, Gryffindor was for those that felt they had courage and always did the right thing, Ravenclaw was for students that were shy and enjoyed academics the most and Hufflepuff was for students who felt a mix of Slytherin, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Students were asked to sort themselves into each "house" and given three words: a verb, a noun, and an emotion. Each house was provided an option of acting out the words in a scenario together or responding to a house's scenario. When closing, students were asked to write down one word on a piece of paper and to leave it in a bowl by the door to be collected later. Students were reminded that group was ended and that they would transition back into academics. Students were invited to take a deep breath, place their feet firmly on the ground under them, and to close their eyes for one minute, visualizing their word.

Results

Preparation for group

Before groups began, the students were observed in the classroom twice and once a week ongoing during their lunch time in the cafeteria. The observations were to identify areas of

empathy and emotion regulation needs and growth within the classroom collectively. The school has initiated a positive behavior intervention plan to encourage students and staff to be safe, kind, responsible and respectful to each other. Classrooms are given daily recognition if they follow the school's positive behavior encouragement plan during lunch. It was observed that the identified classroom had earned six days of recognition during the month of December 2017. At the end of January, the classroom maintained six days of recognition and before February vacation occurred, the classroom had earned three days of recognition.

In one observation, three students were observed assisting another student, who was exhibiting emotion distress. Classroom observations were completed once in the morning and once in the afternoon. During both times, students were loud, continually speaking to peers, and needing additional directions through the use of a whistle, bell or chime, clapping and individual verbal redirection. In the classroom, students were paired up when doing lessons around reading to gain different perspectives and work together. In lunch observations, a group of 4 ($n = 4$) boys presented as reluctant to participate in class and remained unwelcoming in the lunchroom as they sat together and did not speak to other students. These four boys also remained separated in the classroom as a group or in pairs. In interactions with the students between January and February, five students self-identified as earning individual recognition in the same way the classroom lunch recognition is earned.

Response Art

Figure 1.

The Rumbblings of a Beginning

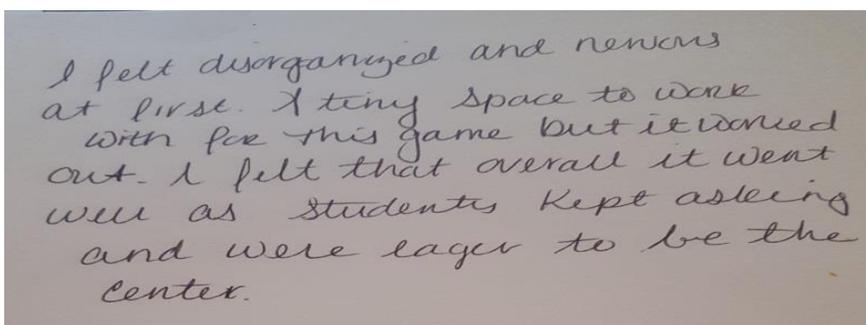


Figure 1 is a brief written description prior to beginning the community project. I felt disorganized as I was unsure of how this project would turn out. There were concerns around the shortened amount of time and the quickened pace that came with the school environment and whether the students would be able to grasp the concept trying to be taught. This reflection was completed directly after the first group took place. However, it is relevant to highlight how nervous energy could enter the practice space. Despite feeling nervous, a positive view was held due to the investment of the literature review discussion. The nervous energy manifested with speaking quickly, feeling jittery and restless as well as a “butterfly” feeling in the abdomen. Each week visual art was created in response to the groups. Additionally, words or poetry was used in response to the response art.

Week 1 Observations

The class was greeted and asked to return the greeting. The classroom returned the greeting quietly and without unity. Instructed again, the class was able to raise their voice to copy the greeting in a call and return method. Students were instructed to take a deep breath between each greeting to introduce mindful breath work. At the end of the greeting activity, the classroom was unified in their greeting response and held a clear and audible voice tone. The students were then introduced to the purpose of the group once and what EAT and mindfulness was. Some students put their heads down during this time with an audible sigh while two others raised their hands to ask additional questions.

The activity introduced during this group was called “*Where the Wind Blows*” in order to introduce students to the facilitator and begin to build attunement in the classroom movement. Within the game, one student identified an interest or quality about themselves and if it was true for other students, they stand with that student. Additionally, students were invited to state their

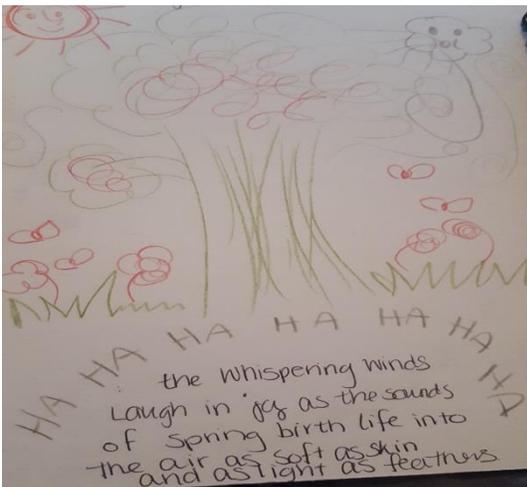
names and an emotion they were currently feeling. The use of movement and sound were utilized in stating their names and current emotions to provide a non-verbal story. The teacher and support staff also participated in the game periodically. Students were slow to move to the identifying student, struggled to maintain focus and to fully participate in the group. In observation, more girls than boys requested to be the identifying student in the center.

The four boys identified as being observed during lunch, remained in pairs for the group and did not participate, even when directly engaged in conversation, but instead laughed at other students. At the ending of the game, students were asked to give a response in sound before sitting down. In closing of the group, students were informed that time had ended and that they would transition to academics. Students were invited to breathe in deeply and upon release of breath, to make a silly laugh and to repeat this three times. All of the students participated in this closing activity at difference levels from a “HA” to a loud, prolonged and high pitched laugh.

Week 1 Response Art

Figure 2.

Week 1 Response Art



The Whispering Winds
 Laugh in joy as the sounds
 of spring birth life into
 The air as soft as skin
 and as light as feathers

Figure 2 was completed using a pen and colored pencils at the end of the day that the group was held. There was continued nervous energy left over from the first group. The end result left me with a feeling of attunement which carried over into the artwork. Within this artwork is a cloud blowing wind to mimic the breathing completed, a sun for satisfaction on how the group turned out, and butterflies that can be correlated to the nervous feelings prior to group. The words also on this picture include “HA HA” in reflection to the laughter shared in group and closing activity. In reflection of the picture, there is just two colors used and the movements of the lines in the picture are simplistic. Movement can be imagined in the blowing wind, flight of the butterflies, laughter across the page, sun rays, and even through the possibility of tree leaves shaking.

Additionally, a small poem was created in response to the response art. “Whispering winds” and “laugh in joy” again describe the movement of the students within the classroom. While “spring birth life” can all represent a hopeful look into the beginning of possibility for the students to learn and grow, as with the picture of the tree. To build a positive relationship with the class and introduce the expressive arts, “*Where the Wind Blows*”, allowed room for play and imagination just as “as light as feathers” can be portrayed as such. With the amount of unused space or white space in the picture, it can be determined that the students have space to grow and learn, as well as, flexibility to tell their own stories through the use of arts.

Week 2 Observations

Again, the class was greeted and asked to return the greeting three times in call and response. The class took two greetings to be in sync with each other. On the third try, students were able to raise their voices together and remain in sync. In looking at working memory, students were then asked to remember introduction from the previous week and how the group

closed. Only three students were able to accurately identify this with four (N=4) students remembering only how the group closed. The opening of group invited students to take a deep breath in and upon release of breath, to make a silly laugh. An explanation about the use of sound and using voice to encourage mindfulness and how this positively impacts the body then occurred. Students, as a whole, were able to identify listening to music, singing or hear a certain sound as a way to “calm down” or “when energetic” to release energy.

The activity invited students to fully participate in a game called “*What Are You Doing?*” All students fully participated in this group except one who verbally identified wanting to observe from his seat until the closing activity was explained. Students were instructed to first, stand in a circle to begin. In the game, a student completes a movement before the next student asks “*What Are You Doing?*” The student completing the movement assigns a movement or activity to the questioning student. Students were instructed to assign a movement or activity related to the previous one to create connection in empathy and community attunement. In this activity, the story unfolded through the use of movement, sounds and words.

In the closing of the group, students were instructed to send a clap around the circle. Students were asked to listen for the clap with their eyes closed until it completed the circle. The reasoning for this activity was to begin a process of attuning the classroom to listening skills that would help them transition back to academics. At first, students struggled to coordinate together to get the clap around the circle. After two times, the class was able to send the clap around with their eyes closed and have the clap sound rhythmic. Lastly, students were asked to take a deep breath in, and exhaling with a low hum three times. As the previous group, students were instructed that the group was ended and that they were transitioning into academics. All students fully participated in the closing activities of the clap and deep breathing. In feedback from

students after the group, several students identified that the activity was “fun” and requested to do it again. One student requested to share an activity with the classroom to do during a group suggesting that the students were engaged about the ongoing activities and groups.

Week 2 Response Art

Figure 3.

Whimsical Dancing



The colors in Figure 3 continue with the pink and green colors seen in Figure 2. A theme of continuity between group activities, mindfulness activities around breathing, and nervous energy turned hopeful becomes present. Additionally, there are significant differences including more colors, the use of space and the materials used. In Figure 3, oil pastels were the only material used to create the visual image. All of the space was used related to the students becoming more comfortable telling their own narratives and had the flexibility to exercise their invitation to play or not. There are contrasts in sharp lines and rounded lines that mimic the tension of breathing, energy and tension around working together in attunement. Figure 3 presents the idea of playful movement, deep breathing and this idea of growth with the lines outlined to appear as a shell or show growth.

Figure 4.

Week 2 Response words

The colors that dance within
A whimsy of life to be breathed
Stem the embers of passion
That thrive on oxygen. Spiritual
Encompassing of unwavering
compassion. Laughter
Within the self brings awareness of
Outside love

The response poetry in Figure 4 portrays the idea that the colors are dancing within the accompanying imagery. “The colors that dance within” and “whimsy of life” highlight the play within “*What Are You Doing?*” and the activity of the clap going around the circle. Each student anticipating the next students’ move, sound, or idea allowed the group to “thrive on oxygen”. Figure 3 mimics the idea of a flame, dancing in the wind and that with more oxygen, or as seen here, more learning and empathy, can grow in “unwavering compassion”. Additionally, like a flame, the need for inhibitory control and emotion regulation could prevent harm to self and others putting out the flame. The flame can be seen as the self, “within the self brings awareness”, again relating to regulation of emotions but also “awareness of outside love” and having the ability to experience our own situations and that of others. By the end of this group and the responses completed, the nervous energy previously felt, remained but manifested through excitement, determination, and a ironically, a flowing calmness.

Week 3 Observations

In the third week, students were greeted and returned the greeting without instruction. The greeting was changed quickly by the facilitator as a challenge to the students. They were able to adapt to this and return the greeting in sync again without instruction. Students were again asked to reflect on the activity and closing from the previous week. During this week's group, most of the students raised their hands and provided accurate answers about why the activity was completed and what the closing activity was. Students were also asked to reflect on why deep breathing and sound help them in school and in the community. The students requested to begin with the same breathing activity from the previous group's closing. In the opening of the group, students were invited to take a deep breath in and exhale with a low hum before finding a different spot in the classroom that was comfortable. The students were able to readily find a comfortable spot close their eyes except for six students that used a soft gaze on an object.

The activity for this week invited students to visualize the sorting hat character in the "*Harry Potter*" book series. Students were asked to imagine themselves sitting on a wooden stool with a "too big, dusty hat on their heads" and that the hat was reading the selected passage from the book to them. Some students excitedly expressed their interest in the book series and needed to be redirected to the instruction. The classroom was observed to have high energy with the introduction of the "*Harry Potter*" passage due to the students' expressed interest and understanding of the series. At the end of the reading, descriptions were given of the four houses associated with the story and asked to self-select which subgroup or house they felt they needed to be in. Students who often felt angry or upset and teased others but also identified as being positive to help them through this went to the Slytherin group. Students that went to the Gryffindor group identified as having courage to do the right thing. Three students identified feeling that they "always" do the right thing to help their friends and family even if it meant they

got in trouble. Those students that felt they were shy, quiet and/or enjoyed academics the most went to Ravenclaw while who felt they were a mix all the houses clustered in the Hufflepuff group. Most of the class went to Slytherin and Gryffindor with only one student in Ravenclaw. It was observed that more male students identified as Slytherin.

Next, the subgroups of students were given three words: a verb, a noun and an emotion with the option of acting out the words in a scenario together like charades or responding to a subgroup's scenario. Students were quiet and cautious to begin the activity. The teacher and support staff also joined the students which were observed to elicit excitement from the students as they began to express their ideas more openly. Students were observed communicating with each other interchangeably between speaker and listener. The students utilized laughter and competition in their responses. This activity was timed; allowing for one minute for each scenario. When closing, students were asked to write down one word on a piece of paper about the group and were allowed one minute to do this. Students rushed back to their seats, bumping each other. Finally, students were invited to take a deep breath, place their feet under them and to visualizing their word as an intention. Some students spoke their word aloud while other students were observed shaking their hands and feet in a "dusting off" action.

Week 3 Response Art

Figure 5.

Connection



Figure 5 was completed after the third group. I entered the group feeling the nervous excited energy held. During this group, I felt a misattunement after the passage was read from the book. It was harder to complete the visual response art during this week. There is more unused or white space than the previous two visual responses (Figure 2 and Figure 3). In Figure 5, the unused space equates to an unfinished feeling and the energy at the end of group. The nervous energy of not having enough time to process activities with the students appeared present during this response art. Movement and play also remained present in Figure 5 with the curves and movement of the lines and circles. Sharpie pens were used as the only material for this response art and provided a bolder color. Black was used more heavily during this visual art as well with the play of blending with the other colors. The letter for the houses are touching providing the idea that the students could interchange their groups as needed and that each house is needed to function or learn at some point in development. Surrounding the letters are curved

and straight lines that are mostly devoid of color besides white. This can be interpreted as space to learn and develop new skills that can be a key for larger openings.

Figure 6.

Thank you

Thank you for being a friend
 Thank you for your honesty
 To sing your name to sing your truth
 Being attuned to the community salute

The written words that accompany Figure 6 accompany and mention attunement within the group as a whole. The students were successfully attuned to each other and to needs and expectations of the group. While Figure 5 felt unfinished, there was a blunt honesty about the need for more play and flexibility towards imagination so that students can develop their own authentic skills and further their need for empathy and eventually identity.

Students were able to be friends with themselves and with each other, as well as in the visual response art in the form of the house letters “S”, “G”, “H” and “R” overlapping with colors and space.

Discussion

Each week included an opening and closing activity that promoted mindfulness in breath and sound. Students struggled to begin the group activities but once they had time to transition, the students went through activities quickly. The limited time of twenty minutes once a week required the groups with little to no processing at the end of activities. Processing was completed by asking feedback before or after group was initiated. Students were also entering and leaving the classroom during the group for various activities such as bathroom, IEP needs and going to

the nurse. This created distraction and at times, confusion for students entering when instructions had already been given. It proved helpful to have the teacher and support staff engaged in the activities also. Finally, due to various events within the school schedule, the groups did not occur consecutively but over the course of two months.

At first, students did not identify emotions readily but as the students became comfortable, they expressed emotions, or states of feeling such as “good” in their feedback. Many students were reluctant to share or participate in the first group. There needed to be more energy and attunement expelled by the facilitator than the group in order to encourage cohesion with the group. There were pockets of students that were removed from the majority of the class during the activity such as the four boys mentioned. In between groups, students would approach to ask more questions about the activity and why the groups were happening, appearing genuinely curious. In the second week, students were able to unify their greeting quicker and become involved in the activities in less time. Compared to the first week where multiple students did not participate, the second group only had one student that did not participate until the end. Feedback provided from the students about how music and breath was used to help them outside of school allowed them to better understand the activities and encouraged empathy when listening to others. Students identified emotions more elaborately than “good” and were able to remain regulated in their excitement. The group of four boys continually sought out this facilitator to ask when next group would be and were observed telling other staff about the activities.

By the third week, all students engaged and participated in the activities while also supporting each other through them. Students were attuned with the group from the beginning. When challenged by changing a greeting, students were able to remain focused, present and

flexible in responding to the changes. The group included more open and fluid activities such as visualization to sub groups to allow the students to continue attuning to each other. Students were able to identify feeling cautious about closing their eyes or acting in front of others. Also, students were able to connect with each other by telling their own story of what the provided words elicited. Feedback from the students after the group ended included words such as “scary”, “fun”, “at first I didn’t want to but then I just did”, “I liked the reading... it helped me feel calmer”, “excited”, and “not really my thing”. With the individual papers collected at the end of the third group, students wrote positive phrases such as “incredible”, “beautiful”, “strong”, “courageous”. There were also words that stated “sad”, “self-confidence”, “uncomfortable” and “embarrassed”. In feedback from the teacher, students were noted to engage in peer relationships more often during classroom activities and recess. Additionally, students are able to transition “slightly” better between activities as they do not need as many redirections.

Summary of Response Art

The use of visual art to provide response to the groups began as a way to capture the energy experience from facilitating the group and from the children involved in each weeks experience. The written response to the art was to release energy captured and provide addition processing in better understanding the group. There was pressure experienced from the shortened time period of the group experience that fueled a consistent nervous energy that manifested with butterfly feelings in the abdomen at first and eventually began to branch out in chunks of swirling lines that played with the unused white space. By the third week, Figure 5 shows circles or “balls” filled with color through sharp lines or constant circling of colors which can also be seen as energy branching out.

Each of the three visual response art used colors and lines to portray movement that the group enacted in each session; moving around, breathing and vibrational movement in sound. Green was a consistent color that was used in each response, coincidentally the color that I associate with growth and empathy. Black was also used in each response which I associate as depth and dimension. Figure 2 showed an open frame where the scene could come or go while Figures 3 and 5 were encased in outlines with colors and lines.

The whimsical nature of play and imagination were present in all three visual art responses as well the written responses. Words such as “sing”, “whimsy”, “dancing”, “attunement”, “laughter”, “joy” and “feathers” can provide a platform for imagination, play and words to express emotion identification. The sense of empathy can be captured within both written and visual art by the way the words complement each other i.e. “community salute” or by the surrounding encasement of lines. The use of arts-based activities to promote a sense of empathy and to teach emotion regulation through mindfulness and play has been shown through the three groups conducted to promote positive community as well. The arts based responses allow for the space to practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there was a slight difference in the students from the first group to the third group. It can be reasonable to suggest that with consistently scheduled groups, the use of EAT to encourage mindfulness into the classroom could have a greater impact on students’ overall classroom behavior. The possibility of increasing the frequency and/or length of the groups to include in the curriculum could support the school’s positive behavior intervention by increasing the identification of emotions and the use of EAT to express them in a healthy way that also builds empathy. As seen through the response art, when given the space, students are able to

express their personal narratives in a constructive way. The ability to express personal event narratives can assist with identifying and correcting language impairments (Culatta & Westby, 2016) which in turn could decrease negative behavior in school as students would be able to effectively express themselves and their needs. Additionally, the attunement of the classroom collectively, allowed for increased positive peer social interactions and support from peers during challenging activities that increased growth of empathy between weeks one and three.

Through the use of EAT in school curriculums, students can continue exploring their “evolving life story” (Culatta & Westby, 2016, p. 268) to encourage reflection into their own behaviors. In this particular school that the community project took place, there is a population of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other learning disabilities that impact a student’s core communication areas and can result in inappropriate or unsafe behaviors (Bozkurt & Vuran, 2014). When mindfulness is provided in school curriculums, the benefits can provide inclusion to these communication deficits. Additionally, mindfulness can bridge gaps in emotion regulation, coping and social skills, confidence and self-esteem building and stronger attention and focusing skills (Coholic & Eys, 2016). An increased ability to recognize emotions and be adept at coping with them is another added benefit from utilizing mindfulness (Coholic & Eys, 2016) and arts-based activities.

Ultimately, there were limitations to this community project around scheduling, duration and frequency. These limitations do not allow for this community project to provide substantial evidence that by using the EATs in the classroom is a sole contributing factor to the improvements of the classroom. Continued work in a group setting with this identified third grade classroom can provide a more detailed perspective. What was noticed by the students was their curiosity to learn more and attunement with each other when introduced to EATs activities

within the group. The allowance of space for play, expression of personal narratives and mindfulness can be contributions for students to explore turn taking, increase autonomy, practice conflict resolutions, emotion regulation and other cognitive demands that are needed in skills with peers (Culatta & Westby, 2016). Franklin (2010) identified that “with careful attunement, art therapists can develop unique, aesthetic forms of empathic resonance that will help clients feel deeply seen and develop empathy for themselves and compassion for others” (p.160)

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