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## Teachers' Stress and the Benefits of Expressive Arts Therapy: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Teachers' Stress and the Benefits of Expressive Arts Therapy:  
A Critical Review of the Literature

Capstone Thesis  
Lesley University

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Expressive Arts Therapy

Christine Mayor

### Abstract

Although every job has its own set of obstacles, struggles and stressors that are unique to their profession, teachers face multidimensional stressors that can have negative impacts on them personally and professionally (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Research shows that teachers have multiple layers of stress that have the potential to lead to burnout, mental health problems, physical health problems and poor student relationships. This thesis outlines the existing research on the sources of stress for teachers, the impacts of the stress and the lack of consistent support and interventions for these teachers. While support for teachers does exist, it is greatly limited. This paper reviews existing research regarding expressive arts therapy and its positive effects on stress. Furthermore, an argument is made that expressive arts therapy, either integrated or individual modalities, can be helpful for teachers during their school day, provided individually and within a supportive group setting. The paper provides a series of practice and research recommendations.

## Teacher's Stress and the Benefits of Expressive Arts Therapy

### A Critical Review of the Literature

#### **Introduction**

Working as a school guidance counselor for a year, I was shocked that the concerns I had regarding mental health were often much greater for the teachers than the students who I was meant to work with. In the beginning, I was enraged and disheartened by the teachers that I observed on a daily basis. A teacher has opportunity to be a role model, a positive light, a supporter, a motivator and a figure that believes in and teaches their students. What I witnessed was overworked, burned out, and often cruel teachers who did not provide much support to students. Their attitude created a negative and unhealthy classroom environment that made teaching and learning almost impossible. As I reflected on my time at this school and dove more into this topic, I noticed a huge problem that I had overlooked and that was the large gap in support, help and care for teachers within the school setting. It was clear that teachers were stressed but I only thought about how that stress was impacting the classroom and failed to see how that stress was affecting them, their mental health and their ability to teach.

Therefore, this literature review begins by examining sources of stress for teachers, impact of that stress on teachers and the classroom, and the limited literature on self-care and effective support for teachers in the school. The impact of stress is extensive, including, but not limited to, high turn over rates, job dissatisfaction, high levels of anxiety, physical health problems and disrupted student learning (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Soreson, 2007; Yoon, 2002; Yu, Wange, Zhai, Dai & Yang, 2014). Therefore, the gap in existing self-care and support for teachers is vital to explore.

Being an aspiring expressive arts therapist and wanting to help with this serious issue in the school system, I examine existing expressive arts therapy in schools, specifically arts interventions with teachers but also other populations undergoing stress. Creative interventions can include art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, drama therapy or psychodrama, poetry therapy and play therapy. These therapies and others that utilize self-expression in treatment are also called “expressive therapies” (Malchiodi, 2005, 2013, 2014). I will review various research studies that examine expressive arts and its impact on stress and burn out with other populations because of the lack of research done specifically with teachers. Looking at all of the research, I intend to recommend realistic, helpful and meaningful interventions for teachers in a way that has thus far been lacking. While the use of one modality would be more realistic and helpful for teachers due to time restraints throughout the day, I will also briefly discuss the impacts of integrating therapies for a more group therapy/support group setting for teachers.

### **Methods**

Being aware of my own assumptions about what teachers stress was and what its impacts were, I knew a literature review would help expand my knowledge and would give me more information to help with solid and practical interventions. Using the literature review method was beneficial because it gave me space to explore the intricacies of teacher stress and impact, more deeply understand the lack of support, and highlight the potential of different creative arts modalities in helping stress reduction.

After making this decision I began my search by looking for peer reviewed articles in the Lesley University database as well as Google Scholar using terms such as “teachers and stress or burnout”. Although some findings were helpful to my research, many of the articles found were

literature reviews or theoretical papers, and not research studies. Therefore, I performed a cross reference of the citations in these articles to see if they had cited any research studies I thought would be helpful. I primarily focused on citations that included words like “secondary education or middle school teachers” and tried to stay away from grades above the high school level. I did this to keep the data focused and because it is this grade level I know best based from my internship experience.

While reviewing this literature I found that many of the studies that looked at what the sources of stress were, also mentioned the impacts of these stressors. These findings validated my ideas that teachers have high levels of stress, but also taught me that the sources of stress vary greatly and the impacts of their stress affect them as individuals much more than it impacts the students, which was in opposition to my original belief and bias. This slightly changed the direction I was headed in because, at first, I predicted that my findings would lead me more towards helping teachers deal with their stress to better help the students, but in fact the research led me to realize that teachers need their own types of interventions throughout the school day to help with their stress and to take care of them.

After this realization, I began to look at sources of support for teachers in both the Lesley Database and Google Scholar using words such as “teachers and support groups or self-help groups”. This is where the gap in literature became evident. There was only one study that really researched teachers and what they could do for themselves and that was the investigation of the CARE program for teachers and the effects of this program (Jennings, Frank, Doyle, Oh, Rasheed & DeWeese, 2017). Research on this topic was limited. The only existing information on teacher self care I found were through online news articles and one or two websites dedicated to teachers.

As the gap became more noticeable, I began to look at what expressive arts therapy has done for those experiencing stress. This is when I began to look at specific studies that involve the expressive arts in regards to stress and burnout. I again searched through the Lesley Database and Google Scholar with words such as “teachers and creative arts or expressive arts”. Few studies examined the use of arts for teachers. Broadening my search, I looked not only for teachers and their experience with expressive arts regarding stress but also research that proved expressive arts to be helpful for stress in general. I found that there is substantial evidence that shows that expressive arts therapies and interventions are beneficial for populations experiencing various types of stress.

With all of this gathered information, I looked through my research and began to see the potential in recommending realistic interventions for teachers both during the busy school day and after the school day in a more group therapy type setting. I took all of this research and compiled it together to create my literature review, which follows below.

## **Literature Review**

### **Sources of Stress For Teachers**

Job stress is a part of every profession and teachers do not fall short of that expectation. What seems to be most difficult for teachers in regards to stress is the fact that “the sources of teacher stress are multidimensional” (Abel & Sewell, 1999, p. 288). The stress is not just coming from managing a classroom full of children whom they are trying to teach but from several different directions. For instance, research done by Valli and Buese (2007) reveals that teachers’ work has “increased, intensified and expanded in response to federal, state and local policies aimed at raising student achievement” (p. 520). These changes may include increased number of tasks, numerous responsibilities outside of the classroom and overall an increase of intensity.

With all of these factors, “The act of teaching is dominated by external plans and requirements such as pre-specified lists of competencies and objectives, pretests and post-tests for determining student skill level, and an increase of record keeping and evaluation” (Valli & Buese, 2007, p. 525). Although the research was able to present some positive outcomes in a teacher’s changing role it was evident that teachers overall experienced feelings of being overwhelmed and highly stressed (Valli & Buese, 2007).

A theme that has been noted by multiple researches is the presence of stress that is brought on not from the students but from the “higher up” pressures in the education system (Aydin & Kaya, 2016; Morgan, 2016; Sorenson, 2007; Valli & Buese, 2007). There are pressures brought on by administration such as work over-loads and time pressures, while needing to avoid errors, which can make for an overly stressed teacher (Sorenson, 2007). In one study that specifically looked at sources of stress for teachers working in private schools, results showed the highest source of stress was in fact school administration (Aydin & Kaya, 2016). There is also the stress that comes from the national level: high-stakes testing. For example, Morgan (2016) shows that the stress that teachers feel over these tests has increased throughout the years. This is because teachers are being evaluated and scrutinized over the test scores of their students and, in some circumstances, their pay can be tied to high or low test scores. This especially stressful for teachers working with disadvantaged students because these students may experience conditions that hurt their chances of getting a good test score, which can in turn damage the teacher’s job (Morgan, 2016).

With role changes, role confusion, administration and systematic pressures there is plenty for a teacher to stress about. However, students also provide a unique form of stress. As Geving (2007) finds, “One of the most commonly reported contributors to teacher stress is student

misbehavior” (p. 624). This qualitative study by Geving (2007) sampled high school teachers about which types of student behaviors caused teacher stress. These behaviors were then used to create questionnaires. Results showed behaviors that caused high stress in teachers were not listening, not participating and yelling in the classroom. As Geving (2007) explains, “It is likely that teachers find students’ lack of effort extremely stressful because it directly undermines their main goal: to help students learn” (p. 639). Although not focused on in much of the research, many studies have shown that students have a substantial impact on teacher’s stress (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Aydin & Kaya, 2016; Sorenson, 2007; Valli & Buese, 2007).

### **Impact of Stress For Teachers**

The impacts that stress can have on an individual can be extensive, especially in the world of the helping professions. Burnout was a term coined by Freudenberger (1974) based on observations on the helping professions. Burnout is defined as “a symptom of emotional exhaustion that was commonly observed among individuals working in helping professions” (Freudenberger, 1974, p.160). Job burnout mostly occurs among people working in helping professions, like teachers (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Tornio (2017) explained that a survey sent out by The American Federation of Teachers (2017), called the “Educator Quality of Work Life Survey,” found that 61% of teachers are “always” or “often” stressed. Stress is casually linked with burn out (Yu, Wange, Zhai, Dai & Yang, 2014).

Backhause, Hampel and Dadaczynski (2018) conducted a national-level study to investigate the mental health status of German kindergarten educators and specifically looked at the degree of effort-reward imbalance and its relationship to burnout and somatic symptoms. Using a cross-sectional study based on questionnaire responses from 1,933 teachers, binary logistic regressions were used to identify effort-reward imbalance and over commitment as

independent predictors of burnout. The effort-reward imbalance model proposed by Siegrist (1996) explains that an effort-reward imbalance occurs when “demands at work (e.g., extreme time pressure) are not perceived as being adequately matched by rewards (e.g., promotion opportunities, monetary compensation, professional status)” (Backhouse et al., 2018). Siegrist (1996) defines the result of this imbalance as “active distress”. Effort-reward imbalance increases the prevalence of somatic symptoms like disturbances of the immune system and cardiovascular disease, and mental health symptoms such as depression and burnout (Backhouse et al., 2018). Results showed that 89.3% of the teachers showed signs of an effort-reward imbalance and, additionally, the findings indicate that effort-reward imbalance has a strong relationship to burnout and somatic symptoms (Backhouse et al., 2018). Backhouse et al. (2018) briefly urges within the recommendations section that more attention be put on holistic intervention strategies to prevent teacher burnout in the school setting.

Yu et al. (2014) continues to emphasize the high degree of psychological distress that is caused by the many factors of being a teacher. This stress can lead to dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and employee turnover among teachers (Yu et al., 2014). The purpose of the study done was to not only look at stress and how it leads to burnout but also the effects of self-efficacy on burnout. In other words, Yu et al. (2014), from previous examination, states that lack of self-efficacy leads to burnout. Therefore, they wanted to discover what the relationship between self-efficacy and burnout was in hopes of being able to suggest recommendations for teachers in the long run. Using a two-step procedure introduced by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), Yu et al. (2014) were able to determine, similar to other studies, that stress is a direct cause of burnout among teachers. Additionally, it was found that if self-efficacy skills regarding work-related pressures were not used promptly it would only increase burnout and teachers with

low self-efficacy had higher levels of burnout rate (Yu et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, stress can lead to much more than just burnout. Studies suggested that stress could lead to many physical as well as other psychological ailments as well (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Aydin & Kaya, 2016; Geving, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2016; Sorenson, 2007; Yu et al., 2015). Sorenson (2007) states that a teacher experiencing high levels of stress can develop issues such as:

High blood pressure, or exhibit a loss of appetite or have the urge to eat, even over-eat, unhealthy foods, or suffer from ulcers, or express anger and show signs of irritability.

These actions have been diagnosed as categories or symptoms related to physiological, psychological, and behavioral states of medical anxiety, each of which create

consequences that can result in health disorders, if not death. (p. 11)

Therefore, stress does not only lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction but also can lead to health disorders, creating a vicious cycle for the lives of teachers.

The role that stress plays in teachers' individual lives is clear, but their stress also affects a very important population, their students. Stress does not only affect teachers' happiness within the job but also their ability to be effective with their students (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Yoon (2002) conducted a study with 113 elementary teachers in a metropolitan area in the United States to discover the effects of teacher stress on their relationship with their students. Scales were created to survey teacher stress, self-efficacy in relationship building and behavioral management, negative affect of the stress and student teacher relationships (Yoon, 2002). The results showed that teachers stress was significantly correlated with negative affect, self-efficacy, and negative relationships. In other words, as predicted, teachers stress has a negative affect on their students and the relationships they could have with them if stress was lesser.

### **Existing Self Care for Teachers**

From the research cited above, it is evident that teacher stress has many impacts. It impacts their mental health, their physical health and also their ability to do their job well and have a positive work experience. It is important then, with all of emotional and physical stress that teachers have, to look at what kind of support for teachers exists in schools today. There are spaces that exist for teachers to talk about curriculum and administrative work but, with the research cited above discussing the great deal of physical, mental and emotional health difficulties that teachers undergo, the gap in literature discussing support for the mental health and stress of teachers is concerning. Although research is scarce when it comes to legitimate organizations and/or support groups that exist within the schools, there are few organizations and spaces that do exist.

One particular support for teachers, which was developed by a team of researchers at the University of Virginia, is called CARE for Teachers (Jennings, Frank, Doyle, Oh, Rasheed & DeWeese, 2017). CARE is a mindfulness-based professional development program designed to promote teachers' social and emotional competence and improve the quality of classroom interactions (Jennings et al., 2017). A study was performed to show the impacts of the program using a cluster randomized trial design and 224 teachers. The CARE for Teachers program involved 30 hours of in person training in addition to intersession phone coaching. Teachers completed self-report measures and assessments of their students both pre and post trainings. Using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), teachers' classrooms were observed and coded. Results showed that CARE for Teachers had significant positive effects on "adaptive emotion regulation, mindfulness, psychological distress, and time urgency" (Jennings et al, 2017, p. 1018). This study is relevant because it shows the positive impact of mindfulness for teachers.

Mindfulness is a huge part of what makes up the CARE program and others have noticed the impact of mindfulness as a helpful tool for teachers as well. For instance, Pennsylvania State University, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, created a series of briefs addressing the need for research, practice and policy on social and emotional learning (Greenberg, Brown & Abenavoli, 2016). This brief mentions the critical role that teachers play in children's lives and the great deal of stress that teachers are constantly under. The findings they cite support the need to reduce stress and improve teacher well-being. They suggest three broad types of interventions: organizational interventions, organization-individual interface interventions, and individual interventions (Greenberg et al, 2016).

The organizational interventions suggested for teachers, which are aimed to change the organization's culture and work practices, include promoting a participatory environment, open communication, supervisor/peer support, training, worker health policies and more (Greenberg et al., 2016). Organizational interventions have some evidence of reducing stress, increasing job satisfaction and reducing turnover. Organization-individual interface interventions include mentoring for incoming teachers through orientation and guidance, school workplace wellness promotion programs and policies, and programs focused on student behavior and social and emotional learning (Greenberg et al., 2016). Organization-individual interface interventions created positive affects for incoming teachers and helped improve teacher's health and benefited teachers' abilities to support classroom learning (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Domitrovich, Bradshaw, Berg, Pas, Becker, Musci & Ialongo, 2016). Lastly, individual interventions include mindfulness and stress management programs (Greenberg et al., 2016), which proved to have physical and mental health benefits for teachers (Roeser, 2014; Weare, 2014).

Both the CARE research (2017) and the brief conducted by Pennsylvania State University (2016) support the need for greater ideas and innovations in developing, implementing and then assessing the effectiveness of programs and different policies to help teachers with their stress well-being within the school systems. There are also websites and online spaces for teachers to get inspired or get advice. For instance, WeAreTeachers (2019) is an online media brand for teachers. WeAreTeachers compare themselves to a virtual teacher's lounge where one could find different kinds of supports. Stacy Tornio (2018), one of WeAreTeachers journalists, wrote an article titled "We need to do more for teachers who are exhausted, stressed and burned out." The article echoes many before it: teaching is one of the most stressful jobs in the US and there is not enough attention put on supporting teachers. The point of this article by WeAreTeachers was to bring light to this issue in order to suggest a solution by changing the conversation about teacher mental health. Their suggestion: therapy.

### **Expressive Arts Therapies in the Schools**

As demonstrated above, both practice and research on support groups and care for teachers' mental health is scarce. Although there may be therapy or counseling available in schools, those services are offered to mostly students and less likely offered to teachers. Below I briefly outline the existing literature on the use of expressive arts therapy in the school setting. As mentioned earlier, creative interventions can include art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, drama therapy or psychodrama, poetry therapy and play therapy. These therapies and others that utilize self-expression in treatment are also called "expressive therapies" (Malchiodi, 2005; 2013; 2014).

**Students and expressive arts therapies.** Expressive arts therapies have in some ways made their way into the school setting. For example a study used action techniques and

psychodrama methods to show the use of expressive therapy to help with conflict resolution skills amongst students (Amatruda, 2006). With 10- to-13 year-old-children Amatruda (2006) conducted biweekly action technique and psychodrama groups with students in an elementary school special education program. Some techniques used by the teachers included human-sculpted images, role-play and future projection. This group was meant to help students “communicate more positively with one another, allowing them to improve their status with peers in the classroom” (Amatruda, 2006, p.168). Results showed that the students in this group had a decrease in negative behavior in the classroom, the interactions they had with one another were more positive and attitude to their own potential increased (Amatruda, 2006).

Additionally, David Henley (1997) performed a one-year project using expressive arts therapy as an alternative education by creating a therapeutic curriculum. The art therapist was both the classroom teacher and the creator of the therapeutic curriculum for the classroom. The art therapist did not just pull from the art modality but used diverse forms of expression like bibliotherapy, phototherapy, poetry therapy and studio work formed the basis of the curriculum. Henley discovered some vital information from this study. On the positive side, having the arts as apart of the classroom setting helped students to remain engaged and to have meaningful dialogue with one another but, what was damaging, was that some of what would come up for students emotionally could not be contained in the classroom setting (Henley, 1997). This study therefore provides information for future implications for both teachers and students, that if art is to be apart of the school day it should be contained to the activity being provided and focus more so on the natural therapeutic affects of doing art and less on the analyzing of the art and what it might bring up.

**Teachers and expressive arts therapies.** There are only a few studies that have been done involving teachers and the arts. For example, a study by Mitchell and Weber (1996) examines visual and written data of pictures that were drawn in response to an in class assignment which was to draw a teacher. The major source of data was from 64 university students enrolled in Elementary Education programs. There were two groups of students, one made up of graduate students who had experience teaching and the other made up of undergraduate preservice teachers. Their goal was to use these drawings to “investigate the pervasive influence of imagery in the emergence of teacher identity” (Mitchell & Weber, 1996, p. 303). This study points out the history of drawing and its use in forming and portraying identity. It even refers to art therapy as it explains, “in art therapy, picture-drawing is considered a key to understanding clients’ thoughts and feelings, and to helping them make sense of their life situations” (Mitchell & Weber, 1996, p. 304). If teachers are able to reflect on identity, they can also reflect on their needs, which is a valuable tool to have since stress can lead to lack of self efficacy and further stress. The findings of the study also brought to light the confusion of identity and who they are versus who they want to be as a teacher. This study shows that the use of visual images gives greater insight for teachers to explore their identity.

Another study used a heuristic methodology termed ‘creative narrative’ that combines art-based methods with narrative inquiry to show how and why art-based inquiry can lead to greater understanding of unconscious identity for teachers in a way that verbal processing cannot do as deeply (Leitch, 2006). Time-line creation, mask making and other visual art making was used to dive further into teachers’ lives. Through artistic and visual images, the narratives of six female teachers are “illuminated” and unconscious knowledge is surfaced. The literature pulls from others like van Maanen (1994), to show how narrative can create self-reflection, obtain

ownership over self as teacher, and explore the ways in which the individual has changed and therefore have a clearer understanding of their own life story. The author of this study also goes on to explain how embodied knowledge, that of using image, a poem, a sculpture or a play, is a way of knowing and understanding that goes further than the verbal narrative (Leitch, 2006).

In just these two studies it is shown that the arts can help teachers access different parts of themselves that perhaps verbal communication cannot in regards to discovering identity. However, expressive arts therapy has the potential to help with much more than identity for teachers. It has the potential to help teachers with stress, burnout, physical health, self-efficacy, teacher student relationship and overall mental health. Yet the absence of research on teachers and the expressive arts therapies and therapies for teachers in general is profound. Below I discuss just how positive the impacts of expressive arts therapy can be.

### **Expressive Arts Therapy/Creative Arts Interventions for Self Care to Reduce Stress and Burnout**

Expressive arts therapy “contributes to restoring the cognitive/intellectual, emotional/affect, and creative/inspiration vacuums in today's stress-driven, technological, impersonal, and often unsafe world” (Synder, 1997, p. 74). In this day and age, it is clear that the stress that teachers endure lead to physical health problems, mental health problems, burnout, issues with students and a lack in well-being. Below, I review the literature, which suggests that the arts and therapy can be a useful tool for self-care, stress reduction, and burnout, potentially applicable to teachers.

Slayton, D'Archer and Kaplan (2010) reviewed several studies that looked at the efficacy of art therapy on specific populations. Some of the populations reviewed were mothers and toddlers, adult women with Lupus, mothers with depression, stroke patients, and students. One

study they reviewed (Curry & Kasser, 2005) worked with undergraduate students. After anxiety was induced, the participants could color a prepared mandala, color a complex plaid pattern or simply color whatever they wanted. The results showed that coloring mandalas and plaid patterns decreased anxiety to below baseline and free coloring did not relieve any anxiety (Curry & Kasser, 2005). Similarly, to show the effects of art therapy interventions on stress and burn out, Italia, Favara-Scacco, Di Cataldo and Russo (2008) worked with doctors and nurses who treat oncology patients. They created two groups: Group A (medical personnel on an adult oncology unit) had no art therapy while Group B (medical personnel on a child oncology unit) had art therapy. Using the Maslach Burnout inventory, results showed that Group B had significantly decreased burnout after art therapy interventions (Italia et al., 2008). Another example of art therapy reducing stress can be seen in a study conducted by Kaimal, Ray and Muniz (2016) that looked at the impact of visual art making on cortisol levels. For this study, in simple terms, the higher the cortisol levels the higher stress in an individual person. A total of 39 college students, staff and faculty were sampled using a pre-post and quasi-experimental design. Results showed that there was a significant reduction in cortisol levels following the one single session of forty-five minutes of art making using collage materials, modeling clay and/or markers. Additionally, it was found that the decrease in cortisol levels was not related to the theme of what was produced by each participant but by the act of art making within itself (Kaimal et al., 2016).

Based off of the research above, it is evident that art therapy can be helpful for individuals while dealing with stress. However, Martin, Oepen, Bauer, Nottensteiner, Mergheim, Gruber and Koch (2018) conducted a review of creative arts therapies, which not only encompasses art therapy but music, dance/movement, and drama therapy. For example, Huss and Surid (2014) worked with 35 healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, and social workers) to

show that the combination of art and guided imagery reduced stress. Using guided imagery, the participants introduced and recalled a stressful work experience. Then, through art therapy, participants constructed a stressful working environment on paper and then transformed the experience into a stress-free environment. Results showed that all participants had a significant reduction in stress (Huss & Surid, 2014). Similarly, Beck, Hansen and Gold (2015) looked at the effects of combining music therapy and guided imagery on biopsychosocial parameters with 20 Danish workers who were experiencing long-term stress-related sick leave. The guided imagery and music is a psychotherapy intervention that includes relaxation, music listening and imagery (Beck, Hansen & Gold, 2015). Data collection was carried out at an occupational health ward in the period of 2008-2010, which made comparison between early and late interventions possible. After nine weeks there were large effects found in well-being, mood disturbance, physical distress and cortisol concentrations. With early intervention, it was shown that there was faster job return and significantly improved perceived stress, well-being, mood disturbance, depression, anxiety, and physical distress symptoms (Beck, Hansen & Gold, 2015). Lastly, Maschi and Bradley (2010) sampled 31 social work students in a pre-post design. The goal was to see the effects of relation drums on well-being, empowerment and social connectedness on this particular population as “recreational music-making has been shown to decrease stress and increase feelings of well-being and empowerment among diverse groups” (Maschi & Bradley, 2010, p. 55). Results of paired t-test analyses revealed significant differences in levels of stress, energy, and feelings of empowerment and community. The researchers name that this creative-arts intervention can be an effective self-care strategy not only for BSW and MSW students, but also for practitioners, and/or clients in educational or agency-based settings to increase feelings of well-being and interpersonal connectedness, which, in turn, may help to increase effectiveness

in practice (Maschi & Bradley, 2010).

Although most of the research regarding creative arts interventions looks at art and music as modalities, there is some research on dance movement therapy. For example, Bräuninger (2012) conducted a randomized controlled trial with 162 clients suffering from stress to compare the effect of a dance movement therapy (DMT) group intervention on stress management improvement and stress reduction with a wait-listed control group. This trial compared short- and long-term effects of ten DMT group sessions. Negative strategies to deal with stress decreased and distraction from stress improved significantly through DMT. Psychological distress and psychopathology decreased significantly in the DMT group as well. Results showed that DMT effects on stress management improvement and stress reduction last over time and, overall, DMT was more effective than non-treatment.

Another powerful modality for stress and anxiety is expressive writing. Like all of the expressive arts therapies, expressive writing can be a means of releasing. Expressive writing can be compared to Freud's free association, which is when one releases painful thoughts and traumas through verbal language (Smyth & Lepore, 2002). Expressive writing is similar in that it is meant to be the releasing of free thoughts but instead of being said out loud, the words that flow from the mind are written onto paper without judgment or questioning. Janet (1995) explained that stressful life experiences can undermine health and that because memories of stressful events are organized at the perceptual level, as disheveled and disorganized sensations, that transforming these perceptual-level memories into cohesive narrative accounts would decrease the healthy effects stressful and traumatic experiences. The work of Janet (1995) was important for implicating both cognitive and emotional mechanisms in expressive therapies.

In regards to the research on these claims, Dr. James W. Pennebaker has conducted much of the research on the health benefits of expressive writing. For Pennebaker (1997), expressive writing consisted of assigning topics for three to five consecutive days and directing participants to write for 15 to 30 minutes each day. The topics of writing varied but included things such as your relationship with others, including parents, lovers or friends or your past, your present or your future or who you have been, who you are and who you would like to be. For example, in one study (Pennebaker, 1997), students were randomly assigned either to express a traumatic experience using bodily movement, to express a traumatic experience first through movement then in written form, or to exercise in a prescribed manner for three days, 10 minutes per day. All groups had positive health benefits, but only the movement-plus-writing group showed significant improvements in physical health and grade point average. Another study done by Smyth, Stone and Hurewitz (1999), asked asthma and rheumatoid arthritis patients to write for 20 minutes on each of three consecutive days. Seventy-one of were asked to write about the most stressful event in their life while the rest about their daily plans. Four months after the writing exercise, seventy patients in the stressful-writing group showed improvement on objective, clinical evaluations compared to the thirty-seven control patients. Additionally, those who wrote about stress improved more and deteriorated less than the controls for both diseases.

In conclusion, the quality of efficacy studies is high in regards to stress prevention and creative arts interventions (Slayton, D'Archer & Kaplan, 2010; Martin et al., 2018). Overall, "CATs and creative arts interventions seem to have a positive impact on perceived stress and stress management. They reduce anxiety levels and improve subjects' mood. This may be due to certain therapeutic mechanisms that researchers assume to be relevant for all creative arts therapies" (Martin et al, 2018, p. 14).

### **Benefits of Integrating the Therapies**

It is important to note that although the creative arts are extremely beneficial on their own, there is also benefit to integrating the therapies. For example the research mentioned above that combined movement with writing was very beneficial (Krantz & Pennebaker, 1996). In a similar way of integrating the arts, one study worked with teachers who were given time in an art studio environment creating their images and then reflecting in journals after through free write or further images. As Leitch (2006) argued, "The differing creative tasks seemed to encourage quite differing types of reflexivity within the participants narratives of identity". Paulo Knill (2004), an expressive arts therapist, echoes that idea. "When therapists 'cross over' and draw on multiple disciplines, as they do in the field of expressive therapy, they can meet with opposition from their differently-focused peers" (p. 16). This further suggests that expressive therapies and integrative therapies can be beneficial because it has many methods of connecting to as many people as possible in regards to self-expression.

### **Discussion**

The research above that discusses the stress that teachers endure, the impact of that stress, and the general lack of support points to a major problem in the school setting. There are two ways to attack this problem: interventions for the individual teacher through out the school day and an after school group therapy for teachers who are seeking support. My prediction, which is supported by the research above, is that if teachers engage in expressive arts therapy interventions both during the school day on their own time and after school in a group setting then stress will decrease and well being would increase which will directly impact burn out, turn over rates and an overall positive change in school environment.

### **Individual Interventions During the School Day**

As seen in the research above there are many contributors to stress that exist during the school day like student behavior, administration, time crunches, high test taking, effort-reward imbalance and many others. Also discussed previously is the positive effects that expressive arts interventions can have on reducing stress. It is easy to see that that many of the arts interventions that reduce stress can be incorporated into the school day to help teachers with this stress.

For example, mandalas were used to decrease stress (Curry & Kasser, 2005). Mandalas could easily be distributed to all teachers in a school setting for them to have on their desk for in between classes that may have cause extra stress. They could even give mandalas to the entire class to do while they do their own if there is a specific conflict or a particularly rowdy and stressful day for the students. Aside from mandalas, it was said that the act of art making in general decreases stress (Kaimal et al, 2016) and therefore even sketch books on the desk or coloring book could be helpful for teachers to release some stress.

Guided imagery was mentioned in many of the studies to pair with a different modality like art or music (Surid, 2014; Back, Hansen & Gold, 2015). When a teacher has a particularly stressful day, class, conversation or interaction with a student or faculty, the concept of imagery can be powerful. Questions could be prompted on their desk, asking them to think, "How would you have liked this conversation to have gone? How would you have liked the class to go? Can you imagine a stress-free environment?" Once imagining what this might look like, the teacher could draw or even write on how they would have wanted a situation to be like or look like. This kind of guided imagery paired with writing or art can be very helpful in decreasing stress and reaching new heights of awareness. Playing relaxing or meditative music during or between classes can increase relaxation as well even if it means looking up "relaxing music" on your work computer. Playing this relaxing music in combination with art or expressive writing can

help to decrease stress and it could be helpful to keep that relaxing and meditative music going while students enter the space to set a desirable tone.

The act of expressive arts can often times bring up emotions, discoveries and feelings that are hard to deal with in a short period of time. Henley (1997) brought this up in a study done with students and the arts within the classroom, explaining that taking part in expressive arts was impactful but also difficult to contain. For example, if a teacher chose to free write between classes about a particularly stressful interaction with a student from the class before, it could become more overwhelming and bring up more emotions that can be difficult to just put aside. If a teacher finds it difficult to contain their emotions in between classes while taking part in expressive arts interventions, they could reframe the topic. For example, free writing about a positive interaction that made the teacher feel good or free writing about how they could make the next class less stressful might be effective. Additionally, I would suggest that teachers that take part in these expressive interventions also take part in the support group being suggested or their own form of therapy in order to create an even bigger container to further process what comes up for them if they need more support.

### **Group Therapy After School**

A support group that involves different expressive therapy techniques could be great to contain, create and connect with other teachers experiencing stressors and difficulties. The research above shows that the amount of teachers that experience stress is high. Therefore, if a teacher is experiencing such stress then the chances are other teachers in that same school are experiencing similar feelings. Open communication in an organization's culture creates a better school environment and less stressed teachers (Greenberg et al., 2016) and a support group for teachers could be a great place to tackle those topics.

Teachers experience a great deal of stress from the many different roles they play as well as the effort-reward imbalance. Mitchell and Weber (1996) and Leitch (2006) both discussed work around teachers and their identity. Teachers, within this group support, could create regarding their identity things like masks, embodiment, role-play, music making and human sculptures. They could draw who they are as teachers, draw how they think their students view them and who they truly want to be as a teacher. Because this is something that many teachers seem to deal with, this could be a great way for teachers to connect, empathize and recognize that they are not alone.

### **Future Recommendations**

It is difficult to make any of this happen without the support of the school. I therefore suggest more research and more recommendations in general about how to bring such interventions into the school system. This kind of change is possible but difficult without an overall look into mental health and how it exists within schools, what teacher's views of mental health are and what kind of things they learn in their own training as teachers around stress and burnout. Many of the issues within schools are systematic and therefore a deeper look into policies within schools and overall school cultures would be great for further researchers. Stress in this day and age seems to continuously increase and therefore innovative interventions like the expressive arts therapies are needed more than ever to help promote healthy humans physically, mentally and emotionally.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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