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**THE UTILIZATION OF GROUP ART THERAPY AS A FRAMEWORK  
TO ENHANCE RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING SKILLS AMONG  
EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED STUDENTS**

by  
Kerith L. Glass

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
March 15, 2017

Dissertation Chair: James Coaxum, III, Ph.D.

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Kerith L. Glass

## **Dedications**

Relationships were the focus of this dissertation, and the relationships in my life carried me through this process from the beginning to the end. First, I want to thank my parents, Eileen and Harry Glass, who have always believed in me, and provided babysitting, encouragement, and guidance throughout this entire process. I would also like to thank my children, Michael and Gabrielle, who were my driving force to begin this process; we have taught each other the importance of striving toward what you want and believing that anything is possible if you have faith in yourself.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my love, Jon, for his patience and understanding as I made this journey. You came into my life after I began this process, but quickly understood how important it was for me to go toward my dreams. You taught me as I went through this process that if I could do this for myself, I would only enrich my life and the lives of those who cared for me. Thank you for understanding that this was a life-long dream that was being realized.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Dr. James Coaxum, III, my chairperson, for his expertise, guidance, support, respect, and time throughout the dissertation process. He also taught me about the art of writing and had the patience to help me learn to become a better writer. I would also like to thank my committee members Dr. Herb Simmerman and Dr. Dorothy Van Horn. I have respected their work and input about the challenges that students with Emotional Disturbance face as well as their experiences that they shared about going through the dissertation process.

I would also like to thank Marlie Krickus, Nancy MacGregor, Hannah Heffner, and Katie Durr for being my independent art therapy raters and for understanding the power of artwork for students who may not always have the words to express their most trying times.

I would also like to thank the five students who participated in this study and traveled with me on this journey. I thought that I would have so much to teach them about relationships and make an impact on their lives; I did not realize that they would teach me about determination and strength through adversity, and that anything is possible even with great challenges. My relationship with the students is full of respect and admiration for their strength and openness to learning, which I will take with me and share with other students in the future.

## **Abstract**

Kerith L. Glass

### **THE UTILIZATION OF GROUP ART THERAPY AS A FRAMEWORK TO ENHANCE RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING SKILLS AMONG EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED STUDENTS**

2016-2017

James Coaxum, III, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education

Over the past four decades in the United States, the number of students that have been classified as Emotionally Disturbed has increased as well as a rise in these students' aggressive behavior, school violence, and expulsion from their home school districts (Mooney, Epstein, Reid, & Nelson, 2003). Historically, school professionals have employed behavior therapy strategies solely as a method to address students' negative behaviors and improve their overall school experiences (Crow & Small, 2011). These behavior therapy strategies include earning points for improved behavior that lead to school rewards. Although students show improvement after behavior therapy strategies are used, some challenges are noted as well. Students have a tendency to become dependent on earning a reward to change negative behavior, and have difficulty getting along with others (Crow & Small, 2011; Mooney et al., 2003). In previous studies and observations, students with emotional and behavioral difficulties display more positive behaviors when others take the time to build relationships with them. This study sought to incorporate other types of therapy approaches to complement behavior therapy strategies and to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties increase their positive relationships with others.

This mixed methods action research study assessed the impact of a Group Art Therapy program on the relationship-building skills of emotionally disturbed students.

Mixed methods approaches were utilized within six cycles of the action research model. These methods included the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale, the School Behavior Survey, classroom observations, Group Art Therapy observations, the Life Space Picture, the Kinetic School Drawing, artwork from the group sessions, and student discipline records.

Results from the study indicated that although students continued to struggle handling their behavior in conflict situations with others, the students were beginning to display more positive and socially appropriate behaviors after they participated in the Group Art Therapy program. The students who participated in the study demonstrated a greater sense of community with others as well as more positive strategies for handling conflict situations with their peers. The students continued to participate in the Group Art Therapy program beyond the study, and revisions and modifications will be made to this approach in an ongoing basis to help students more easily demonstrate positive classroom behavior and relationships with others.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Over the past four decades, there have been a growing number of children who have been identified as displaying emotional and behavioral difficulties in different school settings. Mooney, Epstein, Reid, and Nelson (2003) report that since November 1975, which was when P.L. 94-142 or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed, several million students with emotional and behavioral challenges have been assessed by their school districts and participate in programs to help them make improvements both academically and behaviorally. These students are often classified under the special education category of Emotionally Disturbed. Once students are classified as Emotionally Disturbed, school professionals explore ways to help them improve their behavior and experience more success in school. This is a difficult task for researchers and school professionals to accomplish because of the range of challenging behaviors that students with emotional and behavior difficulties display (Crow & Small, 2011).

### **Problem Statement**

Emotionally disturbed students display one or more of the following conditions over an extended period of time in the school setting: learning difficulties that are not influenced by sensory, health, or intellectual challenges, performing at least one or more years below grade level, extreme difficulty maintaining positive relationships with others, bullying and teasing others, throwing objects, banging objects, knocking over furniture, leaving the classroom without permission, making sexual gestures toward others, having frequent temper tantrums, repeating words or phrases many times, displaying a depressed

affect, and physical ailments related to increased school difficulties (Evans, Weiss, & Cullinan, 2012; Mooney et al., 2003; Roberts, Marshall, Nelson, & Albers, 2001). Reinke and Herman (2002), report that negative behaviors displayed in school are also exacerbated by characteristics present in the student's life since early childhood, which include a lack of readiness skills, abuse, neglect, and poverty. These students have a tendency to be removed from the home and placed in foster care (Gagnon & Leone, 2006). As children with emotional disturbance become adolescents, they may become involved in delinquent behavior, which sometimes leads to incarceration (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Recent research documents that different behavior therapy approaches used to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties successfully improve their classroom behavior and overall school performance (Crow & Small, 2011). Brown and Payne (2014) report that these students are more successful when their work is broken down into smaller steps and they work in 15 minute increments before taking a break. Gregory and Ripski (2008) and Romi et al. (2009) report that children with emotional difficulties make improvements in their behavior when they have the opportunity to earn tokens or prizes for following classroom rules and completing their work. Docan (2006) notes that students also display more appropriate and attentive classroom behaviors when their teachers create a daily point sheet that keeps track of how often they follow directions, and what points they have received to earn special prizes.

Despite the advantages reported when utilizing behavioral approaches, several challenges have also been named. Hyman and Snook (2000) note in their studies with students with emotional disturbance, that even if students change their behavior, they

continue to display other characteristics related to emotional and behavioral difficulties such as a low self-worth, distrust toward others, and lowered self-reliance. Erbas (2010) reports that without an exploration into interventions that complement behavior therapy approaches and address low self-worth and distrustfulness, students have more of a tendency to drop out of school, and increase their negative social experiences with others as adults. In related studies, Crow and Small (2011) and Theisinger (2014) report that students develop a tendency to change behavior only if there is a guaranteed reward; they do not develop the inner motivation to make positive changes without something tangible such as a food or toy item. Based on a review of the challenges behavioral interventions present to students with emotional disturbance, an exploration of treatment approaches that complement behavior therapy approaches could contribute to growing knowledge about how to work successfully with this specific student population. In order to explore complementary therapeutic approaches that could aid students with emotional disturbance, a review was conducted of the following areas: the New Jersey Special Education process, school placement options, behavioral interventions and strategies, and therapeutic approaches.

### **The New Jersey Special Education Process**

In order to develop effective therapeutic approaches for students with emotional disturbance, it was important to review the special education classification process in the state of New Jersey. When students display behavioral and emotional difficulties that negatively impact their academic performance, they are referred for a Child Study Team evaluation. This occurs after the student's family meets with the student's teacher about academic and behavior concerns, and a referral to the Intervention & Referral Services

(I&RS). This is a school committee that includes Child Study Team members, the School Counselor, Speech Therapist, and Basic Skills teachers. These individuals meet and develop strategies that could help the student demonstrate more positive school behaviors. If the strategies are implemented and the student does not show improvement, then the student could be referred for a child study team evaluation as the next step (Berger, 2013).

The Child Study Teams in New Jersey school districts are comprised of several different Educational Specialists that evaluate a student's current academic, emotional, and social functioning, and cognitive potential (Licciardello, 2002). The different individuals that assess this information through testing instruments, interviews, observations, and the student's background include the School Psychologist, School Social Worker, Learning Disabilities Consultant, Speech Therapist, Occupational Therapist, and Physical Therapist. Results of the evaluations conducted could indicate that emotional and behavioral issues negatively impact the child's school experiences. If this is the case, the student is eligible for Special Education services under the category of Emotional Disturbance (Licciardello, 2002).

After students receive the Special Education classification of Emotional Disturbance, the Child Study Team develops an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to help the student experience more school success. The IEP is a document created by the Child Study Team with parent and teacher input that focuses on individualized goals and objectives to help the child with challenges to be successful (Pretti-Frontczak, & Bricker, 2000). These goals and objectives include placement options for students with Emotional Disturbance.

## **School Placement Options for Students with Emotional Disturbance**

When school professionals have knowledge of what programs are included in placement options for students with Emotional Disturbance, effective therapeutic strategies can be developed. School placement options for students with Emotional Disturbance include special education classrooms within the home school district that specifically focus on students who demonstrate problem behaviors. If the students are not making progress behaviorally and academically in this type of classroom and there is an increase in suspensions, expulsions from school, as well as failing grades in academic subjects, students are placed in schools that are located outside of their home school districts (Gagnon & Leone, 2006). This includes day treatment and residential schools.

Day treatment school settings provide specific services for students with Emotional Disturbance. Students participate in individual and group mental health therapy, are presented with academic strategies that addressed learning difficulties, and therapeutic and community support programs are provided for the students' families (Gagnon & Leone, 2006). In the residential school setting, students are provided with the same type of therapeutic and academic support services, but these programs are provided on a 24-hour basis. Students who are placed in a residential setting, may have exhibited behavior outside of school that is a danger to themselves or others; they are less at risk to hurt themselves or others when they are monitored by staff members around the clock. In addition to educational settings that are utilized for the emotionally disturbed student population, interventions have been studied and utilized to help these students experience greater behavioral and academic success.

## **Interventions and Strategies for Students with Emotional Disturbance**

In past research studies with students with Emotional Disturbance, a majority of interventions created focused on behavioral therapy approaches. These approaches were developed as a result of federal legislation and research that emphasized the need to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties improve their academic and behavioral functioning in school.

**Behavioral interventions.** In 2004, revisions were made to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) was created. According to the IDEIA, the school staff members that work with the student with emotional and behavioral challenges needs to conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to help in the creation of a Behavior Implementation Plan (BIP) (Cook et. al., 2012). The FBA encompasses all the methods that are used to determine what variables influence students to behave negatively (Anderson, Rodriguez, & Campbell, 2015). In other words, there is an emphasis on the relationship between the negative behavior displayed and what is present in the child's environment at the time of the behavior (Hanley, Iwata, & McCord, 2003; Oliver, Pratt, & Normand, 2015). Crone and Horner (2003) and Smith and Iwata (1997) note that every behavior displayed has a specific function and reason for occurring. Observations are made with a focus on what was present before and after the behavior occurs. Several different assessment methods are used in the FBA and include: student self-reports, rating scales, surveys, interviews, and classroom observations (Anderson et al., 2015). After the FBA is completed, the BIP is created for each student.

When the BIP is developed, there is an emphasis on using a reward when the student displays more positive behavior (Killu, 2008). Cooper, Heron, and Heward (2007) report that several factors needed to be in place in order for the BIP to be successful. This includes implementing the BIP in a consistent manner, providing the student with support and encouragement, and focusing on goals for academic performance (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

The IDEIA documents that the student with behavior that negatively impacts his or her learning in school needs the FBA and BIP in order to develop to his or her full potential (Etschdeit, 2006). Although past studies document the effectiveness of the FBA and BIP that had been implemented for schools by researchers, school staff members had difficulty implementing these strategies into everyday practice (Cook et al., 2007; Smith, 2000; Van Acker, Boreson, Gable, & Potterton, 2005). The school staff members benefit from ongoing consultation, mentoring, and support to utilize the FBA and BIP correctly (Cook et al., 2007). In addition to ongoing support for the implementation of the FBA and the BIP, other therapeutic approaches are explored as a complement to behavioral approaches.

### **Therapeutic Approaches for Students with Emotional Disturbance**

The past research literature documents therapeutic approaches that complement behavior therapy approaches and help students with Emotional Disturbance improve their classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. These approaches are Relational-Cultural Therapy, Art Therapy, and Group Therapy.



**Relational-Cultural therapy.** Relational-cultural therapy is a theory of therapy that focuses on individuals increasing their self-awareness, and building positive relationships with others. By having the opportunity to focus on positive relationship building, individuals may have more successful developmental experiences, increase their empathy for others, and improve their overall psychological well-being (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, & Parsons, 2008; Tucker, Smith-Adock, & Trepal, 2011).

Several researchers report that individuals with emotional disturbance made positive emotional and behavioral changes after participating in relational-cultural therapy. Sassen, Spencer, and Curtin (2005) note that students increase their expression of thoughts and concerns, Duffey and Somody (2011) document that students receive additional support from others, and Jordan (2000) reports that students increase their maturity and empathy toward others.

**Art therapy.** According to Golden (2002) and Stafstrom, Havlena, and Krezinski (2012), art therapy provides children with the opportunity to express themselves through artwork when verbal expression is difficult for them. Carlton (2014) notes that this could be accomplished through the use of drawings, paintings, sculptures, photography, and computer art. Betensky (1987), Kramer (1971), and Lowenfeld (1957) notes that art therapy serves two purposes: to use the artwork as a record of what the child had been through, and for the child to understand how it impacts his or her life. Several past researchers measured the impact of art therapy on children with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Alavinezhad, Mousavi, and Sohrabi (2014) focused on the impact of art therapy on aggressive behavior in children aged 7 to 11 in their mixed methods study. After 10

weeks of participating in the art therapy program, the child participants demonstrated a decrease in anger and an increase in self-esteem. Freilich and Shechtman (2010) conducted a qualitative study with a similar student population to the participants in the study conducted by Alavinezhad et al. (2014). Results indicated that students made significant emotional growth after participating in the art therapy program. Khadar, Babapour, and Sabourimoghaddam (2013) studied the impact of art therapy on school children between the ages of 7 to 12 that were having difficulty communicating their concerns to others. After the children participated in art therapy sessions, they increased their verbal communication of feelings and concerns (Khadar et al., 2013).

**Group therapy.** Group therapy is a therapeutic approach in which one or more therapists work with a group of individuals at the same time. Individuals are chosen for a group if they have similar goals that they want to achieve such as decreasing depression or increasing positive social interactions with others. Groups may be as small as three people, and as big as 12 people (Yalom, 1985). Researchers list several advantages of providing group therapy. Moon (2010) reports that individuals thrive emotionally and mentally when they have the opportunity to connect with others, to create meaning for themselves in relation to others, to be acknowledged, and to be supported in a group format. Individuals in a group may be comforted by the fact that others may be struggling with similar areas in life; this may lead to greater understanding and empathy of one another (Brabender, Fallon, & Smolar, 2004; Liebmann, 2004; Yalom, 1985; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). As a result, group members develop positive relationships with one another, which are essential to individual change, growth, and progress (Moon, 2010).

Several past studies measured the impact of group therapy on students with emotional disturbance.

Galassi (2007) measured the impact of group therapy on the social skills of students with emotional disturbance. After the student participants participated in the group therapy program, they demonstrated improvements in their social skills and classroom behavior. In a similar study that focused on the impact of group therapy on social skills, Waxmonsky et al. (2012) found that after the student participants participated in group therapy, they demonstrated a decrease in depressed mood and negative interactions with others.

### **Rationale of Study**

In my work setting, which is an out-of-district setting for students with Emotional Disturbance, a school-wide behavior modification program is used that includes a daily progress chart that records student behavior. When students earn a certain number of points on these sheets, they are eligible to exchange their points for prizes in the school store, such as food, toys, and clothing. Although this point sheet is utilized for all the students in the school, the elementary students show more improvement in their classroom behavior than the middle school students.

In my assignments for Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research, I explored the possible reasons that middle school students were not as successful with the school wide behavior program as the elementary students were. Based on student interviews I conducted, students expressed that they were not motivated to change their behaviors based on the rewards they could receive. When asked about other therapeutic approaches that could be added, the students had difficulty coming up with ideas that could help them

improve their behavior and academic performance in school (Glass, 2014). I also had the opportunity to observe students in their classrooms, and I noticed that students seemed to make more positive changes when they felt that a staff member or peer wanted to spend time with them, and work on something together (Glass, 2014). This discovery prompted me to develop therapeutic approaches that could complement behavior therapy approaches and could help students make positive gains in school (Fernandez-Aranda et al., 2015). Additionally, school staff members requested that I implement other treatment approaches to complement behavioral interventions in order to provide ongoing student support, and to increase students' positive relationships with others.

In my five years working at this educational setting, I utilized art therapy in a group as well as an emphasis on a positive connection with the students to help them make improvements in their behavior. Staff members and I observed that students made positive changes in how they related to others when these approaches were utilized. Therefore, a research study could be formulated that not only incorporated complementary approaches to behavioral interventions that were already in place, but also measured the impact of working with students in a group where they had the opportunity to participate in art therapy and relationship- building activities.

### **Purpose of Study**

Based on the challenges that occurred when using behavioral approaches as the sole intervention with students with emotional disturbance, as well as the request for therapeutic strategies that could complement the behavior therapy strategies in the school setting where I worked (Osborn, 2011; Simkin, 2013), the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of alternative approaches with the Emotionally Disturbed student

population that could help them experience more school successes. This was addressed through a Mixed Methods Action Research study in my school setting that sought to implement a Group Art Therapy program that emphasized relational-cultural therapy approaches to improve students' classroom behavior and relationship-building skills (Ivankova, 2015). Through this research study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent did participation in the Group Art Therapy program impact Emotionally Disturbed students' positive relationships with others?
- Which components of a Group Art Therapy program addressed the behavioral characteristics of students with Emotional Disturbance?
- What was the impact of relationship-building skills on the classroom behavior of students with Emotional Disturbance?
- How did my servant leadership style, which included helping others reach their full potential, nonjudgmental acceptance of others, and self-reflection, impact the development and delivery of a Group Art Therapy Program?

### **Significance of Study**

The middle school Emotionally Disturbed student population at the research site had not shown improvement in their classroom behavior and academic performance with a concentration on behavior therapy strategies as the sole intervention for these students. These students showed an increase in negative, disruptive behaviors that had been unsafe to themselves and those around them. This included leaving the school grounds without permission, breaking windows, throwing glass and furniture toward others, and attempting to bite staff members (Glass, 2014). Because of these behaviors, these students had been asked to leave this school and to enter a residential treatment setting

instead. When students were transferred to more restrictive school settings, they had decreased opportunities to return to their home school districts and to learn different coping mechanisms to deal with daily conflicts (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). This study contributed to interventions that could complement behavior therapy approaches (Osborn, 2011) and could help students improve their behavior as well as maintain their placement in this school setting.

Both the Emotionally Disturbed students and the school employees at this research site could benefit from this study. The students had the opportunity to be introduced to complementary therapeutic approaches that they may not have been exposed to before and could contribute to changes in their overall school experiences (Simkin, 2013). School staff members had the opportunity to learn about and implement complementary therapeutic and classroom approaches that could help students make improvements in their academic and coping skills. The results of this study could be shared with other school settings, which could help other school professionals utilize behavioral and complementary therapeutic approaches to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties experience school success.

Additionally, this study could prompt additional research studies with students that have been classified as Emotionally Disturbed. One example of a study could be to help to uncover the possible causes of the students' disruptive behavior and what could help them to succeed more in school. Another study could focus on the student's home environment, family and friend relationships, and how these areas impact the child's school behavior.

## Summary

In the United States over the last four decades, there are a steadily growing number of students classified under the special education category of Emotional Disturbance (Mooney et al., 2003). Often students with Emotional Disturbance are also diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or Conduct Disorder. In the state of New Jersey, when students consistently display behaviors and interactions with others that negatively impact their emotional and academic development, they are referred to the school district's Intervention and Referral Services Team as well as the Child Study Team for evaluations, suggestions for strategies, and the development of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Interventions and strategies in the IEP include behavioral approaches to enhance the academic and behavioral growth of students with Emotional Disturbance (Cook et al., 2012).

Although behavioral approaches such as the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Implementation Plan (BIP) are mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) that was enacted in 2004, students with Emotional Disturbance continue to struggle with trusting others, and having a positive self-concept (Hyman & Snook, 2000). This prompted the exploration of other therapeutic approaches that could complement behavior therapy approaches in the school setting and could help students with Emotional Disturbance be more successful in school (Fernandez-Aranda et al., 2015; Osborn, 2011; Simkin, 2013). This included relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy. Studies that had utilized these therapeutic approaches reported an increase in positive interactions with others, an increase in overall emotional growth, an increase in communication of thoughts and

concerns, and an increased sense of community and empathy for others (Galassi, 2007; Golden, 2002; Moon, 2010). Relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy had been used by this researcher, but not in a formal study that included the effect these approaches had on students. This study focused on the impact a Group Art Therapy program that focused on relational-cultural therapy concepts had on the classroom behavior and relationship-building skills of students with Emotional Disturbance.



## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

Past research indicates that students that had been classified with Emotional Disturbance have a great deal of social, emotional, and educational challenges (Erbas, 2010; Evans et al., 2012). These include frequent negative interactions with others, a tendency to become easily depressed, angry, or frustrated, and increased academic difficulty in school (Heineman et al., 2005). Although behavioral strategies were utilized in past studies as well as in the research setting of this study, the middle school population has not demonstrated improvement utilizing this type of approach solely (Crow & Small 2011; Glass, 2014; Hyman & Snook, 2000; Theisinger, 2014). More current research emphasizes other strategies and interventions for students with Emotional Disturbance that could complement behavioral therapy approaches.

This included my own research, which I observed students with Emotional Disturbance displaying more positive school behaviors when they had the opportunity to build relationships with others (Glass, 2014, 2015; Westling, 2010). Because of the alternatives and interventions that were reported in more recent research as well as in my own findings, I wanted to conduct a literature review that not only focused on behavioral interventions, but other types of interventions that helped students with Emotional Disturbance be successful. This literature covered the last 15 years of behavioral, classroom, and counseling approaches that had been utilized as a support for these students.

## **Behavioral Strategies for Students with Emotional Disturbance**

The literature on behavior strategies for students with Emotional Disturbance in the past 15 years emphasizes three main interventions: Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), and Positive Behavior Support (PBS). Both teachers and therapeutic staff utilize these approaches under the guidance of behavior consultants and researchers. The development of a PBS or a BIP depend largely on what is discovered in the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), which is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2007 (Gonzalez, 2009). The FBA focused on the causes of the behavior in order to understand how to help the student make changes (Smith & Iwata, 1997).

**Functional Behavior Assessment for students with Emotional Disturbance.** In the development of the FBA, students are observed in their classrooms with special attention paid to what happened right before and immediately after the negative behavior is displayed (Iwata, Deleon, & Roscoe, 2013). Additionally, those developing the FBA rely on other measurement tools to develop this document. Anderson et al. (2015) report that student interviews and reports, student, teacher, and parent rating scales, and surveys are utilized as well.

Several studies focus on school professionals' responses to utilizing the FBA method and whether or not they found it useful in understanding challenging behaviors as well as to help them develop classroom behavioral strategies. Gable and Van Acker (2000) report in their study that staff members in school did not utilize the information gathered from the FBA conducted, but focused instead on their own personal reactions to

develop student strategies. Results of this study indicate that students did not demonstrate improvements in behavior based on teacher's personal reactions.

In a similar study, Oliver et al. (2015) found that staff members utilized assessment measures from the FBA such as observations and teacher surveys to gather more information about the student, but did not apply the theory behind why the behavior was occurring, which is the cornerstone of the FBA, into their student interventions. Results of this study indicate that students did not demonstrate improvements in their classroom behavior.

**Behavior Intervention Plan for students with Emotional Disturbance.** The BIP emphasizes the student earning a reward for more positive behavior displayed. Once the BIP is implemented, school staff need to be consistent in providing this intervention to the student each day he or she is in school (Cooper et al., 2007; Knight, 2002; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Researchers discovered varying effects utilizing the BIP with students who had been classified as Emotionally Disturbed. These differences in study results were impacted by the consistency in BIP implementation and involvement of the student in the creation and management of the BIP.

Knight (2002) conducted a study with 10 middle school students who had been classified with Emotional Disturbance and displayed disruptive behavior in the classroom. Students' behavior was compared before and after the implementation of a BIP. The results of this study indicated that students did not demonstrate a difference in behavior with the inclusion of the BIP as a student strategy. Knight (2002) discovered that the teaching staff experienced difficulty creating the BIP and maintaining the plan once it was implemented in the classroom. The school professionals expressed that they may

have had more success making the BIP a consistent part of the classroom structure if they had the opportunity to receive outside coaching and support from consultants who had expertise in the BIP. In a similar study Mouzakitis, Coddling, and Tryon (2015), found that students benefitted from the incorporation of a BIP when teachers self-monitored their implementation of this classroom strategy and received encouragement and feedback from supervisors and colleagues.

In other studies that focused on the effectiveness of the BIP, several researchers found that positive results corresponded with student collaboration and feedback. Burley and Waller (2005) developed a BIP for a male student who was classified with Emotional Disturbance, and had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This student frequently had trouble staying focused on classroom tasks, had a tendency to make comments to his peers, and frequently got out of his seat without permission. The researchers developed a behavior plan and asked this student if he had a favorite activity that he wanted to earn if he decreased inappropriate classroom behaviors. The student seemed interested and motivated by the plan because his input was elicited and the plan included an activity that he looked forward to doing every day. As a result of this plan and his interest in it, this student demonstrated progress in his classroom behaviors and even applied these improvements to other parts of his school day.

Smith and Sugai (2000) also involved student input into a BIP created for a seventh grade student with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Instead of a focus on choosing a reward as was emphasized in the study conducted by Burley and Waller (2005), the student was encouraged to monitor and score his own behavior during his class, including recording when he noticed he was displaying appropriate behavior

around others. The results of this study indicated that this student demonstrated progress in his academic and social development in school when he was responsible for monitoring his own behavior.

**Positive Behavior Support for students with Emotional Disturbance.** In addition to the BIP, the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program is also used by teaching and therapeutic staff members to improve negative and disruptive classroom behaviors, (Doolittle, Horner, Bradly, Sugai, & Vincent, 2007), and more schools in the United States are implementing PBS programming to address the needs of students with Emotional Disturbance (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013).

Bradshaw, Mitchell, and Leaf (2010) report that PBS is included in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and has been found to be successful in studies that focus on students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Reinke et al., 2013).

According to Carr (2007), PBS addresses a student's overall environment and quality of life first and then focuses on the problem behaviors second. This includes fostering school environments that built trust as well as an emphasis on student strengths (Carr, 2007). PBS includes three main areas of focus. These are changing the classroom or school environment, providing strategies to change problem behaviors, and developing an individual behavior plan that helps the student monitor his or her behavior around others (Gonzalez, 2009).

Sugai et al. (2010) note that PBS also focuses on connections between staff strategies, resources available, and student data. Additionally, Sugai and Simonsen (2012) report that PBS relies on research based practices rather than a specific

curriculum; PBS is more of a framework that provides assistance to school professionals. There are specific characteristics that are included in PBS implementation. Classroom rules are stated in a positive manner and are consistent with school-wide expectations, students are given ongoing encouragement and support to develop trust and rapport, and students are given reminders to help them stay focused on classroom activities (Good & Brophy, 2003).

There are also three levels of involvement in PBS: a school wide level, a classroom level for students who are at-risk for behavioral challenges, and an individual student level that uses a specific plan to address negative school behaviors (Gonzalez, 2009). An example of a program that utilizes these three levels is the *Best Behavior, Building Positive Behavior Support in Schools* introduced by Sprague and Golly (2004). Besides providing strategies to address problem behaviors in school, this program also provides collaborative strategies for families to work on together in the home. Sprague and Golly (2004) report that when this program is implemented in a specific school setting, there are decreases seen in student violent behaviors and increases seen in academic engagement and success.

In addition to Sprague and Golly (2004), other studies focus on the use of PBS in different school settings. In a study conducted by Reinke, Herman, and Stormont (2012), the researchers observed the teachers in the classroom to determine what components of PBS were being implemented. Reinke et al. (2012) reported that the teacher-participants were provided with clear classroom expectations through the use of visuals that were easy for the students to understand and follow. Although given these visuals, the teachers were observed using negative comments more than praise to encourage individual

students with challenging behaviors. Additionally, teachers needed to consistently document negative classroom behaviors and approaches to determine if PBS had an impact on student behavior. The researchers noted that the teachers did not provide that documentation. In spite of some of the challenges presented in this study, the researchers noted that increased positive classroom behavior and management occurred when teachers were able to praise the entire classroom. In addition, when teachers utilized more student reprimands and punishments, there were higher levels of teacher burn-out.

Algozzine, Putnam, and Horner (2010) and Scott and Barrett (2004) also focused on the effectiveness of PBS and obtained results that demonstrated increased instructional time and academic performance. Shah (2012) conducted a study that utilized PBS and also included behavior classes that promoted positive student performance in school. The results demonstrated that students showed academic improvement and that younger students were more positively influenced by PBS than the middle school students.

In addition to public school settings, PBS was implemented in studies that took place in private school settings and juvenile detention centers (Read & Lampron, 2012). Swain-Bradway, Swoszowski, Boden, and Sprague (2013) conducted a study in an alternative setting to measure the advantages or challenges in PBS implementation. The results of this study listed several benefits to PBS implementation. These were a connection between teacher encouragement and positive student outcomes, many opportunities to incorporate social skills programming throughout the school day, and ongoing training, mentoring, and support for school professionals. The challenges in PBS implementation in this study were staff resistance to change, staff reliance on punishment as a strategy, and high turnover of students.

## **Classroom Approaches for Students with Emotional Disturbance**

Classroom approaches for students with Emotional Disturbance are implemented by teaching staff, which includes classroom teachers, classroom aides, and 1:1 aides for individual students. The approaches emphasize the relationship between the teacher and student, peer relationships, student self-monitoring, academic engagement, inquiry-based learning, and specific academic subject strategies.

**Student-Teacher alliance.** The relationship between the teacher and the Emotionally Disturbed student was the subject of the majority of studies contained in this literature review. Strothers (2015) and Wernsing (2014) found in a public high school setting that positive staff support was the number one factor that helped students achieve their goals, and in a similar manner, Cappiello (2013) found in a Christian high school setting that the students with emotional and behavioral difficulties that were the most successful had a positive working relationship with their teachers. This was a similar result in a self-contained middle school setting for achieving school success (Whitlow, 2015).

Researchers report additional benefits of a positive teacher and student relationship for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. This includes the forging of positive peer friendships (Murray and Pianta, 2007), more trusting relationships with others (Murray and Pianta, 2007), less delinquent behavior (Murray and Pianta, 2007) and an overall positive impact on the students' academic, social, and emotional development throughout their school career (Baker, 2006; Berry & O'Connor, 2010). Students who have a positive working relationship with their teacher in the school-age years are more successful in their later high school years.



In contrast to the benefits of a positive alliance, students are impacted negatively if they do not have a relationship with their teachers. Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that if students did not think that their teachers liked them, they demonstrated lowered motivation in all academic areas, and did not complete their assignments. Similarly, Henricsson and Rydell (2004) and Lane, Wehby, and Cooley (2006) noted that students who do not receive encouragement from their teachers had a great deal of difficulty with their overall school adjustment as they progressed each year to a higher grade.

In addition to the impact on students, teachers are also affected by a lack of connection to students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Montague and Rinaldi (2001) and Cook and Cameron (2010) report that teachers are more angry and frustrated with students who are struggling academically and socially in their classrooms. Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, and Morgan (2008) report that it is easy for teachers to become overwhelmed by and provide ineffective instruction practices to this student group. Because these students frequently perform below grade level, teachers are often discouraged about their professional efforts (Sutherland et al., 2008).

Toste, Bloom, and Heath (2014) investigated this student-teacher relationship further in a quantitative study that focused on the impact of this alliance on school outcomes for the Emotionally Disturbed student population. In this study, the teachers and students were asked to complete the Classroom Working Alliance Inventory, which measured the relationship between each teacher and student pairing. The teachers were also asked to complete the Social Skills Improvement System, which included their assessment of students' current social skills, negative behaviors, and academic accomplishments. In addition to the Classroom Working Alliance Inventory, the students

were asked to complete the School Life Questionnaire, which measured their attitudes about learning, teaching staff, and their peers (Toste et al., 2014).

The findings of this study indicated that teachers felt a stronger working relationship with non-disabled rather than disabled students. In contrast to the teachers' beliefs about their students, both students with and without special needs believed that they had a positive working relationship with their teachers. The researchers felt this was due to the disabled students' difficulty understanding social nuances to pick up on discomfort, stress, or frustration from the adults that are working with them (Toste et al., 2014).

Based on a review of the literature related to the student-teacher relationship in the classroom, several strategies and recommendations are emphasized. This includes being proactive and setting clear classroom expectations (Witt, Van DerHyeden, & Gilbertson, 2004), discussing and posting a specific list of classroom rules (Emmer & Stough, 2001; Marzano, 2003), using praise for students' participation in different classroom activities (Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000), the instillation of hope (Pangelinan, 2015), and an emphasis on positive peer collaboration and working relationships (Wernsing, 2014).

**Peer relationships.** Researchers emphasize the benefits of utilizing peer relationships to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties be more successful in the classroom. This includes peer-mediated interventions (PMI) that Kaya, Blake, and Chan (2015) studied that focused on the positive relationship between two peers to promote increased social, emotional, and academic skills (Kaya et al., 2015). The typically developing student served as the mediator and encouraged his or her peer

through the use of modeling, counseling, and mentoring. The advantage of utilizing a same-aged peer in mediation was that this student understood the social challenges that his or her peer faced each day, and provided this student with a more natural way of interacting appropriately with others.

Kaya et al. (2015) conducted a literature review study to note the effectiveness of PMI with different students. Twelve studies were included in the literature review study and the researchers obtained the following results: students demonstrated a decrease in negative classroom behaviors and an increase in more positive and socially appropriate behaviors toward others, and the positive outcomes gained occurred in a short amount of time. Kaya et al. (2015) reported that the one area with PMI that students did not make progress was taking what they had learned to other situations in and outside of school.

Another program that focuses on improving academic and emotional development through the use of peer interaction is the Class Wide Peer Tutoring program (Bowman-Perrott, 2009). This differs from the PMI program in which one student continually serves as the mediator and provides support. In the Class Wide Peer Tutoring program, students take turns being the tutor and being the one who is tutored. PMI and the Class Wide Peer Tutoring program share several benefits, which include increased social opportunities and communication with others. Additional benefits of the Class Wide Peer Tutoring program include the following: increasing one-to-one instruction time, increasing self-monitoring for correction of errors in work, and increasing teacher's classroom management.

Bowman-Perrott (2009) conducted a year-long pilot study with two science high school classrooms to measure the effectiveness of the Class Wide Peer Tutoring program

(CWPT) with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Out of the two classrooms, 11 students participated in the study. Before incorporating CWPT into the classroom structure, teachers modeled and trained the students how to use the program for two to three days. Once this program was officially implemented, the researcher provided in-classroom supervision for those students having difficulty using this program.

The program took place for 30 minutes, three times a week. A timer was set by the teacher in each classroom to insure that each pairing had equal time to be the tutor and the one tutored. CWPT was conducted with several steps. First, the teacher reviewed the curriculum to be covered each week with the students. Next, the students were given dry erase markers and laminated point sheets to check off their ability to perform well as the tutor or student being tutored. Third, the students were given a survey to complete that asked questions about what it was like to participate in this program at the end of their first semester (Bowman-Perrot, 2009).

In addition to this end of the semester survey, students completed pre- and post-tests each week to measure their progress when new curriculum was introduced and how effectively they were able to work in pairs. Students were also observed for on and off-task behaviors during CWPT and teacher-led instruction time to note patterns of unfocused class work time for the students.

Bowman-Perrott (2009) reported both successes as well as challenges with the results of this study. The positive results included the following: students had the opportunity to give one another praise and support, students increased their ability to work cooperatively with one another, students demonstrated deeper understanding of new concepts introduced, there was a decrease shown in students' inattentive and off task

behaviors, and students transferred the sense of accomplishment they experienced from the CWPT structure to other subjects and classes in their school day. This differed from the PMI, which was not easily transferred to the students' lives outside of the classroom.

Challenges in the study included the inconsistency in the work the student pairs accomplished when one of the students was absent, or transferred to another school. Additionally, the study was conducted in an alternative school setting that had a smaller class size than the public school district. Students did not have the opportunity to work with a variety of different partners and may have benefitted from the chance to practice their cooperative learning skills with different peers (Bowman-Perrot, 2009).

**Self-Monitoring.** In more recent years, researchers focused on students with emotional and behavioral difficulties utilizing self-monitoring in order to be more successful in school. In their studies, researchers defined self-monitoring as a two-step process to monitor one's own behavior (Denune et al., 2015; Joseph & Eveleigh, 2011). Mace, Belfiore, and Hutchinson (2001) report that the first step is observing your own behavior and the second step is to document your observation. Advantages of student self-monitoring include the following: students are more aware of their behaviors, and as a result of this increased awareness, these students start to make changes in their classroom behaviors.

Joseph and Eveleigh (2011) conducted a Literature Review study of past research in which children with emotional and behavioral difficulties were encouraged to utilize self-monitoring practices to increase their reading skills and achievement. Sixteen studies were used in this review and as a result, 302 participants were included in this study. In all of the studies reviewed, the researchers found that students improved their reading

performance, completed more work, made accurate responses and corrected their work, and displayed more on-task behaviors (Joseph & Eveleigh, 2011). One area of concern noted was that students' performances in reading declined again when self-monitoring practices were no longer emphasized.

In contrast to the Literature Review study conducted by Joseph and Eveleigh (2010), Theisinger (2014) focused on a mixed methods study format to measure the impact of self-monitoring on the academic success of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Three high school student participants were included in this study, which took place in a self-contained classroom in a public school setting. The students had been placed in this classroom setting due to both academic and behavioral concerns. The study was conducted during the classroom's math period. The students received direct instruction from their teacher and paraprofessional, which included modeling of mathematical activities and guided practice (Theisinger, 2014). After the direct instruction portion was completed, the students used the rest of the period to work independently on assigned classroom tasks.

Data collection materials included a self-monitoring form for students to complete, classroom staff rating form of student's academic engagement, and the MotivAider, which reminded students to self-monitor their work by sending out a vibrating sensation when worn on their arms. The student and teacher forms were utilized pre and post intervention implementation, and the MotivAider was utilized during the implementation phase only. Results were similar to what was gathered in the study conducted by Joseph and Eveleigh (2010). In this study, students improved their consistent academic engagement in mathematical tasks after employing self-monitoring methods, increased

their awareness of how they learn, and what strategies helped them to be more successful (Theisinger, 2014).

**Academic engagement.** Past studies in the research literature with this student population also emphasized academic engagement (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013). Bassette and Taber-Doughty (2013) describe academic engagement as participating in class discussions and reading both aloud and silently to oneself. For the student with Emotional Disturbance, he or she may have great difficulty maintaining attention to school tasks and often exhibits off-task behaviors; therefore the student displays a lower amount of academic engagement (Bassette & Taber-Doughty, 2013). These researchers focused on implementing interventions to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties improve their academic engagement, which included animal assisted strategies. These types of strategies incorporated the use of a therapy dog to help students with a variety of academic, emotional, and behavioral goals (Rud & Beck, 2000). The researchers focused on the animal assisted therapy intervention that in past studies involved reading to dogs to increase their motivation and confidence in this academic area (Newlin, 2003). For the study conducted by Bassette and Tabor-Doughty (2013), they focused on utilizing a reading to dogs program for Emotionally Disturbed children to help increase their overall academic engagement in school.

This study was conducted with three elementary school students classified with Emotional Disturbance. All of these students attended the same special education classroom in their home school district, and all exhibited lowered student engagement and increased acting out behaviors (Bassette & Tabor-Doughty, 2013). The results of this study indicated that all three students demonstrated moderate to significant improvement

in their on-task behavior after the implementation of the reading to a dog program. The students all expressed that they enjoyed working with the dogs and this helped to motivate them to concentrate more on their reading. The researchers also discovered that the students spent a great deal of time getting to know the dogs, and seemed more encouraged to read to them because of the bond they felt they shared with the dogs (Bassette & Tabor-Doughty, 2013).

**Inquiry-Based Learning.** Another approach utilized with studies with Emotionally Disturbed students and within the classroom is Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). Camenzuli and Buhagiar (2014) studied the use of IBL to help students with Emotional Disturbance have more success in learning mathematical concepts. When using IBL, students had the opportunity to make observations, ask questions, and look for different methods of answering questions, such as participating in experiments, looking for themes and patterns, and drawing conclusions based on the experiments (Maab & Artigue, 2013). Camenzuli & Buhagiar (2014) and Hughes and Cooper (2007) describe advantages of utilizing IBL with Emotionally Disturbed students, which are the opportunity to increase their focus while working on tasks, to decrease negative class behaviors, to increase their emotional connection with others, and to increase their cognitive and memory skills (Camenzuli & Buhagiar, 2014).

Camenzuli and Buhagiar (2014), conducted a mixed methods action research study that included the following data collection instruments to measure the effectiveness of IBL: student observations, teacher and student interviews, researcher and student reflective journals, and student math scores halfway through and at the end of the year. IBL was presented in the following steps in the study: creating a comfortable and positive



learning environment, and incorporating IBL strategies without emphasizing the changes in strategies to students.

Student results of this study included the following: increased motivation in completing math activities, extending math beyond the classroom to outside experiences, and increased math scores. The researchers discovered through their study the following main advantage of utilizing IBL with this student population: the activities were short and offered a great deal of variety and movement, which was appealing to students who displayed increased frustration and inattentive behaviors (Camenzuli & Buhagiar, 2014).

#### **Specific academic subject strategies.**

**Writing.** Researchers recorded that writing was a common challenge for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Lane, 2004). Cuenca-Carlino and Mustian (2013) documented that this was a challenging area for this student population because they had difficulty organizing their thoughts to create a document that communicated clearly to others their ideas and opinions. White, Houchins, Viel-Ruma, and Dever (2014), investigated the effects of utilizing two different writing strategies for students with Emotional Disturbance. This included the Expressive Writing direct instruction curriculum (EW) and Procedural Facilitation (PF).

The EW program focused on the following areas: writing mechanics such as grammar and spelling, sentence and paragraph organization, and editing abilities (White et al., 2014). A direct instruction approach was provided in EW; this included the teacher breaking down writing concepts into smaller steps through modeling and guiding the student, and having the student practice the concepts taught. PF included the use of a

graphic organizer that students were encouraged to use to organize writing concepts before they began an assignment (Graham & Perrin, 2006).

White et al. (2014) conducted a study with middle and high school students with emotional and behavioral difficulties in a residential school setting to measure the impact of EW and PF on their writing skills and organization. Twenty-nine students participated in this study, which was facilitated during 11 weeks of the school year. During the 11 weeks, the participants took part in writing sessions five times a week for 50-minute sessions. Four teachers were included in this study, and were trained prior to implementing the EW and PF programs (White et al., 2014). The participants were divided into two groups; one study group only utilized the EW intervention, and the other group utilized the PF and EW interventions. These two groups were compared to see if there were differences in writing progress obtained from these combinations of interventions. Results of this study indicated that students in both groups demonstrated 15 percent improvement in writing skills, with the group that included both PF and EW at a faster rate of improvement (White et al., 2014).

Cuenca-Carlino and Mustian (2013) introduced other types of interventions to help students with their writing skills. In contrast to the study conducted by White et al. (2014), these researchers linked writing skills to a student's self-determination characteristics. These researchers additionally stated that students' difficulty in expressing themselves coherently in the written form was impacted by their challenges regulating and advocating for their needs in school. Their ability to self-regulate as well as advocate for their needs was impacted by the amount of self-determination they

possessed, in which they had control over their daily lives and activities (Cuenca-Carlino & Mustian, 2013).

These researchers noted the following relationship in past research studies; the greater amount of self-determination a student had, the more successful their lives were in the future (Ackerman, 2006; Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Cuenca-Carlino & Mustian, 2013). Cuenca-Carlino and Mustian (2013) hypothesized that students could utilize self-determination practices to improve their writing with the use of the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model of writing. The SRSD model taught writing practices and self-regulatory practices at the same time.

In their study, Cuenca-Carlino and Mustian (2013) focused on the effectiveness of the SRSD model in helping middle school students with emotional and behavioral difficulties improve their persuasive writing skills to advocate for themselves in school. Nine middle school students participated in this study, and all of these students had challenges both emotionally and academically in school. All of these participants were assessed for their current writing level and were found to be below grade level and had written expression needs included on their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Three special education teachers and a paraprofessional administered the SRSD to the students in the study. The study took place in an out-of-district alternative school setting for students with emotional and mental health challenges. The two researchers and two graduate students from a nearby university trained the teachers in the SRSD program and provided ongoing support, feedback, and supervision for the duration of the study. Treatment fidelity was an important component in this study and was utilized to assess

the teachers' ability to administer and maintain the SRSD program effectively (Cuenca-Carlino & Mustian, 2013).

Once the SRSD program was initiated, teachers provided this program for four days a week and 40 minutes per session. This included pre- and post-tests to measure the impact of the SRSD on persuasive writing and self-determination skills. The results of this study focused on treatment fidelity, writing skills pre and post SRSD intervention, the effectiveness of the writing strategies that were given to each participant, self-determination, self-efficacy, and social validity (Cuenca-Carlino & Mustian, 2013).

According to the results, each of the three teachers that administered the SRSD had a high degree of fidelity. The instruction model and structure of the SRSD was successfully administered and implemented. From pre- to post-test, all participants showed improvement by 90% in persuasive writing skills (Cuenca-Carlino & Mustian, 2013).

Students also showed more of an understanding of self-determination after the SRSD was utilized. In terms of self-efficacy, students displayed more confidence about their writing abilities after participating in this study. For social validity measures, the student participants reported that the SRSD helped them to improve their writing skills and confidence. Concerns that the researchers had at the conclusion of this study were related to whether or not teaching staff would continue these practices so students could continue to make progress. They were concerned that the improvements would be temporary and recommended that in future research, studies could emphasize how to continue with the intervention beyond the length of the study (Cuenca-Carlino & Mustian, 2013).

Hauth, Mastropieri, Scruggs, and Regan (2013) emphasized the generalization and continuation of SRSD that Cuenca-Carlino and Mustian (2013) suggested. These researchers conducted a study utilizing SRSD with an emphasis on delaying the intervention after it was initially implemented and focusing on generalizing it to other academic subject areas. Although Cuenca-Carlino and Mustian (2013) focused primarily on persuasive writing, Hauth et al. (2013) implemented the SRSD for the students to improve writing skills in mathematics and civics classes. Similar to Cuenca-Carlino and Mustian (2013) they discovered students demonstrated improvement in the following areas: persuasive writing, utilizing writing strategies, and understanding the benefits of the SRSD in terms of helping their overall writing skills improve.

***Mathematics.*** Past studies documented the difficulties students with emotional and behavioral difficulties have in mathematics (Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2005). Mirabella Ormsby (2013) conducted a qualitative study that focused on how middle school students with Emotional Disturbance improved mathematical beliefs and concepts. Two students were chosen to participate in this study; one student attended math in the self-contained classroom and the other student was placed in the general education classroom. Three teachers that worked with these two students were also included as participants, as well as one parent for each of these students.

Data collection measures for this study included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts such as school records and student past work (Mirabella Ormsby, 2013). Results of this study included several different approaches and recommendations to help students with Emotional Disturbance experience more success in mathematical activities. These included the following strategies: structured

classroom in which teachers directly communicated their rules and expectations, proactive classroom techniques such as built in student breaks, continuous praise, and the use of humor to decrease student stress (Mirabella Ormsby, 2013), an established positive rapport with the teaching staff members, emphasis on student social development, an accepting and non-judgmental learning environment, positive parent support, impact of past experiences in math, how useful math would be in the future, and extended time to complete math activities (Mirabella Ormsby, 2013).

### **Counseling Approaches for Students with Emotional Disturbance**

Counseling approaches for students with Emotional Disturbance are coordinated and implemented by therapeutic staff members, which include school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors. These individuals are trained to utilize a variety of different therapeutic approaches to help students express themselves and to focus on helping students improve their behavior. These approaches include social skills programs, technology, relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, drama therapy, equestrian assisted psychotherapy, and group therapy.

**Social skills programs.** Researchers that have studied the challenges that students with Emotional Disturbance have faced report that their acquisition of social skills is important to have more successful experiences in school (Aljadeff-Abergel, Ayvazo, & Eldar, 2012). Because social skills include interacting positively with both adults and peers in school in order to be successful, recommendations have been made to focus on utilizing structured programs to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties increase their prosocial behavior (Gresham, Van, & Cook, 2006). Different

programs have been developed and utilized to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties improve their social skills.

Wu, Lo, Feng, and Lo (2010) conducted a study focused on the effectiveness of a social skills program called Direct Social Skills Training (SST). The SST approach include the following activities: modeling, role-playing, feedback, and reinforcement (Spence, 2003; Wu et al., 2010). In past studies, although students that had participated in SST had improved their social skills, they had a difficult time transferring what they had learned to situations outside of the program (Miller, Lane, & Wehby, 2005).

In the study that Wu et al. (2010) conducted, there was more of an emphasis on the student incorporating the skills learned from this program into other areas of his or her life. The study included two student participants with emotional and behavioral difficulties. The results of their response to the SST program included improvements in cooperative and on-task behaviors, and included maintenance of these skills even after they had completed the program. Wu at al. (2010) also chose to include classroom peers in the implementation of the SST program; these students aided and reminded the participants of prosocial behaviors to incorporate into the different parts of their school day. As a result of maintaining social skills learned, the two participants began to develop more friendships with their peers than they had before.

Another social skills program, Educating through the Physical (ETP), focuses children on practicing their social skills while involved in physical play activities (Eldar & Ayvazo, 2009). In contrast to the social skills program utilized by Wu et al. (2010), ETP emphasizes physical play because children naturally gravitate toward the opportunity to move around (Aljadeff-Abergel et al., 2012). Several goals for ETP

include: cooperating with teaching staff, increasing attention and focus, following directions and rules in the physical activity, developing patience skills, increasing independent activity time, coping with pressure and demands, persevering even when an activity is challenging, cooperating with peers, increasing self-control and self-management, and teaching or assisting their peers (Aljadeff-Abergel et al., 2012).

Eldar, Hirschman, and Elran (2008) utilized ETP to help middle school students with disruptive behaviors increase positive interactions with others. Students had the opportunity to participate in a physical play activity, then stop and practice appropriate social manners and respect, and then end with another physical play activity. After participating in this program, the students demonstrated a decrease in disruptive behaviors and were able to transfer the social skills they had learned to academic subject areas in the classroom during the rest of their day.

**Technology.** The use of technology was used in different counseling approaches. Singer-Califano (2008) measured the impact of technology on the social skills of children with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties through a Literature Review study. Singer-Califano (2008) describes the importance of social skills programs that contain instruments and activities that are both interesting and motivating for students. Singer-Califano reports that there is limited literature on the use of technology to enhance social skills with this child population.

The technology research literature focused mostly on students that not only had emotional and behavioral difficulties, but also had an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Lloyd (2002) notes that students with emotional and behavioral difficulties utilize television as a



way to rehearse and model prosocial behaviors, particularly with programs that do not demonstrate increased violence and aggression.

In addition to television programs, Buggey (2005) and Singer-Califano (2008) report that videos provide these students with the opportunity to observe, model, and practice new behaviors, and eliminate negative and inappropriate behaviors. The videos may be played many times for students who benefit from repetition and review of positive and prosocial behaviors (Singer-Califano, 2008).

Singer-Califano (2008) also references Hitchcock, Dowrick, and Prater (2003), who emphasize the effectiveness of video self-modeling. In video self-modeling, students watch themselves displaying appropriate behaviors. By seeing themselves engaging in prosocial behaviors, the students are provided with more encouragement that they are able to improve their overall social skills (Singer-Califano, 2008). In their review of 18 studies that utilized video-self modeling, Hitchcock et al. (2003) note that students with emotional and behavioral difficulties improved their overall social interactions with others.

In addition to videos, movies, and television, virtual reality technology is also emphasized by Singer-Califano. In virtual reality programming, students have the opportunity to practice social skills scenarios in a real life situation as one player or with multiple players. Singer-Califano (2008) points out that in some social skills activities, students have difficulty taking what they learn to real-life situations. With the use of virtual reality programming, students may participate in settings that are realistic and similar to what they come across each day such as the school environment, school bus, or home setting. Although Singer-Califano describes many benefits of utilizing technology

instruments to help students with emotional and behavioral disorders increase positive social interactions with others, Singer-Califano also points out several limitations, including increased frustration using these materials for students who had a hard time understanding how different technology devices work. In a similar manner, staff members in a school may not be technologically advanced and could have difficulty working with this media to help students with their social skills. A final challenge is the high cost to districts to include this equipment; funds vary from district to district in terms of financial support for these types of programs.

Other technology approaches focus on the use of the Internet. Morgan (2010) reviewed research on the use of social networking websites to help teach students with Emotional Disturbance more positive social skills. Students had the opportunity to practice their social skills and interactions with individuals online and with the supervision of the researcher. Results demonstrated that students improved their overall interactions with others after participating in this study, and were more aware of differences in real-life situations when they struggled in their socialization with others.

**Relational-Cultural therapy approaches.** Past research studies focused on the use of relational-cultural therapy in the school environment for middle school students with social difficulties (Tucker et al., 2011). This approach places emphasis on the connection or lack of connection with others in the past, and what has been blocking individuals from positive relationships with others. Tucker et al. (2011) developed five components of relational-cultural therapy to include when working with middle school students with emotional and behavioral difficulties: self-acceptance, mental images of relationships, providing information about the concept of power, focusing on

disconnections that occur, and increasing the child's ability to relate in a positive way to others (Tucker et al., 2011).

**Art therapy approaches.** For children with Emotional Disturbance, art therapy approaches have been utilized to help them increase their self-awareness, self-esteem, and relationships with others (Epp, 2008; Hicks, 2012; Sunjin, 2014). Through art therapy, students have the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in a non-verbal manner. Art therapy groups for students who are emotionally disturbed focus on the following areas: utilizing a safe and socially acceptable method to express anger, frustration, as well as frightening and painful feelings appropriately, and increasing students' sense of empowerment, self-worth, and non-judgmental acceptance of others (Camilleri, 2007; Hartz & Thick, 2005; Moon, 2010; Safran, 2002). Several authors describe examples of Group Art Therapy programs they created for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Epp, 2008; Kanareff, 2002; Lachance, 2002; Liebmann, 2004).

Liebmann (2004) describes her work using art therapy groups with children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). She reports that she had the children work in pairs to remind each other about focusing in and concentrating on the specific activity in the art project for each session. She notes that often they were confused and frustrated because of attention difficulties, and art materials such as clay helped them to get their anger out in a constructive way. She also utilized stories that the children drew pictures about that centered on anger and how to cope with that type of feeling.

Kanareff (2002) developed an art therapy program to help behaviorally disordered students that took place over two semesters of the school year. In contrast to Liebmann's

(2004) approach that focused on anger management and expression, Kanareff emphasized increased communication with others. In Kanareff's program, students verbally spoke about their day when they came in, worked on an art project of their choice, and then spoke about what they had created before the session was over for the day. In a similar program, Lachance (2002) also encouraged students to create artwork and then discuss what they created with other members of the group. Lachance conducted weekly art therapy sessions in which children with a Conduct Disorder were given a choice of art materials to work with and speak about what they had created. Additionally, these students were asked to give positive feedback to other members of the group.

**Drama therapy approaches.** Drama therapy approaches for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties included the work of Van den berg (2013). This researcher explored the impact of Process Drama Therapy on the anger management skills of female adolescent students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Van den berg conducted a qualitative study using Process Drama Therapy to help students express their anger and problem solve within the structure of a work of fiction they were acting out with one another. Van den berg describes her role in the Process Drama Therapy as one that encouraged the students to reflect on what their emotions were as they were acting out a fictitious story, as well as helping guide the characters in the story into situations similar to ones that had caused these students conflict in the past. The researcher notes that students had an easier time re-enacting anger inducing situations if they thought it was about a fictitious character rather than themselves in order to keep a safe distance to explore their emotions (Van den berg, 2013).

The student participants engaged in the Process Drama Therapy activities for six weeks in a row with a focus on anger management practices. The results of this study indicated that the students developed more of an understanding and insight into the different emotions and themes related to anger and how to handle anger provoking situations in a more constructive manner. The researcher notes an area that the students did not learn and needed to improve was their assertiveness skills to express their anger constructively rather than taking an aggressive stance (Van den berg, 2013). The researcher's recommendation for future studies was to explore how process drama techniques could improve students' assertiveness skills.

**Equestrian assisted psychotherapy approaches.** Carlsson, Nilsson Ranta, and Traeen (2015) measured the impact of Equine Assisted Social Work (EASW) on the relationships, self-esteem, and anxiety level of adolescent students with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties. This research took place in a residential school setting. The individuals who took part in this research were three staff members and four female students who harmed themselves on a regular basis. Video-taped sessions recorded interactions between staff members, students, and horses; students were observed to note if certain approaches taken by staff with the horses helped students to make a positive connection with these animals and ease their anxiety (Carlsson et al., 2015).

Results of this study indicated that when staff members spoke about and engaged with the horses as if they were objects or related them to equestrian sports, the students did not demonstrate a positive connection with the horse. When staff members instead spoke about and to the horse as if he or she possessed human-like qualities, the student participants related to the horses, had empathy for them, and began to form a positive

bond with them. This study pointed out that students with emotional and behavioral difficulties can express themselves more freely, make a positive connection with and ease their anxiety when relating to an animal by giving it human-like qualities. One other study used this approach with students with Emotional Disturbance and noted that students made improvements in their overall school behavior when relating to the horse as if he or she was human and had similar challenges to the student (Posas, 2013).

**Group therapy approaches.** There has been a variety of research using group therapy to help students with emotional and behavioral difficulties make improvements in their school experiences. Galassi (2007) conducted a mixed methods research study to examine the impact of a group therapy program that focused on social skills instruction for students with Emotional Disturbance. Eight participants were included in this study and had the Special Education classification of Emotionally Disturbed. Quantitative measures included pre and post group therapy behavior surveys, and qualitative measures included field notes from student observation periods. The students participated in a daily Social Skills Group Therapy program over a 30-day period. As a result of their participation in the group therapy format, the students demonstrated progress in the following areas: positive social skills, classroom behavior, and academic achievement.

Waxmonsky et al. (2012) also focused on improving students' social skills through the use of group therapy. These researchers conducted a mixed methods research study to measure the impact of group therapy for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as well as Severe Mood Dysregulation (SMD). Six child-participants between the ages of 7 and 12 participated in a weekly group for nine weeks. Each week techniques adopted from Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy were

incorporated into the sessions with a focus on social skills development. The results of this study indicated that after completing the group therapy program, the participants showed a decrease in depressed mood and negative behaviors toward others, and demonstrated an increase in regulation of emotions.

Although Hicks (2012) also incorporated social skills into a group therapy format to help students decrease disruptive school behaviors, this study differed with a focus on utilizing multimodal expressive art with these students. Multimodal expressive art includes different art forms such as art, music, and dance to help students express themselves. Hicks conducted a quantitative study to measure the impact of the group therapy program on the social skills of the students. The Behavior Assessment for Children, Second Edition (BASC-2) was administered before and after the group therapy program. Twelve students were participants in this study and each of these children participated in the group therapy program once a week for eight weeks. Results of this study indicated that after participation in the Group therapy program, the students demonstrated a decrease in aggressive behaviors, and an increase in communication and social skills.

**Summary.** Research studies on approaches with students with Emotional Disturbance included a variety of behavior, classroom, and counseling approaches in the school setting. Over the past 15 years, behavior strategies for students with Emotional Disturbance have emphasized the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), and Positive Behavior Support (PBS). In the development of the FBA, students are observed in their classrooms with an emphasis on what happens right before and immediately after the negative behavior was displayed (Anderson et al., 2015).

The FBA is also utilized to create a BIP. The BIP emphasizes the student earning a reward for more positive behavior displayed, and positive and negative behavior by the student are recorded on a daily point sheet chart (Gonzalez, 2009). The PBS focuses on a school-wide effort that involves changing the classroom or school environment, providing strategies to change problem behaviors, and developing an individual behavior plan that helps the student monitor his or her behavior around others (Cooper et al., 2007). In studies that focus on these different behavioral interventions, researchers discovered that students benefit from these approaches when these strategies are implemented and maintained in a consistent manner, and student input and collaboration is utilized (Reinke et al., 2013).

The majority of the classroom approaches for students with Emotional Disturbance emphasize that a positive student-teacher relationship is needed in order for this student population to succeed (Whitlow, 2015). Other approaches in the classroom include peer support, self-monitoring, and academic engagement. By working in pairs and getting support from a peer, students with Emotional Disturbance have the opportunity to increase their socialization skills as well as their friendships with others in the classroom (Kaya et al., 2015). When students have the opportunity to self-monitor their behavior in the classroom, they become more aware of what may have caused them to react negatively toward others, and help them come up with more constructive strategies to deal with their concerns (Joseph & Eveleigh, 2011). These students have more success being focused and engaged in their work when they have the opportunity to ask questions and problem solve about areas that are unfamiliar to them, receive



modeling and support from classroom staff, and work on hands-on activities in which they have the opportunity to move around more (Maab & Artigue, 2013).

Counseling approaches that are effective with students with Emotional Disturbance in the school setting include the following: social skills programs, technology programs, art therapy, drama therapy, equine Assisted therapy, relational-cultural therapy, and group therapy. Researchers found that counseling approaches that focus on helping students increase their social skills and relationships with others help these students interact more in their classrooms, increase their friendships with others, and increase more positive school experiences (Hicks, 2012; Tucker et al., 2011; Van de berg, 2013; Wu et al., 2010).

Past research also documents that students will express more about themselves through other means than verbal discussions, and like the sessions to offer an object or activity that can act like a buffer for their feelings. This includes using art, technology, dramatization of fictional work, interactions with horses, and working in groups to express how they feel about themselves, their interactions with others, and their overall school experiences (Moon, 2010; Posas, 2013; Singer-Califano, 2008).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Based on the literature review conducted from the past 15 years, students with Emotional Disturbance have the opportunity to improve their classroom behaviors and to increase their positive interactions with others through the use of a variety of therapeutic approaches. Three of these approaches are relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy. In the past research literature on interventions with middle school students with Emotional Disturbance, art therapy, relational-cultural therapy, and group therapy incorporate strategies and techniques that could help students improve their school

behaviors and relationship-building skills (Carlton, 2014; Comstock et al., 2008; Moon, 2010). Relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy form the conceptual framework for this study.

**Relational-Cultural therapy.** This study emphasizes the concepts of relational-cultural therapy introduced by Jordan (2000), Comstock et al. (2008), and Tucker et al. (2011). Jordan (2000) emphasizes concepts of relational-cultural therapy that can help students to build positive relationships with others. First, Jordan (2000) believes that individuals have the opportunity to mature when they focus on their connection to and empathy for others rather than a focus on themselves. Additionally, when individuals are encouraged to and are genuine in their interactions with others, they are able to successfully build relationships. Finally, when a person is able to handle complex relationships with others in an easy way, this demonstrates growth and progress.

In their research with middle school students, Tucker et al. (2011) introduced concepts and themes that were incorporated into this study and helped students build positive relationships with others. Tucker et al. (2011) introduced the following concepts: self-acceptance, mental images of relationships, providing information about the concept of power, disconnections with others, and improving positive interactions.

In addition to the concepts of relational-cultural therapy introduced by Jordan (2000) and Tucker et al. (2011), Comstock et al. (2008) introduced concepts that aided the student in learning to understand interactions with others and start to build more positive relationships. The first concept was connections and disconnections. Connections and disconnections refers to understanding that relationships with others go through different phases of being connected and disconnected from others (Comstock et

al., 2008). When individuals feel disconnected from others, they may feel shame and disbelief in their ability to interact positively with others. The disconnection to others could lead to the next term introduced by Comstock et al. (2008), which is the central relational paradox.

The central relational paradox occurs when individuals who have negative disconnections with others in the past choose to remain isolated from others rather than feel vulnerable in an attempt to connect with others (Comstock et al., 2008). Relational-cultural therapists emphasize their clients' awareness of the central relational paradox as well as the patterns and trends in relationships in order to increase their mental growth and progress. In addition to the central relational paradox, relational-cultural therapy also utilizes the terms relational and controlling images.

Relational images are the negative expectations individuals have of relating to individuals that are new to them. These relational images are considered a challenge to change during the therapy process (Comstock et al., 2008). Controlling images include the preconceived notions about what a person will be like and whether or not they will be accepted based on the individual's racial, cultural, and ethnic background (Comstock et al., 2008). Finally Comstock et al. (2008) emphasizes the incorporation of creative activities.

Creative activities help to promote further expression of thoughts and concerns. These include psychodrama, music, art, and writing (Sassen et al., 2005; Vogel, 2005, 2006). Art therapy may provide this creative expression and is also included in this study's conceptual framework.

**Art therapy.** Art therapy is utilized according to the practices and concepts introduced by Dunn-Snow (2015), Liebmann (2004), and Lachance (2002). Their approaches emphasize both positive classroom behavior and positive relationships with others. Dunn-Snow describes the art therapy session as one in which the individual has the opportunity to create artwork with encouragement and support from his or her therapist. In addition to creating the artwork, the individual is encouraged to describe what he or she has created and how that relates to a current concern in his or her life (Dunn-Snow, 2015). Art therapy may take place in a one-to-one or group format. For this study, the use of group art therapy characteristics were utilized, as emphasized by Liebmann (2004).

Liebmann (2004) describes what is called a theme-based group and is utilized in this study. The theme-based art therapy group meets for a specific period of time and focuses on one or two themes, such as depression or bereavement. This type of art therapy group is structured in the following manner: introduction, group discussion of theme, artwork created related to the theme, and discussion of the artwork created (Liebmann, 2004). The themes that are incorporated into this current study included creating a safe environment, taking turns speaking and listening, taking a break when becoming frustrated or angry, accepting one's strengths and weaknesses, creating visual images of relationships, power in relationships, understanding what disconnections were like with others, and improving positive interactions. Students included in this study had the opportunity to focus on these areas through verbal discussion, the art process, and the discussion about the artwork created.

The art therapy approaches utilized in this study included those strategies introduced by Lachance (2002), and focused on relationship-building and promoting positive classroom behaviors. Lachance encourages students to create artwork and when completed give positive feedback to other members of the group. By having the opportunity to give encouragement to other members of the group, the students may improve their positive interactions with others and display improved classroom behavior (Lachance, 2002).

**Group therapy.** The research literature that focuses on relational-cultural therapy and art therapy with students with Emotional Disturbance also emphasizes work with students in groups. In group therapy, individuals meet as a group with guidance and support from a therapist. The group therapy theory and concepts of Yalom (1985), Waxmonsky et al. (2012), Hicks (2012), and Kastner and May (2009) were utilized in this study. Yalom (1985) identifies several therapeutic elements that are important to incorporate into the group therapy process and may help students to develop more positive relationships with others. These include the following: instillation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, recapitulation of the primary family group, development of social behavior, imitative or modeling practices, interpersonal learning, group cohesion, and catharsis of feelings and concerns (Yalom, 1985). The instillation of hope includes helping the individual return weekly to the group therapy process as well as believe in its effectiveness. Moon (2010) notes that this includes the group leader expressing to the group members that he or she has hope in them, as well as the group members expressing hope and belief in the group leader and the process.

Universality is defined as the individual's experience that they are not alone in how he or she feels, but that others have similar thoughts and concerns (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2012; Yalom, 1985). Imparting of information is using the group format to educate group members about a specific diagnosis, intervention, strategy, or coping mechanism in an effort to continue change and growth beyond the group sessions.

Altruism includes giving to others in the group and as a result having the opportunity to gain a sense of purpose and self-value (Yalom, 1985). Groups also provide the opportunity to learn and practice social skills with the other members of the group, as well as provide opportunities to model prosocial behavior of the therapist (Yalom, 1985).

Group members also have the opportunity to focus on gaining positive interpersonal relationships in the group, as well as group cohesiveness. Group cohesiveness focuses the individuals in the group working together in a positive manner. With group cohesion, group members have the opportunity to create a safe atmosphere in which individuals can release or experience a catharsis of thoughts and concerns, and be given positive recognition for their efforts (Yalom, 1985).

In addition to the concepts and terms that are emphasized by Yalom (1985), Waxmonsky et al. (2012), Hicks (2012), and Kastner and May (2009) present group therapy strategies and interventions with middle students with Emotional Disturbance that are utilized as a part of this study. Kastner and May use role-playing as a main component in working with students in a group. These authors note that when middle school students have the opportunity to role-play, they can more actively learn about interacting with and handling different scenarios that can occur in school. I incorporated role-playing activities into the

Group Art Therapy program to help the student participants practice how to handle themselves more positively in the classroom and in their social interactions with others (Appendix A, Conceptual Framework Diagram).

**Summary.** Relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy are utilized for this study's conceptual framework. These three different theories of therapy utilize strategies and interventions that could help middle school students improve their classroom behavior and interactions with others. I utilized relational-cultural therapy concepts introduced by Tucker et al. (2011) in the Group Art Therapy program for the student-participants in this study. Tucker et al. included the following themes that I incorporated into the Group Art Therapy program: self-acceptance, mental images of relationships, providing information about the concept of power, disconnections with others, and improving positive interactions. In addition to relational-cultural therapy concepts, art therapy strategies introduced by Liebmann (2004) and Lachance (2002) were utilized in the group art therapy program.

Liebmann (2004) describes what is called a theme-based art therapy group and a format that I chose for the Group Art Therapy program. The theme-based art therapy group met for a specific period of time and focused on classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. This type of art therapy group was structured in the following order: introduction, group discussion of theme, artwork created related to the theme, and discussion of the artwork created (Liebmann, 2004). The weekly themes that I used were creating a safe environment, taking turns speaking and listening, taking a break when becoming frustrated or angry, accepting one's strengths and weaknesses, creating visual images of relationships, power in relationships, what are disconnections like with others,

and improving positive interactions. The Group Art Therapy program utilized the structure introduced by Lachance (2002); the students were encouraged to give each other positive feedback about the artwork that was produced. This strategy could further enhance the participants' interactions with one another. In addition to the relational-cultural and art therapy strategies that were utilized in this study, group therapy concepts and strategies introduced by Kastner and May (2009) were used.

Kastner and May (2009) use role-playing as a main component in working with students in a group. These authors note that when middle school students have the opportunity to role-play, they more actively learn about interacting with and handling different scenarios that occur in school. I incorporated role-playing activities into the Group Art Therapy program to help the student participants practice how to handle themselves more positively in the classroom and in their social interactions with others.



## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

Special education students that are classified with Emotional Disturbance have difficulty experiencing success in the school setting, which include their academic, behavioral, and social experiences (Evans et al., 2012). A review of the research literature indicates that a majority of school employees that work with this student population utilize behavioral strategies that incorporate different techniques such as rewards, privileges, and consequences for negative behavior (Crow & Small, 2011; Theisinger, 2014). Researchers note that a reliance on behavioral approaches solely have several disadvantages and are ineffective in helping these students make positive changes and progress.

The disadvantages include a lower self-esteem and a tendency to change behavior temporarily in order to receive a reward, rather than making permanent changes in how students related to others (Theisinger, 2014) More recent research, as well as my own observations in my workplace, indicate that these students improve their academic, emotional, and social development when they have the opportunity to build connections and relationships with others.

Therapeutic approaches that focus on building positive relationships with others were reviewed in the research literature and were included in this study's conceptual framework (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Tucker et al., 2011). These approaches include relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy. Studies that utilize these different approaches showed improvements in students' relationships with others, and classroom behaviors (Hicks, 2012; Sunjin, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy on middle school students classified with Emotional Disturbance. In the setting for this research, middle school students with Emotional Disturbance had difficulty making improvements in their emotional and social development with the use of behavioral interventions. Staff members in this setting asked that other therapeutic programs be offered to students as a complement to the behavioral approaches utilized. This mixed methods action research study focused on the impact of a Group Art Therapy program that emphasized relational-cultural therapy approaches had on the students' relationships and classroom behavior (Ivankova, 2015). Through this research study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent did participation in the Group Art Therapy program impact Emotionally Disturbed students' positive relationships with others?
2. Which components of the Group Art Therapy program addressed the behavioral characteristics of students with Emotional Disturbance?
3. What was the impact of relationship-building skills on the classroom behavior of students with Emotional Disturbance?
4. How did my servant leadership style, which included helping others reach their full potential, nonjudgmental acceptance of others, and self-reflection, impact the development and delivery of a group art therapy program?

### **Research Design and Strategies of Inquiry**

Mixed methods action research (MMAR) utilizes characteristics of both mixed methods and action research. Mixed methods research integrates both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments and mixes the data gathered in order to explore a

research area more completely, and with more credibility (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). By using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, mixed methods research utilizes the best of both approaches and neutralizes each of their shortcomings (Ivankova, 2015; Maxwell, 2013).

Action research emphasizes utilizing a cyclical strategy that addresses a problem or concern, assesses if improvements are needed, and experiments with new approaches or interventions to address the problem (Ivankova, 2015). Action research is a research model that cannot be planned out ahead of time, but evolves as the research process develops (Ivankova, 2015).

MMAR has been defined as the use of mixed methods approaches within the cycles of action research. MMAR studies utilize the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches within the action research process to help researchers develop practical approaches for improvements needed for different community and educational settings (Ivankova, 2015). This study emphasizes a mixed methods methodological framework for action research that was described by Ivankova (2015).

The MMAR framework included six different cycles of research. These cycles were diagnosing, reconnaissance, planning, acting, evaluation, and monitoring (Ivankova, 2015). In the diagnosing cycle, a problem was stated, a rationale for using a mixed methods approach was given, and a review of the research literature was conducted. In the reconnaissance cycle, mixed methods data collection and analysis were conducted about the research problem. In the planning cycle, mixed methods approaches were used to develop the action or intervention plan. In the acting cycle, the action plan was implemented and was informed by mixed methods approaches. In the evaluation cycle,

mixed methods data collection, analysis, and interpretation were given about the action plan that had been implemented. In the monitoring cycle, mixed methods approaches were used to continue to implement the program and make revisions as needed (Ivankova, 2015).

In this study, an MMAR approach was utilized to continue to improve therapeutic approaches for middle school students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. By focusing on mixed methods approaches, I gathered the most comprehensive information about the student participants in this study within the cycles of action research to continually revise and provide improvements for the emotionally disturbed student population (Aylward, Murphy, Colmer, & O'Neill, 2010; Plant, 2014). Utilizing an action research study design also provided me with the opportunity to participate as well as reflect on the research being conducted. I worked in the setting of the study and this research gave me the opportunity to learn and put into practice changes to help Emotionally Disturbed students be more successful (Plant, 2014).

There are several different types of MMAR designs. In this study, I used a concurrent quantitative and qualitative mixed methods action research study design. In this type of MMAR research design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time, but separately from one another, and within the different cycles of the action research structure. Then the information was mixed to note if there were themes in the data collected, and if each type of data collected provided information needed to more thoroughly address the research questions of the study (Ivankova, 2015).

### **Worldview**

In addition to research design and methods, my worldview also impacted the approach to research that was utilized for this study (Ivankova, 2015). I adopted a

pragmatic worldview; I utilized a variety of data collection instruments available to me in order to understand and improve how I worked with students classified with Emotional Disturbance (Ivankova, 2015; Patton, 1990). The pragmatic worldview utilizes a mixed methods approach to engage in the research process (Morgan, 2010). As a pragmatist, I did not see my research defined by one point of view or method. Instead I relied on many different approaches in gathering data and answering research questions (Ivankova, 2015). My pragmatic worldview was also influenced by my work as an individual practitioner with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties and the importance of forming a positive relationship in the therapeutic process (Ivankova, 2015).

Throughout the past 16 years in my work as a school psychologist and art therapist, I had the opportunity to work with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties in a variety of different public and private school settings. I noticed that behavior intervention plans had not always been effective as the sole means in helping students classified as Emotionally Disturbed improve their emotional and social development.

In contrast, I found that students with emotional and behavioral difficulties showed improvements in their behavior and how they related to others when others took an interest in them and took the time to interact with them. This was especially true in my current workplace setting, which was the research site for this study. I observed students who had Behavior Intervention Plans make more of an effort to change negative classroom behaviors and interact more appropriately with others when staff members took the time to get to know them and speak with them about things that interested them (Glass, 2014; 2015). This included providing students with the opportunity to express

themselves in ways that they felt comfortable, such as through art or music if verbal expression was more difficult for them (Hicks, 2012).

Relational-cultural therapy focuses on an individual demonstrating emotional and behavioral growth through positive interactions with others (Tucker et al., 2011). I believed that students had the opportunity to build more positive relationships with others if they were part of a group therapy format and were given non-verbal tools such as art to help them to express themselves to and interact more appropriately with others (Sunjin, 2014). I assumed that when students were given the opportunity to build relationships with others, the supportive community of a group, and with different means to express themselves, that they would show progress in their emotional and social growth.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in a small, suburban, and private Kindergarten through eighth grade alternative school setting for special education students that had been classified with Emotional Disturbance. This school focuses on students with emotional and behavioral difficulties that have not been able to control their behavior in the public school setting. The goal of this school is to help children with emotional difficulties learn how to express their emotions in a positive manner and improve their classroom behavior. Before this school took over the building 10 years ago, the school building originally housed a private Christian school for typically developing children.

Forty-two students attended this school at the time of the study and were involved in the following activities on a weekly basis: grade level activities and assignments, gym and art classes, a school-wide behavior modification program, individual counseling, and group counseling. School staff members included the following individuals: five

classroom teachers, one physical education teacher, five classroom aides, five one-to-one therapeutic aides, four social workers, five social work interns, one school psychologist, one art therapy intern, one dance/movement therapy intern, one school nurse, and one school principal.

### **Participants**

This study was limited to students with Emotional Disturbance that were in the middle school grades. Literature research documented that this portion of the Emotionally Disturbed student population has experienced difficulty responding to behavioral interventions as the sole treatment strategy for them and could benefit from the program developed from this study (Brown & Payne, 1977; Corder, 1999; Roache & Lewis, 2011). School staff members at the research site expressed to me that behavioral strategies such as sticker charts and points for the school store had been successful for younger students, but had not helped middle school students make positive changes.

Due to the specific focus on middle school students with Emotional Disturbance for this study, I used a purposeful, homogeneous sampling, as well as a parallel mixed methods sampling. Purposeful sampling involved utilizing specific subjects that could best answer the research questions of the study (Ivankova, 2015). Homogeneous sampling included subjects that were similar in background; in this study, all of the subjects chosen were in middle school grades and had been classified as Emotionally Disturbed. Parallel mixed methods sampling is defined as using the same participants in both the quantitative and qualitative portions of a study. Additionally, parallel mixed methods sampling is used in an effort to provide the most in-depth information about the

students and the program initiated as a part of this study (Ivankova, 2015; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The parents of the middle school students who attend school at the research setting had the opportunity to participate in meetings in which the researcher gave a presentation about the research as well as consent forms for the students to participate. Additional consent forms were sent to parents who did not attend the school meetings. Participants were chosen based on the consent forms that were returned to the researcher. Five students were included in the art therapy group. When working with Emotionally Disturbed children in groups, these students have had more success focusing on therapy and counseling goals in groups that were not more than five children (Liebmann, 2010).

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were utilized within the cycles of this MMAR study. By using both types of data collection measures, I gathered more detailed and comprehensive information about the Emotionally Disturbed student population as well as answers to this study's research questions. Quantitative data collection instruments can produce results that are generalizable, objective, and could be applied to a variety of different educational settings (Creswell, 2014). Two surveys were the quantitative measures that were utilized in this study and included the Piers-Harris Self Concept Scale, second edition (Piers-Harris 2), and the Student Behavior Survey (SBS).

#### **Quantitative measures.**

*The Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale, second edition (Piers-Harris 2).* The Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale was originally developed in the 1960s. This test was developed to provide a self-report measure to assess self-concept in children and



adolescents (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Piers and Herzberg (2002) define self-concept as the perception of one's own behavior as well as personal attributes. The most current version of this assessment measure at the time of this study was the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Piers-Harris 2).

The Piers-Harris 2 includes 60 items under the title of *The Way I Feel About Myself*. The Piers-Harris 2 is intended for students to complete that are between the ages of 7 to 18. The 60 items that are included in this measure are statements that express how people feel and perceive themselves (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). After the student reads each statement, he is asked to circle "yes" if the statement applies to him and "no" if the item does not pertain to him. The Piers-Harris 2 takes about 10 to 15 minutes for students to complete. The Piers-Harris 2 also contains self-concept domains and validity considerations that were included for data analysis and interpretation.

*Self-concept domains.* The six different domains that are used to assess self-concept on the Piers-Harris 2 are Behavioral Adjustment, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes, Freedom from Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction. The Behavioral Adjustment domain includes 14 items, and assesses the student's perception or lack of perception about his or her problem behaviors (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Piers and Herzberg (2002) report that this domain covers a range of specific behaviors such as the tendency to get into fights, as well as general statements about behavior around others.

The physical appearance and attributes domain includes 11 items that assess the student's perception of his or her physical appearance, leadership qualities, and communication with others (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Piers and Herzberg (2002) note

that the Freedom from Anxiety domain includes 14 items that focus on sadness, worry, nervousness, shyness around others, fear, and isolation from others. The Popularity domain contains 12 items that focus on the student's perception of his or her popularity, being included with others, and making friendships with others (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). The Happiness and Satisfaction Domain includes 10 items that assess a student's perception of his or her happiness and satisfaction. The items included in this domain are more general questions in nature (Piers & Herzberg, 2002).

*Validity considerations.* Four different validity considerations have been named when analyzing the student responses given from this measure. These considerations are exaggeration, response bias, random responding, and moderator variables. Piers and Herzberg (2002) report that the child participant may exaggerate or distort his or her answer purposely to create a false impression of him or herself. Students may have purposely tried to come across as more positive than they were or more negative than they were in their everyday lives. The authors of the Piers-Harris 2 note that it is common for children to want to create a different image of themselves through their responses, but without malicious intent; they can become confused between how they view themselves and how they think others view them (Piers & Herzberg, 2002).

When student participants use response bias, they are answering yes or no to items randomly and do not consider the content in each test statement (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Some participants may have a tendency to say yes to all test items, while other individuals may answer no to all test items. Student participants may also have a tendency to use random responding with test items. In random responding, students pick responses that are not consistent or logical (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). For example,

students may answer yes to items that are opposite to one another, such as answering that they are smart, but later in the assessment, answering that they are not smart.

The moderator variables include variables that affect the outcome of the test that are separate from what the test is intended to measure (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Piers and Herzberg (2002) name several examples, which include gender, sex, and ethnicity. These areas can impact the responses on this assessment independently of the design of the Piers-Harris 2.

*Standardization of the Piers-Harris 2.* In addition to the self-concept and validity scales, the Piers-Harris 2 also includes nationally normative data, which is based on a sample of 1,387 students. These students are recruited from different school districts across the United States (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Piers and Herzberg (2002) report that the Piers-Harris 2 is appropriate in a variety of research, clinical, and educational settings that focus on the student's self-concept. According to research conducted over the past 50 years, the Piers-Harris 2 has been included in studies that have focused on educational and psychological interventions, the relationship between self-concept and concerns, and the changes in self-concept over a specific period of time (Piers & Herzberg, 2002).

*Cautionary notes.* The Piers-Harris 2 also comes with some cautionary notes when using a self-report format. There may be more of a tendency for response bias to occur in which students choose what they think is a more socially desirable answer instead of a genuine response to test items (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Therefore, the authors of this assessment tool recommend encouraging participants to answer items as honestly as they can. Piers and Herzberg (2002) also advise that this measure is used best in conjunction with other research assessments before making clinical assessments of

student participants. Using this measure solely without incorporating tools such as student interviews, drawing projects, and student observations would not provide the most complete picture of the student's academic and emotional functioning.

The Piers-Harris 2 was administered to the student participants before and after their participation in the group art therapy program to measure if there were any differences seen in classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. Although the Piers-Harris 2 could be administered in 10 to 15 minutes, each participant had the option to complete this assessment tool in more than one session. Students with Emotional Disturbance have a tendency to be more successful with tasks presented to them in smaller segments (Crow & Small, 2011). By providing the option to complete this assessment in more than one session, possible frustration and lowered concentration on test items could be decreased.

***Student Behavior Survey.*** The Student Behavior Survey is an assessment measure for students in grades Kindergarten through twelfth grade that focuses on behavior and classroom performance in order to determine the level and severity of emotional and behavioral problems in school. Educators are asked to complete this scale and use their ratings of individual student behavior and classroom performance in comparison to same-aged peers in the regular education classroom (Lachar, Wingenfeld, Kline, & Gruber, 2000).

The School Behavior Survey contains 102 items that include descriptions of classroom behavior and performance. Individuals who complete this measure mark one of the rating options that is provided for each question on this assessment (Lachar et al., 2000). This measure also includes the following areas: academic performance, academic

habits, social skills, parent participation, health concerns, emotional challenges, unusual behavior, social difficulties, verbal, physical, and behavior problems, and aggression.

*Sections of the School Behavior Survey.* The School Behavior Survey (SBS) is organized into three different sections, which include academic resources, adjustment problems, and disruptive behavior. Four scales are included under the category of academic resources. These four scales include the teacher's rating of the student's academic performance, to what degree do academic habits, social skills, and parent participation support positive academic performance, and the student's potential strengths (Lachar et al., 2000).

The adjustment problem section of the SBS focuses on a student's potential problems. Seven different scales are included in this section of the SBS, and focus on unusual behavior, health concerns, emotional distress, verbal aggression, physical aggression, social problems, and behavior problems (Lachar et al., 2000). The third section of the SBS focuses on disruptive behavior. The disruptive behavior section focuses on the DSM-IV categories of Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The SBS cannot be the only measure for the diagnosis of a student with one of these disorders, but can be used in conjunction with other measures to reach a particular diagnosis (Lachar et al., 2000).

*Standardization of the School Behavior Survey.* The SBS was developed over a six-year-period. This instrument was administered to over 4,500 responders. The SBS was standardized in schools throughout the United States, which included students from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to provide a representative sample of the U.S. population at the time (Lachar et al., 2000). In addition to the research needed in

the development of the SBS, a separate sample was utilized to study the data collected on students with documented emotional and behavioral difficulties. Forty-one different educational and clinical facilities participated in creating this sample, and the responders provided information that helped professionals assess the impact of emotional and behavioral difficulties on students' school experiences (Lachar et al., 2000).

I noted differences in scores for classroom behavior and interactions with others by using this measure before and after treatment in the Group Art Therapy program. According to Lachar et al. (2000), the SBS is well organized, easy to use, and has a well-organized manual for administration.

**Qualitative measures.** Qualitative data collection measures focus on gathering detailed information from specific subjects about their experiences and perspectives (Maxwell, 2013). The information gathered is individualized, detailed, and rich in description (Ivankova, 2015). The qualitative measures that were included in this study were student observations, student artwork, and student records. I used those measures to record student classroom behavior and how students interacted with peers and adults.

**Student observations.** According to Maxwell (2013), student observations can help to describe how the student-participants think of themselves and how they relate to others. Observations can also help the researcher determine if the participants' beliefs that they state to others match up with their behavior (Maxwell, 2013). According to Ivankova (2015), observations utilize field notes that include descriptions of what the researcher sees as well as self-reflection of what was seen. I utilized student observations before, during, and after the group art therapy program to record if there were any differences in the student-participants' behavior in the classroom and how they related to

others. I created a student observation protocol that recorded classroom behavior and student relationships with others (see Appendix A). The student observation protocol was piloted several times before use in the study to note strengths, weaknesses, and areas that needed to be revised (Noltemeyer, Boone, & Sansosti, 2014; Spillane & Zuberi, 2009).

*Art therapy assessments.* Student participants were administered two different art therapy assessment measures before and after they participated in the group art therapy program. Art therapy assessments provided students with the opportunity to express themselves non-verbally, especially when they had a difficult time expressing their feelings and ideas in words (Safran, 2002). For this study, two art therapy assessments were chosen that focused on relationship-building and classroom behavior. These assessments were the Life Space Picture, and the Kinetic School Drawing. When the art therapy assessments were completed by the students, four outside art therapy raters analyzed the artwork created (Chilton, Gerber, Council, & Dreyer, 2015).

*Life space picture.* For the life space picture, the student was asked to draw on a piece of paper the people, places, and activities that were the most important to him or her at that time (Rubin, 2005). This drawing assessed relationships with others, and provided another language for expression of current issues (Bagnoli, 2009).

*Kinetic school drawing.* For the Kinetic School Drawing, the student was instructed to draw himself and someone else doing something together at school. This drawing task assessed relationships with others in school, school behavior, as well as self-concept in the school setting (Rubin, 2005).

***Group art therapy program artwork.*** The student-participants were encouraged to work on drawings, paintings, sculptures, and magazine collages to help them focus on relationship-building skills, and positive classroom behaviors. The participants created artwork twice a week in the group for eight weeks. The artwork created from these sessions was studied and analyzed to assess if there were changes seen visually in the students' perceptions of relationships with others and classroom behaviors. This was noted by analyzing the following elements present in the artwork produced: line, color, subject matter, and verbal explanations given about the artwork created (Rubin, 2005). Outside raters analyzed the artwork created to provide an unbiased and objective perspective on what the students created (Karkou, 2010).

***Student discipline records.*** This school setting used the computer program Real Time that gave information about each student, including discipline records for each school year. The discipline record included disruptive behavior incidents and the follow-up consequences for the student. According to Ivankova (2015), the information included in the records is unbiased and gives facts that are separate from the researcher's view of what will occur in the study. These records were reviewed before and after the group art therapy program to note any changes in student behavior and discipline issues after the art therapy program was implemented.

### **Mixed Methods Action Research Cycles**

**Cycle 1: Diagnosing challenges and treatment.** In the diagnosing cycle in this study, research literature was reviewed about students with Emotional Disturbance, Relational-Cultural Therapy, Art Therapy, and Group Therapy. I used the literature review to more fully understand the characteristics and programming for students with



Emotional Disturbance that could effectively help them to improve their classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. The information gathered from the research literature was used to develop the structure, themes, strategies, and approaches for the group art therapy program that were implemented in the acting cycle of this MMAR study.

**Cycle 2: Reconnaissance of student behavior and relationships.** In the reconnaissance cycle in this study, the following data collection measures were utilized: the Piers-Harris 2, School Behavior Survey, classroom observations and field notes, life space picture, kinetic school drawing, and student discipline records. These measures were administered and analyzed to provide a baseline for student-participant classroom behaviors and relationship-building skills.

**Cycle 3: Planning the Group Art Therapy program.** I took the information I gathered from the diagnosing cycle and the student baseline participant data from the reconnaissance cycle (Cycle 2) to develop the Group Art Therapy program for the acting cycle of this study (Ivankova, 2015). The group art therapy program took place over eight weeks, with two sessions per week. The group art therapy program included a theme-based group each week that focused on classroom behavior and building relationships with others (Liebmann, 2004). Each session was 45 minutes in length and included the following parts: transition to room/introduction activity, group discussion about the main topic for the session, the art therapy task, a group discussion about the art therapy task, and closure/transition out of the room activity. The art activities and group discussions focused on providing a safe environment for the participants to express themselves

(Rubin, 2005), to build positive relationships with peers and adults, and to take what was learned about relationships into the classroom setting to improve behavior.

**Cycle 4: Implementing the Group Art Therapy program.** The group art therapy program that was developed in the planning cycle of the study (Cycle 3) was implemented with the students who were the participants in the study. I used student observations and artwork created in the group program to assess the participants' reactions to the group art therapy program and what they were learning about classroom behavior and relationships with others.

**Cycle 5: Evaluating the Group Art Therapy program.** In the evaluation cycle of this study, the following measures were used from the fourth cycle of the study: group art therapy program observations, student artwork, and my self-reflection journal. Additionally, several measures were used in the fifth cycle of the study and included: the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale, the School Behavior Survey, Life Space Picture, Kinetic School Drawing, and student discipline records. The data received from these measures were compared before and after the group art therapy program was implemented to note if there were any changes in students' classroom behavior and relationships with others.

**Cycle 6: Monitoring the Group Art Therapy program.** In the monitoring cycle of this study, future planning for the group art therapy program was developed with data collected from the fourth and fifth cycles of the study.

## **Data Analysis**

**Quantitative measures.** Once the data collected from the Piers-Harris 2 and School Behavior Survey were inspected and reviewed, a codebook was created for each measure that included values for each item that was included on each scale. The individual scores were analyzed and compared among the five student participants.

**Qualitative measures.** The field notes derived from the student observations, art therapy assessments, group artwork, and discipline records were organized and prepared for analysis, which included reading through and reviewing the data several times, writing memos that reflect on the data collected, and adding the analysis of the qualitative measures into a codebook based on themes and categories derived from all the qualitative data collected (Ivankova, 2015; Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). According to Ivankova (2015) and Teddlie and Tashakorri (2009), the qualitative data were organized based on the constant comparative method in which the data from each collection measure were studied one at a time before a new category or theme was created. The different themes and categories that emerged were continuously compared until the data were saturated and there was the absence of any additional areas that could be created (Ivankova, 2015).

**Mixed methods data analysis.** After the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study were analyzed separately, combined mixed methods data analysis was utilized. This included comparing the two data groups (Ivankova, 2015; Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). Interpretive consistency was also used to measure whether or not the themes and categories were derived from both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study (Ivankova, 2015).

## **Validity Measures**

**Content validity.** A content validity assessment of the Piers-Harris 2 and SBS included examining these instruments to note if these measures focused on assessing students' relationships with others and their classroom behavior (Ivankova, 2015).

**Construct validity.** In a similar matter to content validity, construct validity was utilized and included factor analysis, in which each question on the Piers-Harris 2 and School Behavior Survey was analyzed individually to determine if there was a focus on relationships with others and classroom behavior (Ivankova, 2015).

## **Reliability Measures**

**Credibility.** I needed to assess if the results received from the qualitative data were believable and represented an accurate picture of the Emotionally Disturbed student population (Ivankova, 2015). I made my credibility assessment by triangulating the data from both the qualitative and quantitative measures utilized in the study (Ivankova, 2015).

**Transferability.** Transferability was measured to determine if the results obtained from this study could be used to improve programming for students with Emotional Disturbance in other educational settings (Ivankova, 2015). Detailed and rich descriptions of the data results aided in determining transferability. In the case of this research study, the descriptive data obtained from the qualitative measures were analyzed to determine if this information could help other practitioners in similar school settings understand and work with the Emotionally Disturbed student population.

**Dependability.** Dependability of the qualitative measures was also analyzed in this current study. According to Ivankova (2015), this included if the study findings were consistent and could be repeated in future cycles. The following strategies aided in

increasing dependability in this study: triangulation of data and creating and documenting a research design map that included the procedures used to conduct, analyze, and interpret the data (Ivankova, 2015).

**Confirmability.** Confirmability was also analyzed to determine whether or not the results of the study were impacted by my biases or assumptions of the student population. To determine if the data results were objective and impartial, I employed the following strategies: triangulation of the data collected and utilizing a research journal throughout the entire research process (Ivankova, 2015). In the research journal, themes that were present in the data were written about and compared with my perspectives and beliefs about the study (Ivankova, 2015).

### **Inference Considerations**

Teddlie and Tashakorri (2009) describe a framework that includes 10 concepts that focus on inferential relationships in mixed methods studies. This current study included 4 of the 10 concepts: design suitability, theoretical consistency, interpretive agreement, and integrative efficacy.

**Design suitability.** This concept measured whether or not the methods I have chosen answer the research questions that are the focus of this study (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). With the focus on students' classroom behavior and relationships with others with the implementation of a group art therapy program, the rating scales, classroom observations, art therapy assessments, group artwork, and discipline records provided a more thorough look at the impact of the program as well as the incorporation of multiple perspectives (Ivankova, 2015). The research questions were addressed by

both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study, and were addressed through a mixed methods action research study.

**Theoretical consistency.** I continually referred back to relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy to note if data analysis and results were consistent with those theories (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009).

**Interpretive agreement.** I reviewed past research literature that focused on a similar population and research design to help determine if other scholars would reach the same conclusions as this study (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009).

**Integrative efficacy.** I took the time to explore the inconsistencies that resulted from this study and backed up these types of findings with the theoretical framework (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009).

### **Quality Considerations**

Ivankova (2015) notes that MMAR studies cannot rely solely on validity and trustworthiness measures introduced in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies because the characteristics included in action research are unique to that type of study. Additionally, Ivankova (2015) reports on the rigor that is needed in action research to assess the quality of each study. Four different types of validity measures were used and included a review of rigor. These were democratic validity, outcome validity, process validity, and catalytic validity.

**Democratic validity.** This focused on results that were important to the school setting in which the research took place. Included were the use of multiple perspectives of staff and students, and how these were a focus of the research results and implementation of an improvement program for students (Ivankova, 2015).

**Outcome validity.** Outcome validity was utilized to note whether or not the action taken as a part of this research helped improve and resolve the main research questions (Ivankova, 2015). This included determining whether or not the implementation of the Group Art Therapy program improved the classroom behavior and relationship-building skills of students with Emotional Disturbance. The Group Art Therapy program could have resolved the issue of negative relationships for these students or could have necessitated revisions to the program to more successfully meet the student goals.

**Process validity.** Process validity analyzed whether or not the students' challenges with relationship building, and classroom behavior were structured in a way that the research and learning about the problem was ongoing and cyclical (Ivankova, 2015). I conducted the study in a cyclical format to promote this type of research structure as well as program improvement.

**Catalytic validity.** Catalytic validity included educating and encouraging others through the research process to make changes in how they addressed behavioral issues with students. This included presentations to staff and group discussions about the research as it was in process. Additionally, this included staff members' and students' feedback to help make further improvements to the art therapy program (Ivankova, 2015).

### **Research Limitations**

**Educational setting.** This study was conducted in an alternative educational setting for students with Emotional Disturbance. This setting differed from the public school setting in terms of schedule, classroom structure, and the amount and type of staff members. For example, the alternative school setting utilized classroom aides that can

work with students in a one-to-one format if they became upset, left the classroom, or needed to take a break in a quiet room. These staff members were also available during this study and provided support during the implementation of the Group Art Therapy program. This additional support could have been a factor in the students' responses to the art therapy program; in a public school setting, additional staff members may not have been employed and this may have altered how students behaved and responded to the group art therapy intervention.

**Students' outside influences.** Other factors may have influenced student responses that were recorded in this research and may not have been solely influenced by their participation in the group art therapy intervention. During the cycles of research, the student-participants may have had changes in their home environment, in school, or with their peers that impacted changes in their behavior and how they felt about themselves. For example, some of the students who attended school in the research setting had been in foster care in the past, but had the opportunity to be adopted or reunited with their biological parents. These changes in their home environment as well as interactions with adults could have impacted changes in students' self-concept or relationships with others (Tucker et al., 2011).

## **Rivals**

Rivals in a research study were the alternate explanations for the reasoning behind the results received in a study (Maxwell, 2013). Researchers have also considered that rivals could create a divergent theme or pattern that was not anticipated in the results of a study (Patton, 1990).



**Direct rival.** A direct rival that may have impacted changes in participants' relationships with others included the following: changes in individual behavior contracts, changes in classroom staff that were in the students' classrooms, student transition processes back to public educational setting, changes in peer relationships with others, and changes in relationships with parents or legal guardians.

**Implementation rival.** The implementation of the group art therapy program itself may have impacted student changes in self-concept and relationships with others. I noticed in the research setting for this study that students responded positively when staff members invited them to participate in new programs during their school day. This included receiving additional positive support and individual attention that I noticed they seemed to thrive on in this educational setting.

**Rival theory.** In a similar manner to an implementation rival, I observed in the research setting that students showed improvements in behavior and relationships with others when they had the opportunity to receive additional individual attention and non-judgmental acceptance. The Group Art Therapy program provided participants with an additional opportunity to receive support in their school day that differed from students that were not participants in the study. Although the theory and practice of relational-cultural therapy, which focuses on learning positive ways to relate to others (Tucker et al., 2011) was utilized as a part of the Group Art Therapy program, Client-Centered therapy, which focuses on positive support and unconditional acceptance could also promote changes in self-concept and relationships with others (Rogers, 1986).

## **Alternative Explanations**

**Mortality.** In this MMAR study, the students that were included in this study needed to have the classification of Emotional Disturbance. Although each of the students who attended the research setting had this type of special education classification, they may have differed in the intensity of the disruptive behaviors that they displayed in class, the level of positive characteristics in their self-concept, and their ability to initiate and maintain positive relationships with others. The differences in these areas may have impacted their response to the group art therapy intervention, including their ability to continue their participation in the study. In this situation, I limited the student-participants to those that were classified as Emotionally Disturbed, but had been observed to be able to participate fully in programs offered in this school setting, had shown success in working on their goals, and were prepared for a return to their home school district (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005).

**Pre-Research predictions.** I did not only conduct this study, but also worked as a school psychologist at the research site. This included observing and initiating activities for this student population in a variety of different settings and scenarios within the school. This could have impacted my ability to conduct the research impartially and not rely on past experiences or theories about this population. I utilized the following strategies to adjust this alternative explanation: kept a research journal that documented what was observed as well as personal reflection and reaction to the study being conducted (Ivankova, 2015; Krathwohl & Smith, 2005).

**Survey response sets.** The two quantitative surveys utilized in this study were the Piers-Harris 2 and the School Behavior Survey. These measures contain multiple-choice answers that the respondents chose from to complete the answer forms. Krathwohl and Smith (2005) and Ivankova (2015) describe the tendency for participants to answer items in a survey format based on what they thought I would like them to answer, instead of genuinely what their perspective was on a situation. I emphasized and reviewed the importance of each participant providing responses based on their own perspectives and experiences, rather than what they thought were my expectations (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005).

### **Ethical Considerations**

There were several strategies that were utilized to conduct an ethical study. First, I obtained IRB approval for the qualitative and quantitative portions of this MMAR study. This included protecting participants from physical, emotional, and mental harm. According to Ivankova (2015), this includes resubmitting IRB forms when revisions or changes have been made to the research design as this study went through the cycles of research. Second, approved consent forms were returned from the parents or guardians of the participants before the research began. Third, the specific procedures included in this study were discussed in detail with participants before the study began (Ivankova, 2015). This included letting participants know that their involvement in this study was on a voluntary basis, as well as that the information they shared during the study remained confidential and anonymous (Ivankova, 2015).

## Summary

Special education students that have been classified with Emotional Disturbance have had many challenges in the school setting, which include academic difficulties, difficulties handling social situations, as well as expressing how they feel effectively (Theisinger, 2014). Based on a review of the research conducted with this student population and the interventions to help them be more successful, behavior strategies had been emphasized with these students the most (Evans et al., 2012). A review of the research literature indicated that a majority of school employees that work with this student population utilized behavioral strategies that incorporated different techniques such as rewards, privileges, and consequences for negative behavior, but these approaches have not always helped students experience greater school success (Banks, 2006; Crow & Small, 2011). More recent research, as well as my own observations in my workplace, indicate that these students improve their academic, emotional, and social development when they have the opportunity to build connections and relationships with others. Therapeutic approaches that emphasize building relationships could help students improve their overall school experiences (Duffey & Somody, 2011).

Therapeutic approaches that were included in this study's conceptual framework and emphasized building positive relationships with others included relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy. Studies that utilized these different approaches showed improvements in students' relationships with others, and classroom behaviors (Hicks, 2012; Sunjin, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of Relational-Cultural Therapy, Art Therapy, and Group Therapy on middle school students classified with

Emotional Disturbance. This was addressed through a mixed methods action research study that sought to implement a Group Art Therapy program that emphasized relational-cultural therapy approaches to improve middle school students' school experiences, including positive relationships with others (Ivankova, 2015).

The mixed methods action research study utilized both qualitative and quantitative approaches within the cycles of the action research model. The mixed methods approach provided more complete and comprehensive results. The action research model provided me with the opportunity to continually improve interventions for students classified as Emotionally Disturbed. By focusing on mixed methods approaches, I gathered the most comprehensive information about the student participants in this study within the cycles of action research to continually revise and provide improvements for the Emotionally Disturbed student population. The action research model was utilized in this study with the goal of using the findings to continue to improve programming for middle school students with emotional and behavioral difficulties and the opportunity to reflect on my practices (Aylward et al., 2010; Plant, 2014).

The mixed methods action research (MMAR) framework included six cycles which were diagnosing, reconnaissance, planning, acting, evaluating, and monitoring (Ivankova, 2015). The specific MMAR model that was utilized in this study is the Concurrent Mixed Methods Action Research Study. In this type of MMAR research design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time, but separately from one another, and within the different action research cycles. At the end of each cycle, the data collected were mixed to note themes and possible answers to the research questions (Ivankova, 2015).

The student participants that were included in this study were middle school students that had been classified with Emotional Disturbance and were attending a private school setting, which was the site for this research study. Both quantitative and qualitative instruments were utilized with the student participants and school staff members. The quantitative instruments for this study were the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, second edition (Piers-Harris 2), and the School Behavior Survey (SBS). The qualitative instruments that were included were student observations, art therapy assessments, group artwork, and student discipline records.

Six action research cycles were included in this study. In the diagnosing cycle, a problem was stated, a rationale was asserted for using a mixed methods approach, and the research literature about Emotionally Disturbed students and effective strategies were reviewed. In the reconnaissance cycle, both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments were used to develop a student-participant baseline for classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. In the planning cycle, the information gathered from both the diagnosing and reconnaissance cycles was used to develop the group art therapy program. In the acting cycle, the group art therapy program was implemented and student observations and artwork analysis were conducted to measure participant reactions to the group art therapy program. In the evaluating cycle, quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments were used to note if any changes or improvements were observed in the participants' classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. In the monitoring cycle, the data collected and analyzed in the evaluation cycle were used to make changes and recommendations for future group art therapy sessions (Ivankova, 2015). Within each MMAR cycle, validity and reliability measures were utilized. After the cycles

included in this study were completed, inference and quality measures were also utilized for analysis and interpretation.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings for the First, Second, and Third Cycles**

Students that have been classified with Emotional Disturbance struggle with having positive experiences in school. Often they display negative behavior in the classroom that results in increased isolation from others, lowered academic performance, and increased suspensions from school (Crow & Small, 2011). Past research has documented that students show improvements in classroom behavior with the use of different behavior therapy techniques, especially strategies that include a reward for more positive behavior (Mooney et al., 2003). Hyman and Snook (2000) point out the negative effects of focusing solely on behavior therapy techniques; students may become over reliant on prizes to earn in the classroom and may not believe they can make positive changes without earning a reward from their teachers. The incorporation of other theories of therapy with behavior therapy may help students believe that they can make positive changes in their school experiences.

The purpose of this mixed methods action research study was to investigate the impact of alternative therapeutic approaches with the Emotionally Disturbed student population to help them experience more school successes, which included increased positive behavior and relationships with others. The participants who took part in this study were middle school students ( $n = 5$ ) attending a private school for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data collected from the students within the six cycles of this research study were used to explain their perceptions of their classroom behavior and their relationship-building skills. The students' school experiences were



explored in a qualitative manner using art therapy projects, observations of classroom and group therapy experiences, and school discipline records. After these measures were completed, qualitative analysis was used to identify themes that emerged from all the qualitative instruments.

At the same time, quantitative measures were administered including the Piers-Harris Self Concept Scale, second edition (Piers-Harris 2), and the School Behavior Survey (SBS). These measures were used to assess current classroom behavior and relationships with others. Then the Piers-Harris 2 and School Behavior Scale were analyzed to determine if social and emotional domains on these measures were statistically significant. The methods that were used in this study were described in more detail in Chapter III.

The six MMAR cycles that were included in this study focused on different aspects of working with students that are Emotionally Disturbed. The first cycle of this study focused on diagnosing the challenges and treatment of students classified with Emotional Disturbance. This was accomplished through observations of students in their classroom and a review of the research literature related to Emotionally Disturbed students. In the reconnaissance cycle, which was the second cycle of this study, I concurrently used a variety of quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to assess how students were behaving around others in and out of classrooms around the school, how students' viewed themselves and their relationships with others in school, and what classroom teachers' perspectives were of the students' strengths and challenges. All of the assessments in the reconnaissance phase were used to develop a student-participant baseline for classroom behavior and relationship-building skills, which would

help me develop the group art therapy program in the third cycle of this study, and the implementation of the program in the fourth cycle of this study.

The art therapy group program was developed in the third cycle of this study. In planning each of the 16 art therapy group sessions, information gathered from the first two cycles of the study was used to develop the group art therapy program. In the fourth cycle, the group art therapy program was implemented, and observations and reflections of the 16n-session group process was documented. In the fifth cycle, evaluating the art therapy group cycle, both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments were used to measure each student's classroom behavior and relationship-building skills after participating in the art therapy group. I wanted to assess if the art therapy group impacted on the students' school behavior and interactions with others in a positive way. In the monitoring cycle, which was the last cycle in the study, the data collected and analyzed in the implementing the art therapy group and evaluating the art therapy group cycles were used to make changes to the group art therapy program.

This chapter begins with a description of the student-participants for this study. Then the research problem is defined and the rationale is stated for using a mixed methods action research approach. Finally the research literature is reviewed.

### **Participants**

The middle school students who participated in this study were enrolled in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade at a small suburban private school for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. An invitation to participate in the study and a parental consent form were mailed to the parents of the 13 middle school students that were enrolled in the school. My goal out of the 13 students contacted was to gain consent from five families

of the students. I have observed in my work that students with emotional and behavioral challenges have more success in counseling when therapy groups did not exceed five students. Approximately 39% ( $n = 5$ ) of the parents of middle school students gave consent for their child to participate in this study. All five participants completed the entire study process. Each of the participants lived with their parents; none of the students had been placed in foster care homes or had been in the state department's care.

After receiving parental consent, I collected demographic information on each of the students. This information consisted of age, grade, gender, race, special education classification and/or mental health diagnosis, and classroom placement. The majority of the children (80%) were classified ethnically as White. All of the students that participated in this study were male. The mean age of the children was 13 years 0 months and included an age range from 11 years 8 months to 15 years 2 months. Students identified as at-risk of leaving school before the study was completed comprised 40% of the sample ( $n = 2$ ). One of the five students was retained in an earlier grade. The participants' demographic information is provided in the Table 1

Table 1

*Demographic Information for Student Participants*

Student	Age	Grade	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Classification and/or diagnosis	Classroom placement
Isaac	13.2	8	M	African-American	Emotionally Disturbed/ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	Self-contained
Devon	11.8	6	M	Caucasian	Emotionally Disturbed/ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	Self-contained
Andrew	11.8	6	M	Caucasian	Emotionally Disturbed/ Conversion Disorder	Self-contained
Daniel	13.0	8	M	Caucasian	Emotionally Disturbed/ Anxiety Disorder NOS, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	Self-contained
Roger	15.2	8	M	Caucasian	Emotionally Disturbed/ Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	Self-contained

Students from three different self-contained classrooms were included in this study. At the time of the sample selection, no female students were in the middle school program at the school. Out of the 13 middle school students that attended the school setting, 46.2% were African American, 42% were Caucasian, and 8% were Latino. Although I will consider in the data analysis and interpretation the impact of gender and ethnicity, this study had more of an emphasis on utilizing research participants whose emotional and behavioral difficulties impacted their school experiences. All five of the

participants had struggles with their classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. Below are descriptions of each concurrent MMAR cycle, the assessment instruments used, and analysis of the data.

### **Cycle 1: Diagnosing Challenges and Treatment**

Five students participated in this study. Each of them had been classified under the Special Education category of Emotionally Disturbed. Under this Special Education classification, students had demonstrated in school that their emotional and behavioral difficulties negatively impacted on their ability to be academically successful in school. Four out of the five students had also been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, which is a brain disorder that involves ongoing patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, or impulsivity. One of the students had been diagnosed with Conversion Disorder, which is when an individual experiences physical symptoms that are brought on by psychological problems rather than physical ailments or challenges.

In this first cycle, I observed each of these students in different classrooms, during academic activities, and during their lunch and recess times. For example, on September 20, 2016, I observed students in their math class. I noted the difficulty the students had remaining in their seats, and how quickly they became angry toward others. On September 28, I observed some students during recess time, and noticed how quickly a disagreement between two of the students became a fight with raised voices, hitting, and pushing.

I also reviewed research studies that focused on the Emotionally Disturbed student population, their current challenges in school, and the strategies that have helped them be more successful. For example, Galassi (2007) and Jordan and Dooley (2011)

report that middle school students improved their behavior and interactions with others, when they focused on improving their relationship-building skills. From the review of the research literature, as well as my own observations as a researcher-practitioner, I was able to identify the research problem, and develop a rationale for using a mixed methods action research approach.

**Research problem.** According to past research literature, special education students that have been classified with Emotional Disturbance experience academic, behavioral, and social difficulties for a majority of their school experiences (Evans et al., 2012). Behavioral therapy strategies have been used with students with emotional difficulties including rewards and privileges for positive behaviors and consequences given for negative behaviors displayed (Crow & Small, 2011; Theisinger, 2014). Although behavioral strategies alone have helped these students experience more successes in school, challenges with these approaches have also been noted, such as a lower self-esteem and only a temporary change in negative behaviors displayed (Banks, 2006; Cain & Carnellor, 2008; Hyman & Snook, 2000).

More recent research as well as my own observations in my workplace indicate that these students also improve their academic, emotional, and social development when they have the opportunity to build connections and relationships with others (Galassi, 2007). I noticed that in the past few years that I had focused on each student's negative behaviors and correcting the students, rather than what happens to promote the behaviors that get them into trouble and isolated them from others in the school.

I made a decision to begin looking at what happens before the behavior occurs; I began recording my observations when the 2016-2017 school year began in September. I

noticed that although students wanted to interact and gain attention from their peers in a positive way, they had a difficult time knowing how to make that happen. During one classroom observation, I wrote in my journal:

Although he entered the art room and seemed excited about working on box sculptures, Daniel appeared sad and anxious when he was instructed to ask a classmate to work on the project with him. Instead of asking a peer to work with him, he continually made inappropriate comments about one of his peers, took different sized boxes and threw them around the room, and left the classroom without permission. I spoke with Daniel in the hallway, who explained to me he was not sure who to ask to work with him. I asked him to name someone in the class he had been comfortable working with in the past. He reported that he had an easier time working with Roger than some of the other students. After I encouraged him to ask Roger, Daniel returned to the room, asked Roger to work with him, and Daniel and Roger worked together the rest of the class period. (Field Note, Sept. 14, 2016)

I noticed that when I took the time in the moment to help Daniel review and strategize how to relate to others in a positive manner, he was more successful. In another student observation, I noted that other staff also helped a student in the moment use more positive social strategies with others. I wrote in my journal:

Roger was asked six different times to stop hitting a ball against a wall during Recess in the school gym; Miss Tessa also reminded him that he would lose points on his daily behavior sheet if he continued hitting the ball. Miss Amelia, his therapist, went up and spoke to him about his day and what his favorite sports were. After he engaged in conversation with her about basketball being his favorite sport and that his day was going pretty well, Miss Amelia reminded him about not hitting the ball against the wall but using it for the basketball hoop. After that discussion, Roger stopped hitting the ball against the gym wall. (Field Note, Sept. 14, 2016)

After reviewing my field notes from September 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, I wondered if students would have more of a tendency to follow directions and listen to others, when a

staff member took the time to listen to them. I focused on student and staff interactions in my next classroom observation and I wrote:

I observed Devon in his Language Arts class. The students had been divided up into small groups that were writing a group essay together. Devon's teacher asked him to be in a group with two other students. Instead of joining his peers right away to begin the project, Devon paced the entire room seven times before joining his group members. He started to write but had trouble thinking of the correct spelling for several words correctly and did not ask others for help. Instead he stomped his feet on the ground three times and screamed loudly at himself, which his peers found funny and began to laugh. His teacher, Miss Janet, approached Devon's group and complimented him on his neat handwriting, and reminded him that it was okay to ask his group members for help with spelling or to look up on his iPad the correct spelling of words that he did not know. After receiving praise and support from his teacher, the student appeared calmer and was able to ask others about the correct spelling of three words. (Field Note, Sept. 14, 2016)

After recording these observations, I began to explore and review, in my role as a practitioner-researcher, the different therapy programs that focused on positive relationship-building activities to improve classroom behavior. After reviewing a variety of different therapeutic approaches, I chose three theories of therapy that could help students improve their relationships with others and their classroom behavior. These three therapy approaches were relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy.

Relational-cultural therapy focuses on understanding relationships and learning strategies to interact with others in a more positive way (Jordan & Dooley, 2011). I observed the students on September 12, 2016 when they were in their gym class. One of the students seemed to be upset and worried about how others would perceive his athletic performance in a basketball game with his classmates. His initial solution was to lie on the floor facedown and ignore anyone who tried to speak to him. When a staff member approached him and reminded him of the peers from his class who believed in him when



playing sports, and encouraged him to go over to them to play on their team, the student was able to join them and participate in the basketball game.

The approach the staff member took with the student is similar to the relational-cultural therapy approach; this type of therapy educates students about how they can handle social situations differently and then encourages them to practice new strategies within the counseling session (Tucker et al., 2011). For this study, I wanted to include this therapeutic approach to help students understand more about the difficulties they may have had with friendships in the past, and ways they can think about and act in new friendships that can be a more positive experience for them.

Art therapy emphasizes the use of art as a non-verbal language to express thoughts and concerns (Liebmann, 2004; Moon, 2010). In past research with middle school children, adolescents have been more open and honest about themselves when they have had an alternative means of expression, such as through art, music, dance, or poetry (Moon, 2010). On September 8 and 15, 2016, I conducted group art therapy sessions for the middle school students as a part of the school's weekly counseling program. I noticed that when the students worked on different art projects, which included drawings, paintings, and sculptures, they more easily expressed how they were feeling that day or what they may have been upset about when they had the opportunity to complete artwork.

Additionally the students had an easier time working as a cooperative team when creating artwork together. For example on September 15, 2016, the students were asked to create a robot out of cardboard, bottle caps, paper, and glue. The students worked on these projects in small groups and were able to plan what their robot was going to look

like, who was going to construct each part of it, and what they wanted it to look like when it was completed. In the research literature, as well as my observations of this group, the students were able to communicate and work together well when there was an outside focus on an art project that they wanted to complete (Lachance, 2002; Liebmann, 2004). Because I perceived that artwork provided an easy outlet for self-expression and for working with others, I wanted to incorporate this approach to help students express themselves and work on building relationships with others.

Group therapy can provide students with the opportunity to build a positive community with others, to understand that they are not alone in their feelings but others have had the same struggles, and to practice how they interact with others through the use of role-play activities (Kastner & May, 2009; Yalom, 1985). When speaking with the students during their recess about their friendships with others at the beginning of this school year (September 13, 2016), the students expressed to me that they often feel they are the only ones that do not interact with others in a positive way. By providing a group therapy format, I wanted the students to understand that they are not alone in their struggles with others, and can take comfort that there are peers who understand how they feel.

The research literature has also indicated that individuals are more successful understanding relationships and strategies to improve their interactions with others when they can practice these skills in the counseling session (Kastner & May, 2009; Yalom, 1985). When participating in individual counseling, children and adults may talk about and understand therapeutic concepts and strategies, but may not make changes in their

interactions with others, because they do not have the opportunity to practice doing things differently with others (Yalom, 1985).

I have used relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy approaches in my work with the emotionally disturbed student population, but not in a formal study format. This study provided me with the opportunity to assess the impact a group art therapy program with relational-cultural therapy concepts had on the classroom behavior and relationship-building skills of students with Emotional Disturbance.

**Rationale for mixed methods action research (MMAR).** MMAR can be defined as the use of mixed methods approaches within the cycles of action research. MMAR studies utilize the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches within the action research process to help researchers develop practical approaches for improvements needed for different community and educational settings (Ivankova, 2015). The MMAR format, qualitative measures, and quantitative measures used in this study were described in detail in Chapter III. The MMAR format provided me with the opportunity to gather concurrently, the most comprehensive information about the student participants. I could make changes from one cycle of the study to another depending on the student's responses to the therapy program I created. For example, if using clay in the therapy group was frustrating to the students and increased their negative behavior toward one another, I would introduce art materials such as markers and paper that would be easier for the students to manage and to experience more success. Revisions to art projects as well as other strategies used in the research were recorded in a journal throughout the study.

**Review of research literature.** In the past several years, I have noticed in my work with students classified with Emotional Disturbance that each student has his or her own personal reaction to therapy strategies; it has been difficult for me to develop a therapy program that has a positive impact on a variety of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. My review of the research literature focused on strategies and approaches that could help a variety of different students that had been classified with Emotional Disturbance. I could gather ideas for my therapy group in my study from this past research and incorporate some of their ideas.

The research literature included in this cycle of the study was reviewed in detail in Chapter II. These past studies emphasized what were effective techniques in working with students with Emotional Disturbance. These techniques were used in the classroom and in counseling sessions. Several studies reported that students with emotional and behavioral difficulties were more successful when they had positive relationships with staff members and had the opportunity to collaborate with them (Reinke et al., 2013; Whitlow, 2015).

Based on these studies, I wanted students to feel comfortable with me in the group therapy sessions in the study, and to be able to provide input about the different group activities presented to them. In addition to positive relationships with school staff members, students in past studies have benefitted from a focus on peer relationships. Hicks (2012), Kaya et al. (2015), Tucker et al. (2011), Van de berg (2013), Wu et al. (2010) report that students with Emotional Disturbance have a greater opportunity to increase positive relationships with others and their social skills when they have the opportunity to work with others in pairs or in a small group. With my focus in the study

on increasing student positive relationships, I would provide the students with opportunities to work with someone else on art therapy projects.

Past research also documents that students express more about themselves through other means than verbal discussions, and like the sessions to offer an object or activity that can act like a buffer for their feelings (Moon, 2010; Posas, 2013; Singer-Califano, 2008). The art therapy projects presented to them in this study could provide a safe outlet for expressing their feelings and may be an easier form of communication than speaking about their concerns to others (Liebmann, 2004).

The conceptual framework for the study was developed out of the review of the research literature and included the following three theories of therapy: art therapy, relational-cultural therapy, and group therapy. From the conceptual framework utilized, a theme-based approach was developed and would be used in each group art therapy session (Liebmann, 2004). In the theme-based approach, the students would meet with me for a specific period of time and with a focus on thinking about friendships and building relationships with others (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). Past research has indicated that students with Emotional Disturbance thrive on structure and consistent routines. Additionally, students with emotional and behavioral difficulties can have a tendency to become unfocused and have a difficult time concentrating on what brought them to the group counseling session in the first place (Lachance, 2002; Liebmann, 2004; Yalom, 1985). By providing them with a structured and consistent routine and focus on relationship-building skills, the students could have a greater opportunity to learn and incorporate new ways of interacting with others.

Group therapy techniques that would be used included building a safe counseling environment for one another in which students would not be judged or criticized for their differences from one another, and would provide one another with praise and support (Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985). The students would also have the opportunity to learn positive relationship-building techniques by modeling my behavior and by participating in role-playing activities (Kastner & May, 2009; Yalom, 1985).

**Summary of Cycle 1.** The first cycle of this study focused on diagnosing the challenges and treatment of students classified with Emotional Disturbance. Students that are emotionally disturbed have had difficulty being academically and socially successful in school. They have had a tendency to be suspended frequently and to drop out of school entirely (Crow & Small, 2011; Evans et al., 2012).

Traditionally, behavioral therapy strategies have been used with students with emotional difficulties to help them experience more academic, emotional, and social success in school. These approaches include rewards and privileges for positive behaviors and consequences given for negative behaviors displayed (Crow & Small, 2011; Theisinger, 2014). Although behavioral strategies have shown success with these students, challenges with these approaches have also been noted, such as a lower self-esteem and only a temporary change in negative behaviors displayed (Banks, 2006; Cain & Carnellor, 2008). More recent research (Galassi, 2007), as well as my own observations in my workplace, indicates that these students also improve their academic, emotional, and social development when they have the opportunity to build connections and relationships with others (Galassi, 2007).

I have utilized a mixed methods action research (MMAR) approach, the concurrent use of both qualitative and quantitative methods within the cycles of action research, to gather the most comprehensive information about the student participants in this study (Ivankova, 2014). I work at the setting and with the students included in this study. Through the MMAR approach, I could continually revise and provide improvements for the students (Aylward et al., 2010; Plant, 2014).

The research literature for students with Emotional Disturbance included classroom and counseling approaches. Classroom approaches for students with Emotional Disturbance emphasized that peer support, and working in pairs or groups will help students be more successful (Whitlow, 2015). By working in pairs, students with Emotional Disturbance would have the opportunity to increase their socialization skills and friendships with others (Kaya et al., 2015).

Past research on effective counseling approaches with students with Emotional Disturbance has reported that these students will express more about themselves through other means than verbal discussions, and like the sessions to offer an object or activity that can act like a buffer for their feelings (Moon, 2010; Posas, 2013; Singer-Califano, 2008). Based on the research literature review, the conceptual framework that was developed for this study included relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy. The conceptual framework included a theme-based approach; the students would meet with me for a specific period of time and with a focus on thinking about friendships and building relationships with others (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004).

Group therapy techniques included building a safe counseling environment for one another in which students would not be judged or criticized for their differences from

one another, and providing the opportunity for the students to give one another praise and support (Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985). The students would also have the opportunity to learn positive relationship-building techniques by modeling my behavior and by participating in role-playing activities (Kastner & May, 2009; Yalom, 1985).

### **Cycle 2: Reconnaissance of Student Behavior and Relationships**

In the reconnaissance cycle, I concurrently used a variety of quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to assess how students were behaving around others in and out of classrooms around the school, how students' viewed themselves and their relationships with others in school, and what classroom teachers' perspectives were of the students' strengths and challenges. Students completed the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale and the classroom teachers completed the School Behavior Survey. I conducted classroom observations, students met with me individually to complete art therapy drawings, and I reviewed descriptions of student negative behavior and consequences given from student discipline records. All of the assessments in the reconnaissance phase were used to develop a student-participant baseline for classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. This baseline of student behavior and relationships with others helped me determine the strategies and approaches included in planning the group art therapy program in the third cycle of this study, and the implementation of the art therapy program in the fourth cycle of this study. Additionally, the baseline of behavior and relationships with others was compared to the student behavior and peer relationships recorded after the students participated in the group art therapy program.



**Quantitative measures.** The quantitative measures used in this study were the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale (student version) and the School Behavior Survey (teacher version). Detailed descriptions of each of these measures were given in Chapter III.

*Piers-Harris 2 Self Concept Scale.* The Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale is intended for students to complete that are between the ages of 7 to 18. The 60 items included in this measure are statements that express how people feel and perceive themselves (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). The Piers-Harris 2 contains six different domains that are used to assess self-concept. These domains are: Behavioral Adjustment, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes, Freedom from Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction.

The Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale was administered to each of the five student participants individually in my office. Isaac was administered the Piers-Harris 2 on September 21, 2016; Devon and Andrew were administered this measure on September 22, 2016; Daniel was administered the Piers-Harris 2 on September 23, 2016; and Roger was administered this assessment tool on September 28, 2016. Each student took about 15 minutes to complete this measure. Because the students have had a tendency to experience increased anxiety when completing this measure (Piers & Herzberg, 2002), the students were given a choice of what chair and table to sit at in the room, in order to help each student feel more comfortable and at ease. In order to more easily compare the scores that the students received after they had completed this measure, I gave each of the students the same version of the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale. After the students read each of the 60 test items, they were asked to circle “yes” if

the statement applied to him and “no” if the item did not pertain to him. I collected and manually scored each of the forms completed by the students.

Table 2 contains the student data in the form of T-scores that were collected from the Piers-Harris 2. T-scores are the raw scores converted to a standard score in which 50 was the mean with a standard deviation of 10. For example, if a student received a T-score of 60 on this measure, his score would be one standard deviation above the mean (Ivankova, 2014). On the table, T-scores in the 29 and lower range indicated a very low self-concept, scores in the 30 to 39 range indicate a low self-concept, scores in the 40 to 44 range indicate a low average self-concept, scores in the 45 to 55 range indicate an average self-concept, and scores 56 and above indicate an above average self-concept.

Table 2

*Individual T-scores From Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale*

Student	Isaac	Devon	Andrew	Daniel	Roger
Total score	49	52	<b>58</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>&gt;80</b>
Behavioral adjustment	54	54	54	<b>28</b>	<b>62</b>
Intellectual and school status	<b>65</b>	54	<b>59</b>	<b>29</b>	54
Physical appearance and attributes	52	48	<b>58</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>65</b>
Freedom from anxiety	<b>58</b>	54	48	<b>22</b>	<b>58</b>
Popularity	<b>60</b>	47	<b>60</b>	<b>31</b>	50
Happiness and satisfaction	51	<b>59</b>	47	<b>30</b>	<b>59</b>

*Note.* Bold print for significant T-scores.

The following descriptions of the student's behavior and scores on this measure provided a baseline for each student's classroom behavior and interactions with others. When completing the Piers-Harris 2 on September 21, 2016, Isaac seemed to be concentrating a great deal on the test items and which answer he wanted to choose. He seemed to easily understand the directions given for this measure and asked me about one of the test items that he did not understand. He received scores in the average to the above average range for all of the domains on this measure. He reported an above average self-concept for intellectual and school status, freedom from anxiety, and popularity. In other words, he saw himself as a successful student in his academics, in coping with school stress, and with his peers.

Devon smiled, was pleasant and polite when working on test items on the Piers-Harris 2 on September 22, 2016. He worked to complete this measure quickly, and did not ask questions about any of the items on this assessment tool. On this measure, he received an above average score for the happiness and satisfaction domain, and average scores for all the other domains on the Piers-Harris 2.

Andrew completed this measure sitting on the floor in the hallway outside of my office on September 22, 2016. He had a great deal of difficulty walking without feeling pain and discomfort, and it was a challenge for him to get to different places in the school throughout the day. While he was sitting on the floor, he seemed to be having a difficult time balancing himself and answering test items at the same time. He had more success maintaining his balance and writing when the Piers-Harris 2 protocol was attached to a clipboard and I held the clipboard up for him while he circled test-item responses. Andrew received scores that ranged from average to high average. He received his

highest scores for intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, and popularity. He viewed himself as being successful with his academic work and his role in the classroom, how he looks and his physical strengths, and being popular with his peers.

Daniel seemed to be hesitant and anxious when working on answering items from the Piers-Harris 2 on September 23, 2016. He expressed the desire to participate, but when he started working on test items he said in a soft voice “I can’t do this.” I reminded him that answering the test questions was his choice and he did not have to complete the protocol if he was feeling uncomfortable. He continued to work on the test items and I mentioned to him that there was not a right or wrong answer, the questions were focused more on how he thinks about himself in school. Based on his scores, he presented with an overall low self-concept and scored in the low range for all of the domain areas on this measure.

On September 28, 2016, Roger came into my office to complete the items on the Piers-Harris 2 in a friendly and enthusiastic manner. He smiled and laughed at items on this measure that seemed humorous or funny. He asked me about three different items that he did not understand, and after explanations were given for these items, he appeared to work hard to answer the test questions. For example, one of the test items stated, “I am popular with boys.” Roger asked me if he answered yes to this item, would that mean that he was stating that he was “gay.” I encouraged him to interpret the question in his own way and to answer based on his life experiences and without concern about what others would think of him. On the Piers-Harris 2, he received scores that were in the average to above average range. He demonstrated an above average self-concept in the following areas: behavioral adjustment, physical appearance and attributes, freedom from anxiety,

and happiness and satisfaction (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). In other words, Roger viewed himself as being successful with his classroom behavior, his physical image, how he handled anxiety at school, and general happiness and satisfaction with his life.

In an analysis of the overall baseline scores, the students, with the exception of Daniel, gave themselves scores in the average to high average range for most of the domains on this measure. Daniel assessed himself within the low range for his academic abilities, classroom behavior, and ability to get along with others. In contrast, Isaac, Devon, Andrew, and Roger viewed themselves as working well in their classes and that they had positive friendships with others. The higher scores that were recorded for four out of the five students may have been due to choosing what they think is a more socially desirable answer instead of a genuine response to test items (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). Overall, most of the students demonstrated an average to high average self-concept. Only Daniel viewed himself with a low self-concept in terms of his friendships with others and his classroom behavior.

I was not surprised at the scores that the students gave themselves on this measure; four out of the five students have been observed completing different class projects and activities with the goal of gaining the approval of others. I had anticipated that Isaac, Devon, Andrew, and Roger would give a more positive picture of themselves than what was seen each day in their classrooms. I also had predicted that Daniel would give himself lower scores; he has had a tendency to put himself down or say, “I can’t do this,” when asked to participate in different class activities throughout the day. He seemed to assume there were many things he could not do well, and this matched with the lower scores he gave himself overall on the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale.

*School Behavior Survey.* The classroom teachers that worked with the five student-participants were asked to complete the School Behavior Survey. Miss Janet completed this measure for Devon and Andrew, Mr. Thomas completed this measure for Isaac and Roger, and Miss Melissa completed this measure for Daniel. The School Behavior Survey contains 102 items that include descriptions of classroom behavior and performance. This measure also includes the following areas: academic performance, academic habits, social skills, parent participation, health concerns, emotional challenges, unusual behavior, social difficulties, verbal, physical, and behavior problems, and aggression.

I reviewed the directions with the three teachers completing the form, which included marking one of the rating options that was provided for each question on this assessment (Lachar et al., 2000). Once I gave the instructions to each of the teachers, they were given the opportunity to complete the scale independently, and return it to me so that I could manually score each form.

The School Behavior Survey is reported in T-scores, which like the Piers-Harris 2, is the raw score that is converted to a standard score in which 50 is the mean with a standard deviation of 10. Scores that are received in the 40 and below range indicate below average performance, scores that are 60 to 69 are described as areas of concern for students for staff members to explore with the students, and scores that are 70 and above are considered in the clinically significant range, and may necessitate further exploration and support through psychological treatment services. The individual subtest scores that the students received appear in Table 3.0

Table 3

*Individual Student SBS T-Scores*

Student	Isaac	Devon	Andrew	Daniel	Roger
Academic performance	38	48	50	50	37
Academic habits	42	46	41	51	35
Social skills	45	47	38	55	27
Parent participation	47	55	35	56	50
Health concerns	44	49	52	59	> <b>85</b>
Emotional distress	51	55	<b>65</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>66</b>
Unusual behavior	59	<b>61</b>	57	41	57
Social problems	56	44	55	41	<b>73</b>
Verbal aggression	48	46	59	48	<b>76</b>
Physical aggression	45	44	44	45	> <b>85</b>
Behavior problems	53	43	49	41	<b>71</b>
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	54	49	56	45	<b>62</b>

*Note.* Scores that are in bold print indicate a concern area to be addressed with the student.

When comparing scores received on the School Behavior Survey and the Piers-Harris 2, there were some differences between the students' and teachers' scores. On the School Behavior Survey, Isaac received average scores for the domains on this measure. On the Unusual Behavior domain for the School Behavior Survey, Isaac received a T-score of 59, which was on the borderline of Average and a score that falls into the significant range. The Unusual Behavior domain focuses on unique behaviors that can negatively impact on an individual's ability to complete academic tasks and interact with

others in a positive way (Lachar et al., 2000). Mr. Thomas, who completed the School Behavior Survey for Isaac, may have felt that Isaac demonstrated increased unusual behaviors that could negatively impact his school experiences. In contrast, on the Piers-Harris 2, Isaac received scores in the average to the above average range for all of the domains on this measure. He reported an above average self-concept for intellectual and school status, freedom from anxiety, and popularity. In other words, he saw himself as a successful student in his academics, in coping with school stress, and with his peers. The differences between the scores that he received on the School Behavior Survey and Piers-Harris 2 may have indicated difficulty understanding how his behaviors in school impacted on his peer interactions and relationships.

Like Isaac, Devon received a score that was in the concern range for the Unusual Behavior domain on the School Behavior Survey. This was an area that his teacher, Miss Janet, felt needed to be addressed to help Devon have more positive experiences in school. In contrast, Devon viewed his classroom behavior as average on the Piers-Harris 2. This difference in scores between the Piers-Harris 2 and School Behavior Survey may have indicated that Devon was not taking an honest look at, or was not understanding how, his behavior around others negatively impacted his interactions with classroom staff and peers.

On the School Behavior Survey, Andrew received average scores for most of the domain areas, except for the Emotional Distress domain; Miss Janet assessed that his low coping skills in dealing with anxiety and conflict was low and needed to be changed for Andrew to be more successful in school. This was in contrast to the scores he gave himself on the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale; on all of the domains on the Piers-



Harris 2, Andrew scored in the average to above average range. He seemed to view himself as having an easier time handling conflict and anxiety-provoking situations than how Miss Janet viewed him. In a similar manner to Devon, Andrew may not have been taking an honest look at, or did not understand how, his school behavior impacted his interactions with others.

Daniel scored in the significant range for the Emotional Distress domain, which focuses on how much the student copes with personal stressors as well as in conflicts with others (Lachar et al., 2000). Although he received a score in the significant range for Emotional Distress, Daniel gave himself even lower scores on the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale. This may have indicated that Daniel's perception of himself and his abilities were more negative than how his teachers viewed his performance and interactions with others in the classroom.

On the School Behavior Survey, Roger demonstrated increased concerns in the majority of the areas on this measure which included Health Concerns, Emotional Distress, Verbal Aggression, Physical Aggression, Behavior Problems, and characteristics of ADHD (Lachar et al., 2000). This differed in the scores that Roger gave himself on the Piers-Harris 2; based on the average to above average scores he gave himself, Roger saw himself as a well-adjusted individual that got along well with others and coped well in conflict situations. Based on the differences in scores Roger received on the School Behavior Survey and the Piers-Harris 2, he may have not seen his behavior around others in a realistic way, or may have been concerned about receiving scores that would not appear socially acceptable to others. Since Roger began attending this school,

he appeared to be concerned about being accepted by others, and acted in ways to seek approval from his peers.

Overall, when comparing students' scores on the School Behavior Survey and Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale, three main concern areas emerged, which can be addressed when planning the art therapy group in the next cycle of this study. First, most of the students on the School Behavior Survey received significant scores on the Emotional Distress domain. The Emotional Distress domain focused on the ability of the student to cope with stress and anxiety with himself as well as others around him (Lachar et al., 2000). Based on the significant scores that the students received, each of the students benefitted from art therapy groups that focused on helping them develop strategies to cope with personal and peer conflicts.

Second, the differences in scores that the students received between the School Behavior Survey and the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale indicated that the students may not have made an honest assessment of how their behavior negatively impacted their relationships with others. The students benefitted from discussions, role-plays, and art therapy projects in the group that focused on the behaviors that they displayed in school and how others may react toward them.

Third, the students may have demonstrated differences in scores based on a need to present themselves in a positive light, or what they considered to be socially acceptable rather than an honest and genuine assessment of themselves. Therefore, the students benefitted from a group art therapy program that emphasized a non-judgmental atmosphere that encouraged honesty and acceptance of one another (Tucker et al., 2011; Yalom, 1985).

**Qualitative measures.** The qualitative measures used with the five student-participants were the Life Space Picture, Kinetic School Drawing, observations of the students in their classroom during their academic subjects, recess, and gym, and a qualitative review of student discipline records.

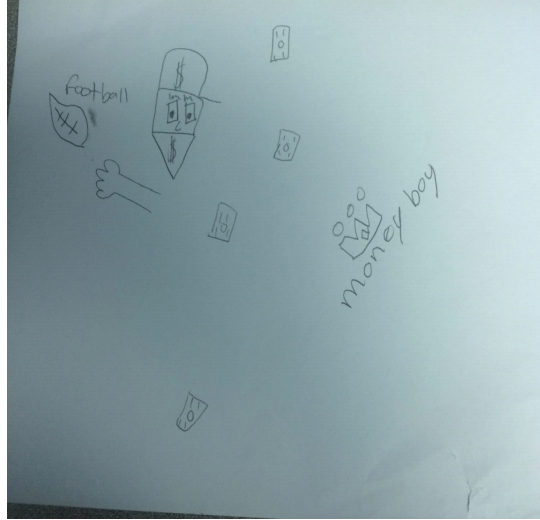
***Life Space Drawing.*** The purpose of the Life Space Drawing was to assess who and what was important to the student at the time of the evaluation. For the Life Space Drawing, the students were asked to use their choice of paper size to draw a picture of the people, places, and things that are important to them in their lives at the present time.

***Kinetic School Drawing.*** The purpose of the Kinetic School Drawing was to assess how the student viewed his school role and his interactions with his peers. For the Kinetic School Drawing, the students were asked to draw a picture of themselves with someone else doing something together in school. For both of the drawings, the students were offered pencils, markers, and crayons, and were instructed that they could choose to use some or all of those materials to complete their drawings. After the drawings were completed, I asked the students to give their drawing a title, and tell me the story behind their drawing. The artwork created was analyzed by four independent art therapy raters. The individuals all held a Master's degree in art therapy, and had practiced art therapy with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. The art therapy raters needed to have the education and experience requirement to more accurately analyze the student artwork produced. The art therapy raters were asked to review each drawing and note how color, line, shape, and space were used and what that may have signified about the emotional functioning of each of the student participants (Liebmann, 2004).

***Classroom observations and discipline records.*** I observed each of the students in their classrooms, and qualitatively reviewed each student's discipline records. The student discipline records were made up of descriptions of negative and disruptive behavior and the consequences for the student.

**Qualitative data themes.** Two main themes emerged from the qualitative data. These were isolation from their peers and negative peer interactions.

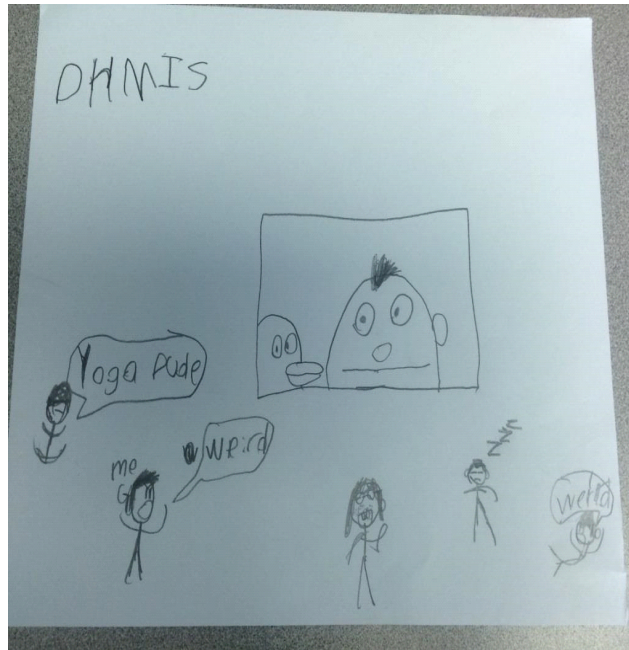
***Isolation from peers.*** Based on the classroom observations and the drawings that the students completed, the student-participants seemed to express feelings of isolation from others. Isaac was observed in his classroom and he was not engaged in conversation with the other students around him. He asked his peers questions, such as “do you have GTA 5 (Grand theft auto 5)” and “what is Mr. T doing?” in an attempt to be included in their discussion but was ignored. In his Life Space and Kinetic School Drawings, Isaac had the opportunity to add himself along with a peer or family member to both drawings. Instead Isaac only drew himself in the pictures and used visual characteristics that Liebmann (2004) has described as isolation from others, which included disjointed or segmented body parts, and using pencil only to complete the drawings (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Isaac's Kinetic School Drawing*

Devon also created drawings that did not include other people in them (Figure 2). For his first drawing instead of depicting people that were important to him in his life, he focused instead on the games he plays on the computer. When encouraged to add people that are important to him, student 2 chose not to, which according to Moon (2010), can indicate isolation from others. In a similar manner to Isaac, Devon chose one color only to complete his drawing, which Liebmann (2004) reports can also indicate isolation from others. In his Kinetic School Drawing, student 2 created his classroom with himself and five other students pictured. Although he chose to include other people in his drawing, each person was pictured doing his or her own activity, and were not interacting with each other. Liebmann (2004) notes that when two or more figures are included in a drawing, but are not facing or interacting with each other, this can indicate isolation from others. Devon included the initials at the top "DHMIS," which he said stood for, "Don't hug me, I'm scared." Jordan and Dooley (2000) and Yalom (1985) report that he may

have made this statement because he was interested in a hug as a form of connecting with others, but not have felt he would know how to handle himself if someone hugged him.



*Figure 2.* Devon's Kinetic School Drawing

Andrew also depicted people who were not interacting with one another in his Kinetic School Drawing. He explained that the two people he had drawn were standing near each other but were thinking about two different things and were not speaking to each other. Liebmann (2004) and Moon (2010) note that when figures are not interacting in a drawing, this indicated isolation or a lack of relationships with others.

I noticed that Daniel, in both his classroom observation and completed drawings, depicted isolation from his peers. According to my journal:

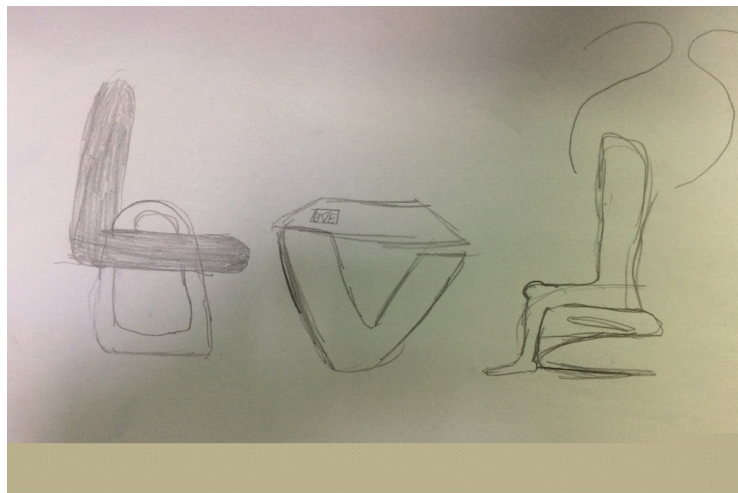
When he entered his classroom, Daniel looked around the room three times before going up to one of his peers and making an attempt to speak with him, who was focusing instead on completing his work. Daniel stood up, paced the length of the

room five times before walking slowly past small groups of peers around the room, in a perceived attempt to get attention and interact with others. The other students in the class did not speak with him, but ignored him. I noticed that when he was ignored, he began to take deep, short breaths and made his way to the desk near the first peer he attempted to speak to when he came into the room. He began to make negative comments about his peer, which required redirection and reminders from his teacher, Miss Melissa. He did not follow Miss Melissa's directions and was asked to take a break in the hallway. I spoke to him about the incident while he was standing in the hallway, and he explained to me that his comments were meant to be a joke. (Field Note, Sept. 13, 2016)

In the Life Space Drawing Daniel created, he used words to describe what and who were important in his life. Art therapists such as Liebmann (2004) and Moon (2010) report that when words are used by an individual as a main focal point in a drawing rather than drawn figures, the individual may have needed distance from the subject that he was asked to draw about or he may have experienced increased anxiety about the topic at hand. For Daniel, expressing what he felt about important relationships in his life may have increased his anxiety and he may have needed distance from that topical area. One of the words in the drawing that he emphasized the most was the word "self." Liebmann (2004) notes that when the word self was a main focal point, the student may have been more focused on himself and not the relationships around him. In his Kinetic School Drawing, he focused on depicting the relationships he had made with peers he had met online playing games. He did not include friendships that he had with his peers in school. Each person in his drawing was separated by distinct colors and lines, which Liebmann (2004) and Moon (2010) report can also indicate isolation from others (Liebmann, 2004).

Isolation from others was also depicted in the drawings that Roger created. In his Life Space Drawing, he drew a picture of his home and a tree that were located in the country he lived in before coming to the United States. Pencil only was used, although I

offered him the opportunity to use markers and crayons. According to Liebmann (2004), his use of pencil indicated isolation. Roger gave a detailed description of the tree in the picture, which symbolized his mother's strength in dealing with his father's death. The use of one color in the drawing may have also been due to the isolation he felt because of his father's death. In his Kinetic School Drawing (Figure 3), Roger mentioned to me that he was creating a picture of him with one of his friends at school playing chess. He took a great deal of time with pencil to create a drawing of two chairs and a table, but without any people pictured, which Liebmann (2004) notes can also indicate isolation from others.



*Figure 3.* Roger's Kinetic School Drawing

In summary, the students experienced isolation from others that was indicated from observations of them during their school day, and from their individual drawings. These students made efforts to interact with others, but often were ignored and not included in discussions with their classmates. Often increased isolation in the classroom led to inappropriate comments and jokes toward others, and throwing objects at peers.



The isolation that the students experienced was also portrayed in the drawings they produced. Liebmann (2004) and Moon (2010) report that isolation from others can be represented by the following artistic characteristics: one color only, fragmented or separated body parts, a lack of interaction between figures pictured, and use of words instead of drawing objects or figures. Those artistic characteristics were present in the student drawings completed during this cycle.

*Negative interactions with others.* Based on the classroom observations conducted and the student discipline records reviewed, the student-participants displayed negative behavior toward others. These negative peer interactions appeared to be the result of peer-to-peer conflicts and a lack of classroom focus.

*Peer-to-peer conflict.* In my review of my observations of students and a qualitative review of their discipline records, I noticed that the students displayed negative behaviors when they were not sure how to handle different conflict situations with their peers. For example, in a discipline report dated October 4, 2016, Isaac during recess pulled another student's leg when the other student was jumping off a slide in the playground. He continued to swing at and kick the other student. He also pushed away staff members who were trying to stop him. Later that same day, when he was asked about the incident, he reported that the peer he attacked had said very inappropriate things about a female peer of his, and Isaac wanted him to stop making comments about her.

Devon also engaged in a physical fight with a peer during recess. According to a discipline report also dated October 4, 2016, he went up and punched a student who was in a physical fight with another student. He explained later that day that he was mad at

this student because he made a mean comment to him earlier in the day and was not sure how to handle the situation. Devon also received another discipline report later that same day. He became angry at a female peer's comments toward him and was asked several times by classroom staff to leave the room and take a break in the hallway. He did not take the staff members' suggestions, but stayed in the classroom and spat in the other student's face. When he was asked about the incident at a later time, he explained that he wanted his peer to stop making comments, but did not know how to tell her.

Andrew, like Devon was upset at the comments of other students in his classroom, and did not seem to know how to handle the situation in a positive way. When I observed Andrew in his classroom, I wrote:

Andrew was very responsive to Miss Janet's classroom discussion about the world's population. When Miss Janet brought up this discussion, he raised his hand several times, and smiled broadly at the different facts that she presented to the class. On two different occasions, he was called on by Miss Janet to contribute to the discussion. During both of those moments, another student spoke over him. The first time that happened, Andrew gritted his teeth and rolled his eyes. The second time that occurred he became upset and yelled loudly "shut up." (Field Note, Sept. 9, 2016)

In a similar manner to Andrew, Roger also handled conflicts with peers in a negative manner. In my journal I wrote:

When I walked into the classroom at the beginning of the observation, a classmate was saying to Roger that he had stolen his iPad. Roger clenched his hands, began to look angry, and went up to the other student in an attempt to push him. Mr. Thomas approached both students and asked them to give each other space and take their seats. Roger began to take loud breaths as he returned to his seat and mumbled comments about his classmate under his breath. Mr. Thomas reminded Roger that it was time to take an open book test and that he could visit the therapy dog if he completed all the test items. Roger kept his head bent over his test until he completed it and headed down willingly to the classroom where the therapy dog was visiting. Later that day, I met up with Roger in the hall and asked him about what had occurred with his classmate. Roger reported that he was so angry

at this other peer he was not sure how to handle the situation. (Field Note, Sept. 28, 2016)

In a review of a discipline report from September 28, 2016, Roger was walking back from his gym class. He appeared to look upset when another student the hallway made a negative comment to him. Then he quickly went up to the student and hit him in the back of the head. Later that day, when speaking about this incident to staff members, Roger reported that he did not want anyone to get away with saying negative things to him.

*Lack of classroom focus.* Based on a variety of different classroom observations, the students had great difficulty focusing on classroom tasks to be completed; often their focus was on socializing with their peers. Classroom staff were observed reminding them several times to concentrate on class work and activities to be completed. In my journal I wrote:

I observed Andrew smiling frequently as he listened to several peers in the back of the classroom joking around with each other. He continued to look at them for five minutes instead of concentrating on a worksheet that was in front of him. After the five minutes spent watching his peers, Andrew began to make inappropriate jokes in a perceived attempt to gain their attention and approval. He was asked by his teacher several times to stop making inappropriate jokes and comments to others and focus instead on his classwork. (Field Note, Sept. 9, 2016)

I noted that Daniel, during his classroom observation, also displayed a lack of focus in the classroom on assignments, but instead focused on interacting with his peers.

In my journal I wrote:

I began observing Daniel while Miss Melissa was speaking to the class about completing an assignment. While Miss Melissa was speaking, Daniel, for 10 minutes, continually turned around in his seat to speak with a classmate sitting behind him. I noticed that Daniel was wearing a large cowboy hat on his head,

and each time he turned around in his seat, he put it on his peer's head, laughed, and did this five times even when the peer said no. His teacher needed to remind him to return his focus to his classwork two times in order for him to concentrate on his class work for the rest of the observation period. (Field Note, Sept. 13, 2016)

In contrast to Daniel, who was redirected to his work by Miss Melissa, Roger had a hard time taking direction from Mr. Thomas. In a discipline report from October 3, 2016, Roger was walking into his classroom engaged in horseplay with a peer. His teacher told him to stop putting his hands on someone else. Roger immediately cursed at his teacher and left the room. At a later time that day, he reported to me that he felt embarrassed that the teacher spoke to him in front of the entire class and he was not sure how to handle the situation.

In summary, several themes emerged out of a review of the qualitative data. The themes included the students' feelings of isolation from others and negative peer interactions, which were influenced by peer-to-peer conflicts, and a lack of attention in the classroom. The students were observed experiencing isolation in their classroom, and expressed feeling alone through the drawings they created. The students struggled in their peer interactions; often they solved conflicts with negative comments or physical fights. Additionally, the students' focus on their peers during class time resulted in frequent reminders by their teachers to complete their schoolwork.

**Analysis of Cycle 2 data.** The data from both the quantitative and qualitative measures was mixed to note student themes. The main theme after mixing the data was difficulty forming positive relationships with others. Their decreased relationships with others seemed to be impacted by the students' tendency to isolate themselves, to handle conflicts with others in a negative way, and to possess emotional and behavioral

challenges that prevented them from interacting positively with others. This was evident through the drawings the students produced, their behavior recorded in the classroom observations and student discipline records, and the scores they received from their teachers on the School Behavior Survey.

The drawings that the students produced showed a lack of relationships with others as well as increased isolation from others. Although the student participants were asked in two different drawings to draw themselves with other people, all five students either did not draw any people, only drew themselves, if they drew more than one person in the picture, the people are not interacting with one another in the drawing, or they named friends they had online rather than peers who go to their school (Liebmann, 2004).

Further isolation was noted in the classroom observations that were conducted with each student. Isaac, Devon, Andrew, and Daniel were observed spending more time on their own in their classroom rather than interacting with their peers. Their attempts to interact and be included in conversations with their peers were often ignored. After the students did not receive attention from their peers, they made negative choices with their behavior toward others. Additionally, after reviewing the student discipline records, the students made negative comments or physically fought with others when they were not sure how to handle conflicts with others.

The data received from the School Behavior Survey (teacher version) demonstrated that the students had emotional and behavioral challenges, which could impact on their ability to form positive relationships with others. Two out of the five students demonstrated decreased social skills, and three out of the five students demonstrated increased social problems with others. Additionally, three out of the five

students demonstrated increased emotional distress, which included lowered coping skills to handle conflict and stress that occurs when interacting with others.

Finally, when comparing the scores the students received from their teachers on the SBS, in comparison to the scores that they gave themselves on the Piers-Harris 2, the students saw themselves in a much more positive light in terms of their relationships with others. This was evidenced by the average to above scores they gave themselves on the Popularity domain, which measured how well they interacted with their peers (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). This lack of perception of how they interacted and their behavior with others could also impact on their friendships with their peers. The students may not have been taking an honest look at how they acted and handled their interactions with others.

**Summary of Cycle 2.** In the reconnaissance cycle, I concurrently used a variety of quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to assess how students were behaving around others in and out of classrooms around the school, how students viewed themselves and their relationships with others, and what their teachers' perspectives were of their classroom behavior and relationships. The measures used would create a baseline of their current behavior and relationships with others that could aid in the planning for the art therapy group that is included as a part of this study.

The quantitative measures utilized during this phase of the research included the Piers-Harris 2 and the School Behavior Survey. The students completed the Piers-Harris 2, which gave their own perspectives of their academic performance, classroom behavior, and peer interactions. Four out of the five students scored themselves in the average to above average range on all the domains of this measure; Daniel was the only individual who gave himself low scores and had an overall low self-concept.

The positive scores that the students gave themselves were in contrast to the scores that the students received from their teachers on the School Behavior Survey. This may have been indicative of the students' inability to view their challenge areas in school, or a response bias, in which students gave positive answers instead of more genuine responses to items (Piers & Herzberg, 2002).

On the School Behavior Survey, the teachers noted that two out of the five students displayed decreased social skills, three out of the five students displayed increased social problems, and three out of the five students displayed increased emotional distress. Increased difficulty with social skills, increased social problems, and increased emotional distress can impact negatively on the students' ability to behave in a positive manner in the classroom and toward their peers.

The qualitative measures that were utilized in this portion of the study were the Life Space Drawing, the Kinetic School Drawing, classroom observations, and a review of student discipline records, which included a report of negative behavior and the resulting consequence for the student. From these measures, two main themes emerged. These were isolation from others and negative peer interactions. The negative peer interactions were impacted by peer-to-peer conflicts, and a lack of classroom focus.

In the analysis of all of the Cycle 2 data, one main student theme emerged; decreased positive relationships with others. The students demonstrated increased isolated from others, increased negative interactions with their peers, and increased emotional and behavioral challenges which impacted their ability to form positive relationships with others. These student challenges would be addressed in the next cycle

of the study, which would include planning for the art therapy group that would be implemented in the fourth cycle of this study.

### **Cycle 3: Planning the Art Therapy Group**

The art therapy group program was developed in this cycle in the study. According to Yalom (1985), individuals are able to learn more from a group therapy format that has a duration of at least eight weeks. Additionally, Crow and Small (2011) and Romi et al. (2009) report that students with Emotional Disturbance benefit from repetition in learning to successfully incorporate more positive ways of handling themselves in school. Therefore, I developed an art therapy group program that lasted eight weeks, but met twice a week to give students a greater opportunity to understand and put into practice different therapy concepts and techniques.

Each of the 16 art therapy sessions included approaches that were developed from the information that I gathered from the first and second cycles of this study. In the first cycle, the research literature reported several classroom and counseling approaches that have helped students with emotional and behavioral difficulties increase positive interactions with others. In the second cycle, the student data reflected that the students demonstrated difficulty forming positive relationships with others. Based on those two cycles, the research art therapy group was designed to focus on students: 1) working together in pairs or small groups, 2) taking part in problem-solving and role-play activities, and 3) participating in friendship and relationship building relationship-building activities.

**Working in pairs or small groups.** According to the research literature, when working in pairs and getting support from a peer, students with Emotional Disturbance have the opportunity to increase their socialization skills as well as their friendships with



others in the classroom (Kaya et al., 2015). All of the students demonstrated isolation from others based on the lack of people or lack of interaction between people in their drawings.

Based on the classroom observations and student discipline records, the students were isolated from others, and would make negative or inappropriate comments in order to gain a peer's attention. Additionally, negative behavior would occur when they were in a conflict with someone else and were not sure how to handle a situation. Most of the students had a tendency to hit or physically threaten a peer when involved in a conflict situation with someone else.

Based on the information gathered from the Piers-Harris 2 and SBS, the majority of the students did not make an honest assessment about their behavior around others. Their teachers, in contrast, reported that some of the students needed to work on increasing their social skills, and decreasing their social problems and emotional distress. Overall, by having the opportunity to work in small groups or pairs, the participants had greater opportunities to decrease the isolation they were feeling and interact in a more positive way with others.

**Problem-Solving through role-playing.** When students with Emotional Disturbance have the opportunity to ask questions and problem solve about areas that are unfamiliar to them, they demonstrate more success and insight into school tasks and themselves (Maab & Artigue, 2013). According to the school discipline records for some of the participants in this study, the students were aware early on that they were not interacting well with others, but were not sure how to problem-solve to handle the interaction more appropriately. For example, Devon was asked several times to leave the

classroom when a female peer was upsetting him. Although at a later time, he reported that staff encouraged him to take a break from the classroom in the hallway, he noted he could not stop himself from spitting in her face. By participating in role-playing activities, the students would have the opportunity to practice and begin to develop more strategies for handling conflict situations with their peers.

**Relationship-Building activities.** Researchers found that group counseling approaches that focused on helping students increase their social skills and relationships with others helped these students interact more in their classrooms, increase their friendships with others, and demonstrate more positive school experiences (Hicks, 2012; Tucker et al., 2011; Van de berg, 2013; Wu et al., 2010). The student drawings and classroom observations showed the students having difficulty with their peer relationships. In the student drawings, Devon drew a picture of himself with four other students. Each person was involved in their own activity and were not interacting with one another. In a similar manner, Andrew drew a picture of two people standing next to each other, but were not doing something together or interacting with one another.

In the classroom observations conducted, Andrew and Daniel seemed to want attention from and to interact with their peers, but made negative choices when attempting the connection. Andrew made inappropriate joking comments to a peer when he wanted his attention and approval, and Daniel made a mean-spirited comment about a peer, but reported that what he said to the other student was a joke. By having the opportunity to focus on relationship-building activities, students could develop more positive ways of building relationships with others (Jordan & Dooley, 2000).

**Art therapy group structure.** The following section will outline the structure for each art therapy group session, which included the themes and strategies that were introduced to the students. First, the theme-based art therapy group format will be utilized in all 16 sessions. Second, strategies related to relationship-building skills from relational-cultural therapy were introduced to the students in the 16 group art therapy sessions. Finally, group therapy strategies to promote teamwork and a positive community were incorporated into all 16 sessions.

***Theme-Based art therapy group.*** Liebmann (2004) describes what is called a theme-based art therapy group. The theme-based art therapy group is structured in the following order: welcome to group and checking in with each student as they come into the session, introduction of the theme for the day, group discussion of the theme, role-play based on the group discussion, art project related to the theme, and discussion of the artwork with praise and support for one another (Lachance, 2002; Liebmann, 2004).

Several art therapy tasks were developed for the students to work on in pairs and in small groups. These tasks included the following: create body armor that includes strengths and weaknesses of each person in the group, work on creating a magazine collage that shows positive and negative relationships, create clay figures that are doing something together, create a group ladder, create a stone path that shows someone going from being disconnected to connected with others, create a bridge from being isolated to connecting with others, create a group story using photos of people, create a person who is stuck or isolated from others, and create a group painting. In addition to the art therapy tasks presented in the group sessions were the incorporation of relational-cultural therapy concepts and strategies that make up the themes for each group session.

***Relational-Cultural therapy concepts and strategies.*** Tucker et al. (2011)

emphasize the following relational-cultural therapy themes that I incorporated into the art therapy group sessions: accepting oneself, mental images of relationships, power in relationships, connections and disconnections with others, preconceptions of others, and improving positive interactions in school.

***Group therapy concepts.*** Each theme-based art therapy group session also incorporated group therapy theory and concepts of Yalom (1985), Kastner and May (2009), and Liebmann (2004) to promote positive behavior and relationship-building practices in the student participants. These concepts included building a sense of safety and community in the group, building a group identity, providing opportunities for students to learn new concepts, helping the students realize that others have similar problems to them, modeling prosocial behavior for students, encouraging students to express their feelings and concerns through discussions, role-plays or art therapy projects, and focusing on becoming a group that works well together.

***Art therapy group schedule.*** The 16 group art therapy sessions included a theme-based art therapy group structure, relational-cultural therapy strategies, and group therapy strategies. The first art therapy group began on October 5, 2016, and the last session took place on November 22, 2016. The following paragraphs describe the strategies that were included in each session.

***Session 1.*** The first session took place on October 5, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. The students were introduced to the group. Then I checked in with each person to see how his day was going. I reviewed with the students the school's policy on handling physical fights in the group; first I would attempt to verbally try to calm down the

students, then if necessary, I would use a therapeutic hold and escort students from the room if they were unsafe around the other group members. I also spoke about the opportunity to earn a snack each time that they participated in the group. I discussed the concept of self-acceptance (Tucker et al., 2011). I asked the students how they were able to accept themselves. After this discussion, I asked the students to work in pairs in a role-play where they practiced accepting themselves as well as accepting other people (Kastner & May, 2009). I encouraged the students to share how they felt about the role-play activity when they had finished (Yalom, 1985). Next, I introduced them to a group armor project. I encouraged them to use cardboard, templates of armor, magazine pictures, glue sticks, large scissors, drawing materials, construction paper, and fabric to create a group armor that showed the things that they liked and disliked about themselves (Liebmann, 2004). At the end of the art therapy session, I asked the students to talk about what they had created so far, and reminded them that they would have more time to work on the armor in the next session. Lastly, I encouraged the students to give each other positive feedback and support for what they had created, and provided them with snacks as they left the room (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002).

*Session 2.* The second art therapy group took place on October 7, 2016 from 9:15am-10:00am. The students checked in with me about how they were feeling when they came into the group that day (Liebmann, 2004). I also reminded them about getting snacks at the end of the group to thank them for participating (Crow & Small, 2011). I reviewed with them the term self-acceptance from the previous group session. I asked the students to describe what the word self-acceptance meant to them (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Next, I asked the students to work in pairs on a role-play in which one person had

done really badly on work from school, and the other person tried to offer encouragement (Kastner & May, 2009). I asked the students to talk about how they felt after they participated in the role-play (Yalom, 1985). Then I encouraged the students to continue working on the group armor project. This included adding more details and finishing touches to the project such as fabric and tissue paper (Liebmann, 2004). At the end of the session, I encouraged everyone to discuss the finished armor piece, to give each other encouragement and compliments about what was created, and I provided the students with snacks before they left the room (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985).

*Session 3.* The third art therapy group took place on October 13, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. I asked how the students were feeling as they came into the room, and reminded them that they would receive snacks at the end of the group (Crow & Small, 2011; Liebmann, 2004). I introduced the word relationship, and asked the group to help me create a list of different types of relationships that people can have (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). This included the following questions: what were some positive and negative things they had experienced in relationships, and did negative relationships discourage them from making new friends (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). After this discussion, I asked the students to work in pairs on a role-play activity; one person was interested in making a new friendship, but the other person was worried because the new person reminds him of someone who treated him negatively in the past (Kastner & May, 2009; Tucker et al., 2001). I spoke with the students about how they felt about the role-play when it was finished and then introduced them to a new art therapy project. I encouraged the students to create a clay figure and then asked the students to think of an activity that the

completed clay figures did together (Liebmann, 2004). Once the clay figures were completed I encouraged the students to talk about what they had created (Yalom, 1985). The group ended with me encouraging the students to give each other compliments for what they had created and reminding the students to take a snack to thank them for participating in the group that day (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002).

*Session 4.* The fourth art therapy group took place on October 18, 2016 from 1:30pm-2:15pm. As the students entered the room, I asked them how they were feeling that morning (Liebmann, 2004). Next I explained to the group that we were talking about friendships like we had in the previous session. I would ask them to describe specific examples of positive friendships and negative friendships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I also asked them how they formed a positive friendship with someone else. After this discussion, the students participated in a role-play that demonstrated positive and negative friendships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner & May, 2009). I encouraged the students to talk about their feelings after they participated in the role-play activity (Yalom, 1985). Next, I introduced the art therapy project, which was a magazine collage. Using magazine pictures, the students were encouraged to make a collage of pictures that reminded them of positive friendships from their lives and included activities that they liked to do with someone else (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). I led a discussion of what they had created and encouraged them to give one another praise for their completed projects (Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985). I gave the students snacks as they left the group that day (Crow & Small, 2011).

*Session 5.* The fifth art therapy group session took place on October 20, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. When the students came into the room I asked them about their

day and how they were feeling (Liebmann, 2004). Next, I introduced them to the concept of power and power in relationships and asked them to answer the following questions: what does power mean, what does it mean to have power in relationships, and what type of power exists when someone is bullying someone else (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). After the students answered the questions, I introduced the role-play activity. In this role-play, one student played the victim, one person played the bully, and a third person played the person trying to help the victim (Kastner & May, 2009). After the students participated in and discussed their reactions to the role-play, I introduced an art therapy project. Using cardboard and duct tape, the students would be asked to construct a ladder (Liebmann, 2004). In another group session, the students were asked to create small figures of people that stood at different points on the ladder to represent different levels of power (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I encouraged the students to give one another praise for the ladder they had created, I handed them snacks for participating in the group session that day (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002).

*Session 6.* The sixth art therapy group session took place on October 21, 2016 from 10:30am-11:15am. I asked the students about their morning as they came into the group (Liebmann, 2004). Then I reviewed with them the relational-cultural therapy concepts that I had discussed with the students in the previous sessions. This included self-acceptance, friendships, and power in relationships, and I reminded the students about applying these concepts to how they treated one another in the group (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). The students were encouraged to think of rules for the group that the students could show acceptance, kindness, and respect toward one another (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Tucker et al., 2011). They were reminded to create a group name (Yalom,



1985). After this opening discussion, I encouraged the students to participate in a role-play activity. In this role-play, the students formed small groups and role-played a friendship in which one of the people had more power or leadership in the friendship than the other person (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner & May, 2009). I asked the students to describe how they felt as they participated in the role-play and if it was similar to issues of power that they have had in their own friendships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985). Next I asked the students to continue to work on the ladder they had started constructing in the previous session. In this session, I asked them to create small figures that they would place on different rungs on the ladder to represent different levels of power (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). At the end of the session, the students were encouraged to give each other compliments for the artwork they had created, and were given snacks as they left the room (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002).

*Session 7.* The seventh art therapy group took place on October 24, 2016 from 1:30pm-2:15pm. As the students came into the room, I asked them about their day and reminded them that they were receiving gift cards for their participation in the group in the next group session (Crow & Small, 2011). Then I introduced the concept of connections and disconnections with others. I pointed out that it was normal to have had disagreements with or be disappointed by someone else. I asked them the following questions: what are your feelings about disagreements or disappointments with others, and when have you felt disconnected from other people at school (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Next, I introduced a role-play activity to the students. I asked them to break into small groups and act as if they were arguing about the best way to handle a bullying situation (Kastner & May, 2009). After the students participated in the role-play activity,

I asked them how they felt about the role-play and then introduced an art therapy project. I asked the students to work together to create two group pictures: one picture of creatures or people that were connected, and another picture of the same creatures or people when they were not connected (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). After the students completed the two drawings, I encouraged them to give each other compliments about what they had created before they were given a snack and ended the group (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002).

*Session 8.* The eighth art therapy group took place on October 26, 2016 from 9:45am-10:30am. I asked the students about their morning as they came into the group room (Liebmann, 2004). I reminded the students that they were receiving their first gift card today and a snack at the end of the group for their continued participation (Crow & Small, 2011). I spoke to the students about disconnecting from others, that this happened in middle school, and that students ended up feeling isolated from others (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Tucker et al., 2001). As a part of the discussion I asked the students to answer the following questions: what does the word isolation mean, and when have you felt isolated in school. Next, I asked the students to participate in a role-play in which they acted as if they were isolated from other people at school (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner & May, 2009). After they discussed how they felt in the role-play, I introduced the art therapy project. I showed them five large construction paper circles and lined them up on the floor as if they were a path of stones across a small body of water. At the circle at one end I wrote the word “connected” and at the other end I wrote on a circle the word “disconnected.” On the remaining three circles I asked the students to write or draw as a group ideas to help someone go from feeling disconnected to connect to others (Jordan &

Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). After the students were encouraged to talk about what was created, they were asked to give each other compliments about what was created, and were given snacks and their gift cards to end the group that day (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002).

*Session 9.* The ninth session took place on October 31, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. The students were asked how they felt when they entered the room and were reminded that they were receiving a snack at the end of the group (Crow & Small, 2011; Liebmann, 2004). I spoke about ways that people can be positive and connect to others. This included the following strategies: be a good listener, accept someone else's experiences, even if they were different from your own, and think of cool, fun, and funny things to do together (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I asked the students if they had used these different strategies before. Next, I asked the students to role-play speaking about different topics and show that they were listening to each other and accepting differences of opinions (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner & May, 2009). I encouraged the students to talk about what the role-play experience was like when they had completed the activity (Yalom, 1985). Then I introduced an art therapy task; the students were asked to create a bridge with a character on one side that wanted to connect to new people in a positive way. In the middle of the bridge, the students were asked to write or draw ways that a person could interact in a positive way with someone else (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). The students were encouraged to talk about what they had created and to give one another compliments before earning a snack and leaving the group (Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985).

*Session 10.* The tenth group art therapy session took place on November 1, 2016 from 10:00am-10:45am. I greeted the students as they entered the room and asked them about their day (Liebmann, 2004). Next, I wrote the word “connections” on the board and asked the students what the word meant to them (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I also pointed out three strategies for connections that were discussed in the previous session. I asked the students if they had the opportunity to use the three strategies (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Once we finished this discussion, I asked the students to continue working on the bridge project that they had started in the previous session (Liebmann, 2004). After the students worked on the project and spoke about it, they were encouraged to give each other compliments about what was created (Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985). Lastly, the students received snacks as the group ended that day (Crow & Small, 2011).

*Session 11.* The eleventh art therapy group session took place on November 7, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. I asked the students about their day as they entered the room and reminded them that they were receiving a snack at the end of the group (Crow & Small, 2011; Liebmann, 2011). Next, I introduced the concept of controlled images. I asked the students what they thought controlled images meant. I explained that people could have assumptions about others based on past experiences and stereotypes (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I also mentioned that people were more disconnected from others when they have made assumptions about others. Then I introduced the role-play activity. The students were asked to work in small groups and role play one person being a new student who transferred to the school from another country. The other students played the role of people not accepting the student because he reminded them of people they knew before or of stereotypes they had of certain people (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner &

May, 2009). The students were encouraged to act out how they would speak to each other in the role-play. Then I asked the students to participate in a second role-play in which they spoke to a new student with respect and found ways to connect to the new person (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner & May, 2009). I encouraged the students to talk about the experience when they were finished the role-play (Yalom, 1985). Next, I asked the students to work on an art therapy project in which they created a story from magazine pictures of people from a variety of different backgrounds. The students were asked to put the pictures of the people onto cardboard, create a story about each of the people in the pictures, and decide if all the people in the pictures were getting along with and accepted by each other (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004; Yalom, 1985). After working on this project, the students were encouraged to praise each other about what they had worked on and receive a snack before the group ended that day (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002).

*Session 12.* The twelfth art therapy group session took place on November 8, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. As the students entered the room, I asked them about their day and how they were feeling (Liebmann, 2004). Next, I reviewed the concept of a controlled or stereotyped image from the previous session (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I encouraged the students to describe this concept. Then I asked the students to work with the magazine pictures they had picked of people from the previous session and create an environment for the people to be in together and connect beyond stereotypes and outer appearances (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2011). The students, when they completed the project, were encouraged to speak about and give each other compliments

for their efforts (Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985). Then the students received a snack as they were leaving the group (Crow & Small, 2011).

*Session 13.* The thirteenth art therapy group took place on November 14, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. The students were asked about their day and how they were feeling as they entered the room (Liebmann, 2004). Next, I spoke with the students about the concept of central paradox, which was when someone was stuck or isolated because of biased beliefs (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I wrote the word “stuck” on the board and asked the students to tell me words they thought of when they saw the word stuck. Then I asked them to think of times they had felt stuck or isolated around others, and when they had felt stuck when others had used stereotypes to describe them (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985). Next, the students participated in a role-play in which one person was stuck in quicksand and the other students had to help the student escape and feel connected to others (Kastner & May, 2009). After speaking about their reaction to the role-play, the students were asked to create an environment that a person experienced feeling stuck. I asked them to use a variety of collage materials to make the place, and offered the students the use of my computer to print out images of people who look like they are stuck or isolated from others (Liebmann, 2004). They were asked how they felt about the art therapy project, were encouraged to give compliments to each other’s contributions to the group, and received a snack as they were leaving the group (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985).

*Session 14.* The fourteenth art therapy group took place on November 15, 2016 from 12:30pm-1:00pm. The students were asked about their day and how they were feeling as they entered the room (Liebmann, 2004). I reviewed with them from the

previous session the idea of being stuck based on stereotypes of others. I asked the students when they felt isolated from others because you believed stereotypes about different people (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). I asked the students to participate in a role-play in which one person was not giving another person a chance to be his friend because of a belief in a stereotype (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner & May, 2009). The other students were asked to try to convince the first student to view the person for who he was as an individual, rather than a stereotype. I encouraged the students to share their experiences of participating in this role-play, and then I invited them to continue to work on the art therapy project that they had started in the previous session (Liebmann, 2004; Yalom, 1985). I encouraged the students to speak about what they created, to give each other compliments for their efforts, and I gave them a snack as they left the group that day (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985).

*Session 15.* The fifteenth art therapy group took place on November 21, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. I asked the students how they felt as they entered the room, reminded them that we had one session left, and had the opportunity to earn a gift card for the last session (Crow & Small, 2011; Liebmann, 2004). Next, I began a discussion of the ways the students could build positive relationships with other people in school (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). After the students provided some ideas, I reviewed with them some main concepts introduced in relational-cultural therapy such as empathy, accepting someone even if you disagree with them, focusing on positive strengths of each other, and thinking of a positive activity to do together (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Tucker et al., 2011). Then I introduced a role-play activity by asking them if they knew what the word empathy meant (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985). On slips of paper, I wrote

different scenarios about empathy that the students chose to act out in small groups. After the students shared their reactions to the role-play, I explained the art therapy task. The students were presented with a large canvas to create a group painting that showed people getting along together in school (Liebmann, 2004). After the students worked on the group painting, they were asked about how they felt about the project, and gave each other compliments for their contributions to the project (Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985). Lastly, they received a snack as they left the room (Crow & Small, 2011).

*Session 16.* The sixteenth art therapy group session took place on November 22, 2016 from 1:00pm-1:45pm. I asked the students about their day as they entered the room, and reminded them about the gift card that they would receive at the end of the group (Crow & Small, 2011; Liebmann, 2004). I began a discussion about what they thought they learned from coming to the group twice a week over the past eight weeks. I asked them if they had taken what they learned in the group and applied it to their interactions with their friends (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985). Next, I asked the students to continue working on the group painting that they had started in the previous session. They were provided with paints and a canvas to work on this project. I reminded them that they were depicting how people could interact positively with one another in school (Liebmann, 2002). The students spoke about the painting, gave each other compliments for their contributions, and received a snack and gift card as they left the group session (Crow & Small, 2011; Lachance, 2002; Yalom, 1985).

**Summary of Cycle 3.** The art therapy group program was developed in this cycle in the study. The art therapy group program lasted eight weeks and met twice a week to give students a greater opportunity to understand, and put into practice, different therapy



concepts and techniques. In planning each of the 16 art therapy group sessions, information gathered from the first two cycles of the study was used to develop the group art therapy program. In the first cycle, I reviewed therapeutic approaches used in past studies that have helped students with Emotional Disturbance have more positive interactions with others. In the second cycle, the main theme I developed from an analysis of data collected included decreased positive relationships with others. Based on those two cycles, the students had the opportunity to work together in pairs or small groups, take part in discussion groups and role-play activities, and participate in friendship and relationship-building activities. These strategies would be used to promote decreased isolation from others and increased positive relationships with their peers. The research design also included a specific structure for each session, with the incorporation of art therapy tasks, relational-cultural therapy themes, and group therapy practices.

Liebmann (2004) describes what is called a theme-based art therapy group and is the format that I used for the group art therapy program. The theme-based art therapy group meets for a specific period of time and the activities that are used in the group sessions focus each week on the overall goals of the group. In this study the group sessions were theme-based with a focus on improving classroom behavior and relationship-building skills.

Several art therapy tasks were developed for the students to work on in pairs and in small groups. I also incorporated relational-cultural theories and concepts that became the theme for each group session. Additionally, group therapy concepts and strategies were utilized in each art therapy group session that focused the group forming an identity and working together effectively, expressing their feelings and concerns in a genuine

manner, understanding that others in the group understand what is difficult for them at school, and that students can learn appropriate ways of interacting by modeling my behavior in the group.

The third cycle of this study concluded with a description of the 16 art therapy group sessions. These descriptions included the date of the group, the structure of the group, topics of group discussions, role-play activities, and art therapy projects.

## Chapter V

### Findings from the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Cycles

#### Cycle 4: Implementing the Group Art Therapy Program

In the fourth cycle, the group art therapy program was implemented. The students participated in 16 sessions of the art therapy group; the group met twice a week for eight weeks from October 6, 2016 to November 22, 2016. Each of the group art therapy sessions was described in detail in the third cycle of this study. Qualitative data were collected from the 16 group art therapy sessions. These included student observations during the art therapy group sessions, artwork completed during those sessions, and a researcher self-reflection journal of each session. Based on the qualitative data collected, the students responded positively to several art therapy, relational-cultural therapy, and group therapy strategies, which would be incorporated into future group art therapy sessions for the students. These strategies were 1) acceptance and trust among group members (Tucker et al. 2011; Yalom, 1985), 2) universality (Yalom, 1985), 3) group cohesion (Yalom, 1985), 4) self-expression through art (Liebmann, 2004), 5) imparting of information (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985), 6) role-play in groups (Kastner & May, 2009), and 7) modeling prosocial behaviors (Yalom, 1985).

**Acceptance and trust among group members.** Acceptance and trust among group members was a group therapy strategy introduced by Yalom (1985). Yalom (1985) reports that when individuals first meet in a group therapy format, it is important for the therapist to establish an atmosphere in which the group members can begin to build trust and acceptance of each other. I focused on building this type of atmosphere of non-judgment and acceptance for each of the 16 group art therapy sessions in the following

ways: reminding students that the sessions were private and confidential, that I would not be talking about what we discussed in the group to others in the school, encouraging students to interact in a positive rather than a negative way toward each other, and reminding students that they would be accepted for their strengths and challenges.

After attending five sessions together as a group, the students in the sixth session on October 21, 2016, demonstrated greater trust, respect, and acceptance of each other. First, the students developed a set of group rules to treat each other kindly and with respect. In the sessions that preceded the sixth session, the students were asked to work on establishing group rules and a group name, but had a more difficult time maintaining eye contact and verbal discussion without my prompting them to interact with one another in a more positive way. Additionally, they did not sit near each other in the room or easily ask one another to work together on group projects. In the sixth session, the students spoke to one another with eye contact and created the following group rules:

1. Listen to each other.
2. Take turns speaking.
3. Feelings and concerns expressed will stay within the group.
3. We will not use profanity or negative comments toward someone else.
4. We will not throw objects at someone else.
5. We will give each other support and praise.
6. It is okay to have weaknesses; no one has to be perfect to be a part of this group.

(Field Note, October 21, 2016)

I noted in my journal that after the students worked with ease on creating group rules that they were also able to select a group name and group song. I wrote:

All of the group members smiled, laughed and seemed generally pleased with the group rules they created. I asked the group if they were ready to create a group name. Most of the students in previous weeks had called each other a turtle when they thought someone said something funny in the group session. Daniel

suggested that they call their group the turtles, and the other group members easily agreed to that as the group name. (Field Note, October 21, 2016)

I also noted that Andrew asked everyone if they also needed a group song. The other group members seemed to like that idea and they voted on a song by PBB All in called "The Turtle Song" which contained the following lyrics:

My love for you is strong like the shell of a turtle,  
My love for you is elongated, like the neck of a turtle,  
My love for you is cute, like the tail of the turtle,  
And we will fight all of the odds, like the arms of the turtle,  
Fighting the tides,  
Fighting the tides. (PBB All in, 2014)

After this group session ended, I analyzed how the group name and group song related to each of the group members and their level of trust and acceptance of each other.

I wrote in my journal:

When I thought about the students picking the group name the turtles, I remembered what I learned about animals representing people in my experience as an art therapist; the qualities of the animal may mirror the characteristics of the individual. Turtles, have a strong shell but have a reputation for moving slowly and this could be seen as a weaknesses by other animals and humans. The group members as a whole may have felt that they require a hard outer shell to protect themselves, but feel they were seen as weak when completing class activities more slowly and with more difficulty than some of their classmates. I thought that the "Turtle Song" was picked with some sarcasm by the students, especially in the first few lines of the song. The last several lines described turtles that needed to fight together against challenges that were presented to them. I thought the students as a group were identifying themselves like the turtles with strengths, but would work together against adversity to handle areas that were more difficult for them. (Field Note, Oct. 21, 2016)

Overall, when the students were encouraged to establish trust, respect, and acceptance of each other, they began to work together more effectively as a group. The establishment of trust and acceptance in the group art therapy session helped the students

to respond positively to the other art therapy, relational-cultural therapy, and group therapy strategies. An example of one of these other strategies was universality, which was introduced by Yalom (1985).

**Universality.** Yalom (1985) describes universality as the realization among group members that they are not alone in how they feel and what they have experienced in the past. During the second group art therapy session, the students had a discussion about receiving bad grades in school. I wrote about the discussion in my journal:

Andrew noted that he has received bad grades in school, but has tried to hide this from other people; although he thought of himself as a smart person, he did not want others to see that he had received bad grades. Devon spoke about handling bad grades in a similar way and hoping to keep the information from his parents. Roger reported that he also had bad grades before but tries to keep going and get better with his school work. Daniel and Isaac stated that they did not receive bad grades; Daniel noted that he would be pretty upset if he did. After this discussion, the students smiled when I pointed out that the different group members had similar experiences to others in the group and were not alone in how they felt about their school work. (Field Note, Oct. 7, 2016)

In the fourth session on October 18, 2016, the students also experienced universality through their similar feelings about pets. In my journal, I wrote:

After Roger, Devon, and Daniel saw that they had each picked animal pictures for an upcoming art project, they began a spontaneous discussion about their pets at home. Devon spoke about thinking of his dog as his friend, but not wanting to tell other people because they may tease him for feeling that way. Then Roger spoke and noted that he also thought of pets he had at home as friends that could be easier to get along with than people. Daniel laughed and said that his friends were online or his pets at home; it was harder for him to maintain friends at his school. When I pointed out to the three students that they had expressed similar ideas about their pets, they laughed and seemed pleased about agreeing about the importance of animals in their lives. (Field Note, Oct. 18, 2016)

Overall, the students learned through their interactions in the group art therapy sessions that they were not alone in how they were feeling; other students in the group had similar experiences to them and could provide support to one another through a shared understanding of a situation (Yalom, 1985). Students also provided support to one another as they became more cohesive as a group (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom 1985).

**Group cohesion.** Both Liebmann (2004) and Yalom (1985) define group cohesion as the ability of group members to work together on a group project or activity without conflict; this includes the roles each group member takes to help complete the group task. In several of the group art therapy sessions, the students demonstrated that they were able to communicate with each other and establish different roles and responsibilities in order to complete group art therapy projects.

For example, on November 7, 2016, which was the eleventh group art therapy session, the students were asked to create a group collage with magazine pictures that told a story about people doing something together (Liebmann, 2004). I wrote about the session in my journal:

I asked each of the students to choose a magazine picture that represented themselves, and show them in one picture doing something together. Isaac took on the role of group organizer and asked the other group members if the picture could show them eating at McDonald's together. The other students agreed and began to glue their pictures onto an 18 by 24 piece of white drawing paper. Once the pictures were glued on, Andrew and Devon added wooden sticks to the picture to represent tables and chairs at McDonald's. Isaac, Devon, and Roger chose to finish up the drawing for the group with markers. Isaac added a large M to the picture to represent McDonald's; then Devon also added the letter M, and Roger wrote a phrase near the Isaac's letter M that said "I'm loving it," which Andrew jokingly said throughout most of the session. Although the figures in the artwork appear to be isolated and separated from one another by wooden sticks, the students' agreement about including the letter M and the phrase "I'm loving it"

seemed to represent their ability to agree on ideas and work together more as a group. (Field Note, Nov. 7, 2016)

The artwork produced from this group is pictured in Figure 4.



*Figure 4.* Students' Group Magazine Collage.

In their sixteenth and last session on November 22, 2016, the students demonstrated that they worked cohesively as a group to create a completed painting.

During that last session I wrote:

Although Devon expressed to the group members that he was not comfortable working with paints, he took on the role of thinking of ideas for completing the project and for helping the others paint on the canvas. Devon and Roger asked the group if they wanted to create a painting of the five of them playing basketball together. The other students agreed with this idea. Daniel, Isaac, and Andrew drew and added paint with brushes and stamps to create the painting. Roger added a final layer of paint around each of the figures to emphasize them and to show them playing basketball together. Although the students created stick figures and not fully developed people playing basketball, they created a finished piece of artwork that showed a group of people doing something together. While the students were working on the painting, they stayed in close proximity to each



other at the table; in earlier group art therapy sessions, the students did not seem as comfortable being in the same space and worked on projects from different areas of the room. Roger, Daniel, and Devon smiled when they finished the painting, and Roger and Andrew gave each other a high five when the project was completed. (Field Note, Nov. 22, 2016)

The group painting created in the last session is shown in Figure 5.



*Figure 5. Session 16 Group Painting*

Overall, the students demonstrated increased group cohesion when they were able to communicate ideas, and take on different roles and responsibilities to complete a group

art therapy project. Not only did the students demonstrate increased group cohesion through the group art therapy projects, but they were able to use their artwork to express their thoughts and concerns.

**Self-Expression through art.** Liebmann (2004) and Moon (2010) report that self-expression through art provides individuals with a non-verbal way to express their feelings and concerns. This could be especially helpful for students who do not express themselves easily in verbal conversations with others. In the sixth session on October 21, 2016, the students were asked to create a ladder with cardboard and tape, which they could add figures to at different points on the ladder to represent the amount of power each person had. For example, a person with more power would be located on a higher rung on the ladder. I wrote about this session in my journal:

Devon and Andrew ripped the cardboard into smaller pieces to get the cardboard ready to use, Isaac, Roger and Andrew taped the cardboard pieces together to create the ladder. Isaac, Roger, and Andrew put extra pieces of duct tape on each piece of cardboard because all three of them expressed to me that they were worried that the ladder was not strong and would fall apart. The second part of this project was to draw or create out of clay people to add to different parts of the ladder to represent different levels of power with each other. Although encouraged to add people, the students chose not to include figures on the ladder. Overall, the students seemed happy to complete the project, but did not want to talk about what they had created. (Field Note, Oct. 21, 2016)

Jordan and Dooley (2000) and Liebmann (2004) report that the incompleteness of the ladder project could have been an avoidance of expressing how they felt about power struggles with others, or those who seemed to have more social power than they do. Although the art project was not completed in its entirety, the use of extra duct tape on the project and the lack of figures indicated to me that they were either not comfortable with the topic of power in relationships or did not feel they had power or control in their

relationships with others (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). They did not express their discomfort with the concept of power in their verbal discussions; their artwork helped them to express this more easily. The ladder artwork is shown in Figure 6.



*Figure 6. Session 6 Group Ladder Project*

In the seventh session on October 24, 2016, the students were asked to create two group drawings; the first showed turtles that were connected or were interacting well with each other, and the second drawing depicted turtles getting angry with each other and not being connected to each other. I wrote about the second drawing in my journal:

In the second drawing, the students drew their turtles with word clouds above them to show what they were saying to each other. Isaac noted that the turtles had been getting along, but then one of the turtles ate all of the pizza meant for the whole group of turtles. I looked at all the cursing used in the drawing and the distance that the turtles were from each other. I asked the students if what happened to the turtles happened to them when they had disagreed or fought with their peers. Roger reported that this had happened to him; he would be getting

along with someone else, and if they had a disagreement, he and the other person would curse and stay away from each other. (Field Note, Oct. 24, 2016)

Liebmann (2004) reports that when objects or creatures in a picture are drawn away from each other, this indicated that the individual was feeling isolated from others. The turtles were drawn with no real proximity to each other or interaction. The word clouds above each of the turtles shown were making a negative comment or used profanity. This seemed to indicate that their ability to handle conflict with others was a challenge for the students. Although the students verbalized that they had difficulty handling disagreements with their peers, the drawing they created of the turtles in a fight helped me to see more clearly how difficult it was for them to handle conflicts with others. The drawing from the session is shown in Figure 7.

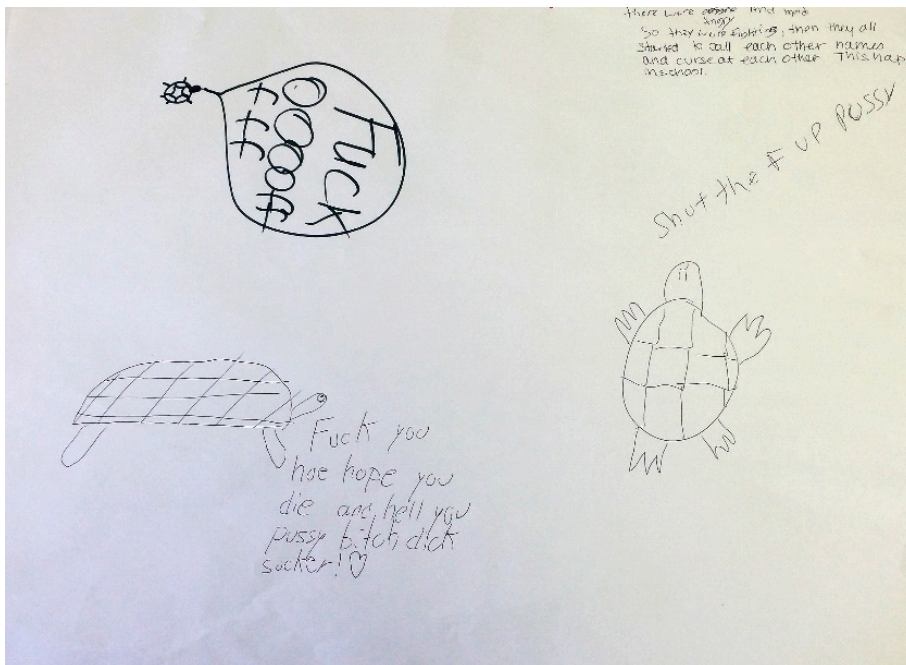


Figure 7. Session 7 Students' Disconnection Drawing

Overall, when the students had the opportunity to express themselves through different art projects, they were able to convey more fully how they felt about themselves and their relationships with others; although they expressed themselves through verbal discussions, their artwork provided a more detailed view of why interactions with others were challenging for them. In addition to working on art projects to express themselves fully, the students also utilized the imparting of information and role-play strategies to express their concerns about their interactions with others.

**Imparting of information.** Yalom (1985) describes the group therapy strategy, imparting of information in the following way: first the therapist introduces a word or theme to the group, then asks the group members to guess the word's definition and describe an example of the word or theme from their own lives.

I wrote in my journal about sessions in which the students listened to my opening introduction and discussion of different words or themes, and were able to provide examples from their own lives. In the third session on October 13, 2016, I introduced the theme of positive and negative friendships, and wrote about this group in my journal:

First, I opened the discussion by reporting that everyone at some point experiences both positive and negative friendships. I asked the students to define what makes up a positive friendship. Isaac mentioned that in a positive friendship, a person is not mean to you but has respect for you. Daniel noted that when two people were in a positive friendship, they provided support for each other and defended each other in fights with their classmates. Next, I asked the students to define negative friendships. Roger noted that when one friend encouraged another friend to take drugs or alcohol, that the two people had a negative friendship. When I asked the students to describe examples of positive and negative friendships from their own lives, Devon spoke at length about students who hit and kicked him every day at his old school. When he met people at this school who could have potentially been friends with him, he reported he did not make an effort to make new friendships, because they reminded him of the students from his old school who had hurt him. (Field Note, October 13, 2016)

By imparting information to the students by introducing a theme and asking the students about it, the group members expressed more about their concerns in their peer interactions. This was also the case during the seventh group art therapy session on October 24, 2016, when I spoke about the concept of feeling disconnected or isolated from others. In my journal I wrote:

I brought up to the students feeling isolated or disconnected from others. Each student in the group was nodding his head as I spoke and maintained eye contact with me. Isaac spoke about noticing when students seemed isolated from others in their school. For example, he mentioned a younger female student who tended to spend the majority of the day at the school without speaking to peers or school staff members. Isaac noted that often at lunch and recess she sat by herself. Next, I asked if anyone in the group had felt isolated from others, Daniel noted that when he had felt alone before he became angry and upset because he did not want to be alone. (Field Note, Oct. 24, 2017)

Overall, when students had the opportunity to take part in group discussion about different concepts or themes that I introduced to them, the students were comfortable discussing their ideas with me, gave examples from their own experiences, and provided me with more information related to their negative peer interactions with their classmates. In addition to the imparting of information group therapy strategy used in each group art therapy session, role-play activities were also incorporated into the group work with the students.

**Role-Play in groups.** Kastner and May (2009) report that when students had the opportunity to participate in a role-play, they could extend their understanding of new concepts and themes. In a role-play for a group therapy format, the students worked in pairs, each chose a role, and acted out a skit related to relationships with others (Kastner & May, 2009). I wrote about a role-play in which the students participated in the tenth session on November 1, 2016:

In an effort to help the students develop more positive ways of handling disagreements or conflicts with others, I asked the students to work in pairs and act as if they were two people who had discussed the upcoming presidential election, and were not rooting for the same candidate. I wanted them to have the opportunity to practice disagreeing with someone without a fight or negative comments said to one another. Instead all the students yelled the name "Trump" and shook each other hands. When I asked the students why they had not play-acted disagreeing with each other, Roger explained for the group that they would rather agree with someone than cope with the fall-out from disagreeing with a person. I asked them to try again, and gave them examples of things to say to one another on the board in the room. These included saying one of the following to each other: it was okay to have a difference of opinion, it did not mean a friendship was ending, and different ideas did not mean that one person was right and one person was wrong. With examples given to them ahead of time to say to one another, the students were able to role-play handling a difference of opinion in a positive way. (Field Note, November 1, 2016)

By having the opportunity to act out through role-play interactions with others that have been difficult for the students to handle, the group members had an opportunity to practice handling those types of situations in a more positive way (Kastner & May, 2009). In the fifteenth session on November 21, 2016, the students also demonstrated more positive ways of interacting with their peers through the role-play activity for that group session. In my journal I wrote:

I asked the students to participate in a role-play related to having empathy for others and understanding what they were going through; the students were asked to act like a friend to someone who had lost a pet. The students broke up into small groups and worked well acting out this role-play. Devon acted in the role of the student who had lost a pet, because he stated he had dogs and is dreading when they would pass away. Roger let Devon know that he understood how he felt, and that he could try to think of positive memories of a lost pet to help him feel better about the situation. Daniel and Andrew both had lost pets, but Isaac did not have a pet. Although he did not know what it was like to lose a pet, Isaac provided Daniel and Andrew with empathy and support by listening carefully to them speaking about their loss and suggesting listening to favorite music as a way to cope with their loss. (Field Note, Nov. 21, 2016)

Overall, by participating in role-play activities in their group art therapy sessions, the students learned and practiced more positive ways to handle a variety of different peer scenarios. Another strategy utilized to help the students practice interacting with others in a more positive way was through the use of modeling prosocial behaviors (Tucker et al., 2011; Yalom, 1985).

**Modeling prosocial behaviors.** According to Tucker et al. (2011) and Yalom (1985), individuals learn about more positive ways to interact with others when the group therapist models socially appropriate behaviors for the students in the group. For example, if I observed a negative interaction in the group, I would go over to the student and show them more positive ways to speak of themselves or get along with others. I employed modeling prosocial behaviors in each of the group art therapy sessions. In the second session on October 7, 2016, I wrote about Daniel putting himself down in front of the other group members and how I intervened:

The students were thinking of things to add to the group armor that they were finishing. Daniel had trouble attaching some of the cardboard pieces together and seemed frustrated with the task. Daniel took a deep breath and stated that he was “dumb.” I went over to him and spoke to him about some tasks being difficult and some were easier to handle. I reminded him that everyone can get frustrated by projects that are hard to do; he needed to rephrase how he spoke about himself. I modeled for him how I would speak about myself if something was difficult. I said “I can think of myself as smart even if this project is hard to do.” Daniel repeated this statement about himself and seemed more relaxed during the rest of his time in the group. (Field Note, October 7, 2016)

In addition to modeling more positive ways to speak of themselves, I also showed the students how to interact more positively with one another. During the fifth session on October 20, 2016, I wrote about modeling positive social interactions for the students:

After the students came into the room, they began to call each other names and throw objects at one another for the first 10 minutes of the group, even though



they had been given several reminders to stop the behavior. The students were laughing the entire time they were displaying the behavior and were trying to say things to one another that the others would think were funny. I mentioned to all of the students that they could joke around with each other in the group, but there needed to be rules for the jokes. First, the joke needed to be appropriate for the school setting. Second, the students could joke with each other and make each other laugh without throwing things at one another or using profanity. I had Roger practice joking with me in an appropriate way as a model to follow for the other students. For the rest of the group that day, if the students joked with one another, they did so with appropriate subject matter and language and without throwing things at each other. (Field Note, October 20, 2016)

Overall, the students seemed to change their behavior in a positive way in the group when I modeled for them different ways to think of themselves and interact with their peers.

**Summary of Cycle 4.** In the fourth cycle, the group art therapy program was implemented, and observations, student artwork, and my reflections of the 16-session group process was documented. These qualitative measures yielded positive responses to several art, relational-cultural, and group therapy approaches. These approaches were 1) acceptance and trust among group members (Tucker et al. 2011; Yalom, 1985), 2) universality (Yalom, 1985), 3) group cohesion (Yalom, 1985), 4) self-expression through art (Liebmann, 2004), 5) imparting of information (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985), 6) role play in groups (Kastner & May, 2009), and 7) modeling prosocial behaviors (Yalom, 1985).

#### **Cycle 5: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Group Art Therapy Program**

In this cycle, not only did I concurrently use a variety of quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to assess students' behavior and relationships with others after they participated in the group art therapy program, but I also reviewed student qualitative data collected in the fourth cycle to assess the impact of the group art

therapy program on the student-participants. The qualitative data in the fourth cycle of this study were collected from group art therapy observations, student artwork, and my self-reflective journal.

In the fifth cycle, the students completed the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale, and the classroom teachers completed the School Behavior Survey. I conducted classroom observations, students met with me individually to complete art therapy drawings, and I reviewed descriptions of student negative behavior and consequences given from student discipline records. All of the data collected in the fifth cycle were compared to the data collected in the second cycle of this study, which took place before the students participated in the group art therapy program. By comparing the data collected from the second, fourth, and fifth cycles of this study, I assessed student differences in classroom behavior and relationships with others before and after participating in the group art therapy program.

**Quantitative measures.** The Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale and the School Behavior Survey were used in this cycle as well as the second cycle of this study.

***Piers-Harris 2 Self Concept Scale.*** The Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale was administered to each of the student participants individually in my office on November 29, 2016. The Piers-Harris 2 is intended for students between the ages of 7 to 18; this measure contains 60 items, which are statements that express how people feel about themselves (Piers & Herzberg, 2002). The Piers-Harris 2 contains six different domains that are used to assess self-concept. These domains are Behavioral Adjustment, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes, Freedom from Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction.

Each student took approximately 15 minutes to complete this measure. Isaac completed this measure on November 29, 2016; Devon and Andrew completed it on November 30, 2016; Daniel completed the Piers-Harris 2 on December 5, 2016; and Roger on December 6, 2016. I instructed the students to review each of the items on this measure, and circle “yes” if the statement applied to him and “no” if the item did not pertain to him. I collected and manually scored each of the forms completed by the students. Table 4 shows the scores that the students received during the second and fifth cycle of this study.

Table 4

*Individual Student T-Scores From the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale*

T-scores	Isaac 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Isaac 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Devon 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Devon 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Andrew 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Andrew 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Daniel 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Daniel 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Roger 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Roger 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle
Total score	49	<b>72</b>	52	53	<b>58</b>	53	<b>30</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>&gt;80</b>	<b>44</b>
Behavioral adjustment	54	<b>62</b>	54	<b>62</b>	54	<b>63</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>41</b>
Intellectual and school status	<b>65</b>	<b>66</b>	54	48	<b>59</b>	46	<b>29</b>	48	54	51
Physical appearance and attributes	52	<b>58</b>	48	48	<b>58</b>	54	<b>23</b>	46	<b>65</b>	<b>58</b>
Freedom from anxiety	<b>58</b>	<b>65</b>	54	<b>58</b>	48	<b>58</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>41</b>
Popularity	<b>60</b>	<b>68</b>	47	54	<b>60</b>	50	<b>31</b>	<b>36</b>	50	50
Happiness and satisfaction	51	<b>59</b>	<b>59</b>	51	47	<b>43</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>59</b>	47

*Note.* Scores in bold indicate significant scores.

In a similar manner to the administration of the Piers-Harris 2 in the second cycle of this study, the students differed in the scores they received. Isaac completed the survey on November 29, 2016 without difficulty or hesitation. He scored in the above average range for the majority of the domain areas; these were higher scores than he had received in the second cycle. Based on a comparison between the scores he received in the second cycle and this current cycle, Isaac demonstrated an overall higher self-concept.

On November 30, 2016, Devon worked in a quick manner to answer items and seemed confident about the responses he circled on this measure. He received scores from average to above average for the different domain areas. He viewed his self-concept as above average for Behavioral Adjustment, which measured behavior around others and Freedom from Anxiety, which measured coping skills with anxiety and conflicts with others. He had received average scores for those domains in the second cycle of this study; based on his scores in this cycle, Devon viewed his behavior around others and his coping with anxiety and conflict to have improved.

Andrew, also on November 30, 2016, was able to answer questions on this measure when the protocol was attached to a clipboard, which I held up for him. He received scores in the average range for most of the domains on this measure. In two domains he received above average scores, which were for the Behavioral Adjustment and Freedom from Anxiety domains. The scores for those domains in the second cycle were in the average range; based on the scores he received in this cycle, he viewed his behavior around others and his coping skills with anxiety and conflict to have improved. On several domains in the second cycle he had received above average scores. Those domains were the Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes,

and Popularity domains. In other words, Andrew viewed himself as successful with academic tasks in school, attractive to others, and highly sociable with his peers. In this cycle, Andrew gave himself average instead of above average scores for those domains. This may have indicated that Andrew's positive view of his academic abilities, his appearance and friendships with others had decreased since the second cycle of the study.

On December 5, 2016, Daniel looked over the different questions on the Piers-Harris 2 before beginning to circle his responses. If he was uncomfortable with the wording of some of the items, he would check with me to make sure he was interpreting the questions correctly. Based on the scores he received during this cycle, Daniel viewed himself as scoring in the low range on the majority of domain areas. Although Daniel assessed himself within the low range for most of the domains, he gave himself scores that were in the average range for intellectual and school status and physical attributes and appearance. These scores were higher than the scores he gave himself in the second cycle of the study; in the second cycle his scores for those two domains were in the low range. He appeared to view his academic skills and physical appearance in a more positive way than he did earlier in the study. He gave himself his lowest scores for the Behavioral Adjustment and Freedom from Anxiety domains. These scores were similar to the scores in the low range that he received in the second cycle of the study.

Roger, on December 6, 2016, listened carefully to directions given and took his time to complete each item before finishing filling out the protocol. In contrast to his previous scores, Roger rated himself with mostly average scores in contrast to the above average range scores he received in the second cycle. His low average scores were in the Behavioral Adjustment and Freedom from Anxiety domains; he viewed himself as

having more challenges with his behavior with others and had difficulty coping with anxiety at this point in the study. In the previous administration during the second cycle, Roger seemed to want to put answers that were more socially acceptable. In the administration of the Piers-Harris 2 during this cycle, Roger seemed to be more honest about his challenges both behaviorally and emotionally.

In an analysis of and in comparison to the second cycle scores received on the Piers-Harris 2, the students showed some differences in the scores that they received. Isaac gave himself higher scores in this cycle in comparison to the second cycle of this study; he gave himself scores in the above average range on most of the domains. According to this measure, he viewed himself in a more positive way than he had earlier in the study. Both Devon and Andrew scored similarly between this and the second cycle except for two of the domains; they scored in the above average range for behavioral adjustment and freedom from anxiety. Based on this change in scores, Devon and Andrew viewed their behavior around others and their coping with anxiety in a more positive way than they had earlier in the study. Based on the average scores he gave himself for the Intellectual and School Status and Physical Appearance and Attributes domains, Daniel appeared to view his academic skills and physical appearance in a more positive way than he did earlier in the study. He continued to give himself scores in the low range, with his lowest scores for the Behavioral Adjustment and Freedom from Anxiety domains. In contrast to the mostly above average scores that he received when the Piers-Harris 2 was administered to him in the second cycle, Roger received mostly average scores, and seemed to view his behaviors around others and his socialization with his peers in a more realistic way.

*School Behavior Survey.* The teachers were asked to complete the teacher version of the School Behavior Survey (SBS). The School Behavior Survey contained 102 items that included descriptions of classroom behavior and performance. This measure also included the following areas: academic performance, academic habits, social skills, parent participation, health concerns, emotional challenges, unusual behavior, social difficulties, verbal, physical, and behavior problems, and aggression. Like the Piers-Harris 2, the student scores were converted from raw scores to T-scores that have a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10 (see Table 5).

In contrast to the mostly average scores received on the School Behavior Survey in the second cycle, the students received more clinically significant scores when this measure was given during this cycle of this study. Isaac received scores that would necessitate concern and review with the student in the following domains: unusual behavior, social problems, verbal aggression, behavior problems, and ADHD. He received scores in the clinically significant range for the following domains: emotional distress, physical aggression, and conduct problems. These scores differed from the mostly average scores he received on the School Behavior Survey in the second cycle of this study and the above average scores Isaac gave himself on the Piers-Harris 2 in this cycle. This may have indicated that Isaac and his teacher differed in how they viewed Isaac's behavior and interactions with others. Additionally, Isaac may not have been aware or honest about his increased negative behavior in school and its impact on those around him.

Table 5

*Individual T-scores of the School Behavior Survey*

T-scores	Isaac 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Isaac 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Devon 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Devon 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Andrew 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Andrew 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Daniel 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Daniel 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle	Roger 2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	Roger 5 <sup>th</sup> cycle
Academic performance	38	<35	48	38	50	39	50	55	37	<35
Academic habits	42	<35	46	<35	41	43	51	47	<35	<35
Social skills	45	<35	47	<35	38	50	55	55	27	55
Parent participation	47	<b>53</b>	55	38	<35	41	56	56	50	53
Health concerns	44	44	49	<b>70</b>	52	<b>76</b>	59	<b>74</b>	<b>&gt;85</b>	47
Emotional distress	51	<b>79</b>	55	<b>75</b>	<b>65</b>	50	<b>84</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>73</b>
Unusual behavior	59	<b>66</b>	<b>61</b>	59	57	46	41	41	57	56
Social problems	56	<b>69</b>	44	<b>62</b>	55	53	41	51	<b>73</b>	59
Verbal aggression	48	<b>&gt;85</b>	46	<b>&gt;85</b>	59	<b>70</b>	48	48	<b>76</b>	<b>71</b>
Physical aggression	45	<b>&gt;85</b>	44	<b>84</b>	44	<b>66</b>	45	55	<b>&gt;85</b>	<b>80</b>
Behavior problems	53	<b>68</b>	43	<b>64</b>	49	49	41	47	<b>71</b>	59
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	54	<b>66</b>	49	<b>68</b>	56	50	45	43	<b>62</b>	<b>64</b>

Devon received scores that raised concern and would necessitate review with the student for the following domains: social problems and behavior problems. He received scores in the clinically significant range for the following domains: health concerns, verbal aggression, physical aggression, and conduct problems. In other words, he had a



tendency to resort to verbal profanity and threats, and physically hurting others when upset or involved in conflict situations with others more during this cycle than in the second cycle of the study (Lachar et al., 2002). On the School Behavior Survey in the second cycle of the study he received average scores for the social problems, behavior problems, health concerns, verbal aggression, and physical aggression domains. In contrast on the Piers-Harris 2 in this cycle, Devon gave himself average to above average scores in most of the domains with his highest scores on the domains related to his behavior around others and his ability to cope with anxiety and conflict. Based on the scores that Devon gave himself he differed from his teacher in his view of how his behavior impacted on his overall school behavior and interactions with others. This may have indicated that he was not being honest about or was unaware of the increased negative behaviors he displayed around others in school.

Andrew received a score that raised concerns and would necessitate review with him for the physical aggression domain, which focused on increased incidences of physical threats or hurting others. He received scores in the clinically significant range for the Health Concerns and Verbal Aggression domains. In other words, his physical challenges and comments toward others negatively impacted his interactions with other individuals. In the second cycle, his scores were in the average range for the health concerns and verbal aggression domains. In contrast, on the scores he gave himself on the Piers-Harris 2, Andrew viewed his behavior around others and his coping with anxiety in a more positive way than he had earlier in the study. This may have indicated that he was unaware of how his behavior in certain situations in school was viewed by others as increasingly more negative than positive.

Daniel received scores in the clinically significant range for the Health Concerns and Emotional Distress domains, which focused on increased anxiety due to inner conflict as well as peer difficulties. He also received a score in the clinically significant range for the Emotional Distress domain in the second cycle of the study. In both the second and fifth cycles, Daniel received mostly average scores for the majority of the domains. The data collected from both of the cycles indicated that Daniel continued to experience increased anxiety in different situations that could negatively impact on his behavior and interactions with others in school. Although he received scores that were clinically significant on the School Behavior Survey, Daniel gave himself even lower scores on the Piers-Harris 2 than what his teacher gave him on the School Behavior Survey. This difference in scores was also seen when the Piers-Harris 2 and School Behavior Survey that were administered in the second cycle of this study. This may have indicated that Daniel's perception of himself and his abilities continued to be more negative than how his teachers viewed his performance and interactions with others in the classroom.

Roger received scores in the clinically significant range for the Emotional Distress, Verbal Aggression, and Physical Aggression domains. In other words, he demonstrated increased anxiety, verbal profanity, verbal threats, physical threats, and physical violence when around others (Lachar et al., 2002). He also received scores in the clinically significant range for those domains on the School Behavior Survey in the second cycle of this study. This seemed to indicate that his anxiety, verbal aggression, and physical aggression negatively impacted his behavior and peer interactions before and after participating in the group art therapy. Roger's scores on the Piers-Harris 2 in the

fifth cycle were within the same range of the scores that he received from his teacher on the School Behavior Survey. On both measures the concern areas were related to his behavior toward others, including verbal and physical aggression. This was in contrast to the above average scores that he gave himself on his behavioral adjustment scale in the second cycle of the study. This change in scores between the two cycles may have been indicative of Roger being more honest about and working to improve his school behavior.

Overall, the students reflected a variety of different concern areas that were recorded after their participation in the group art therapy program. The domain areas that were a clinically significant area for the majority of the students were verbal and physical aggression toward others. The students demonstrated increased incidences of making inappropriate comments, verbal and physical threats, and hurting others. For the majority of the students, the scores that they received on the verbal aggression and physical aggression domains were much higher than the scores they received on those domains in the second cycle of this research. This indicated that their verbal and physical aggression increased since the beginning of the study.

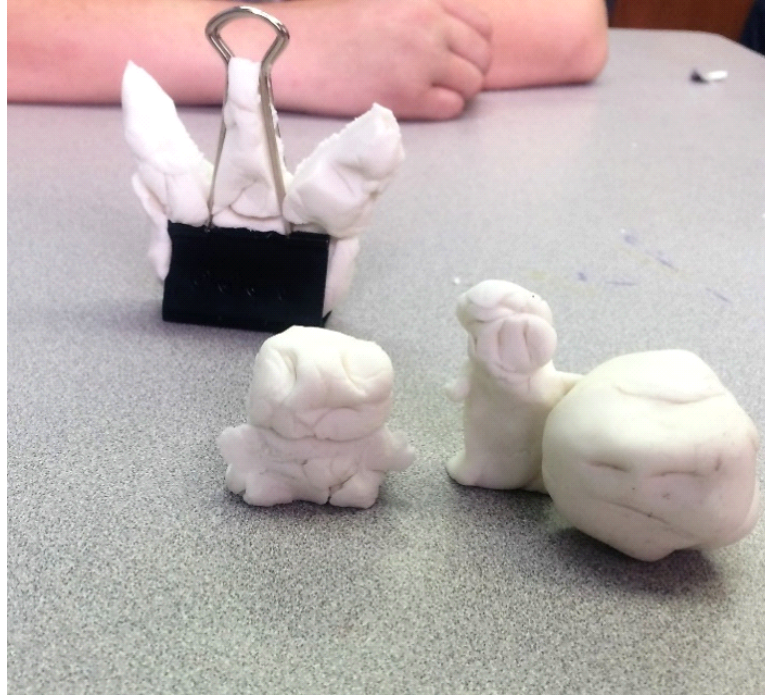
**Qualitative measures.** Several different qualitative measures were used in the fourth and fifth cycles of the study. In the fourth or implementing the group art therapy cycle, qualitative data were collected from the group art therapy session observations, student artwork, and my self-reflection journal. The qualitative measures that were used with the students in the fifth or evaluating the group art therapy program cycle, were the Life Space Picture, Kinetic School Drawing, classroom observations, and student discipline records. After reviewing the descriptive coding for the qualitative measures

from the fourth and fifth cycles, two themes were developed. These themes were isolation from others and emerging positive behavior and interactions.

*Isolation from others.* According to the data collected from the fourth and fifth cycles of this study, students continued to demonstrate isolation from others. The isolation was demonstrated through their disconnection from others, and judgment based on outer appearance or family background.

*Disconnections from others.* During my observations of students during the group art therapy sessions, the group members had a difficult time connecting with peers when a conflict had occurred. In the third group art therapy session on October 13, 2016, I wrote:

When it was time to work on the art therapy task, I encouraged the students to each create a clay figure and then asked them to think of an activity that the completed clay figures could do together. Andrew was absent from the group today. Before the students began working with the clay, they agreed to have the completed figures look like they were playing a basketball game together. Roger created a figure five different times; he would create a person and then destroy the figure. The sixth figure he created had trouble standing up without support; he put his figure into a large metal clip and then placed it on the table with the other finished figures. Once he had completed his figure, Roger grabbed and destroyed Daniel's clay each time he created a figure. Although Daniel laughed at first about what Roger was doing, he became quiet and did not speak to anyone after Roger destroyed his clay figure for the third time. Devon and Isaac watched Daniel and Roger and worked quietly on their own without interacting with one another. By the time all the clay figures were completed, the students placed them on the table without speaking to one another, but to remind Roger not to destroy their clay figures. Although I reminded the students that they had decided to have their clay figures play a basketball game together, Devon, Daniel, and Isaac did not respond to me but finished the session by placing their figures in a row, away from Roger's, without facing each other (see Figure 8). (Field Note, Oct. 13, 2016)



*Figure 8. Group Clay Figures*

According to Liebmann (2004), the students demonstrated isolation from each other based on lining the figures up, instead of having the clay figures participate in a group activity together (see Figure 8). Additionally, the group members seemed to isolate themselves from each other when they became upset with Roger for destroying Daniel's clay figure. Instead of trying to work out a way to resolve the negative feelings the other students had toward Roger, the students ignored each other, and disconnected from one another (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Liebmann (2004) also report that when three dimensional figures fall over or cannot stand on their own, this may indicate that the individual who created the figure is experiencing instability. This may have been the case for Roger, who may have been feeling that his ability to work with the other students in creating the clay sculptures was on shaky ground, and who may have been experiencing more instability once he destroyed Daniel's figure.

Their difficulty connecting with others was also expressed during the eighth group art therapy session on October 26, 2016. During this session, the students discussed that they had difficulties knowing how to connect to others when peer conflicts had occurred. In my journal I wrote:

I asked each of the students what they would do to repair a friendship if an argument occurred and they were not speaking to the friend. Roger reported that there would not be options to be friends with the person anymore. He reported that when he has had arguments or yelling fights with a friend, he does not think there was anything he could have said or done to continue to be friends with the person. Roger reported that he looked for other people to be friends with in school instead. Isaac agreed with Roger and felt that if you argue with a friend, he does not have respect for you and there will not be a way to work things out. Devon, Andrew, and Daniel appeared to be listening carefully to the discussion, but when I asked them what they would do to continue a friendship after an argument occurred, they did not verbalize ideas. (Field Note, Oct. 26, 2016)

*Being judged for outer appearance.* During the eleventh group art therapy session on November 7, 2016, the students participated in a group discussion about being judged by others based on outer appearance and family background. In my journal I wrote about the session:

I opened the group discussion by asking the students 1) if they had been judged by others based on their appearance and background, and 2) if they had judged others in that same way. The students expressed that others have judged them based on how they look. Daniel reported “when I had long hair, people thought I was a girl,” and Devon noted, “because I am German people in school think I am a Nazi and believe in Hitler.” I spoke with the students that when others judged you or jumped to conclusions about who you were, that was another opportunity to be isolated from others. Isaac nodded his head, but when asked if he had felt judged by others, he reported that he did not want to speak about it in the group. I asked the students if they had judged others in that same way. Daniel noted that he thought someone looked like a “creepy predator” and did not give the person a chance to be friends. Devon said he saw many people that played sports and looked like a “dumb jock.” (Field Note, Nov. 7, 2016)

Although the students demonstrated that they continued to experience isolation from others, they also demonstrated in data collected in the fourth and fifth cycles that they were beginning to demonstrate more positive behavior and interactions with others.

***Emerging positive behavior and interactions.*** I observed Isaac behaving and interacting in a more positive way in one of the group art therapy sessions than he had when I observed him earlier in the study. In my journal I wrote Isaac's behavior and peer interactions while working on a group art therapy project that focused on positive peer friendships:

In the tenth group art therapy session on November 1, 2016, I asked the students to create a three dimensional bridge that had a student on one side of the bridge and two students playing together on the other side of the bridge. I also asked them to write in the middle of the bridge three strategies that would help them to interact with others in a positive way. Isaac spent a great deal of time working with Roger to create the figures playing together on one side of the bridge in a positive way, and he helped Daniel think of and write three strategies for friendships that were written on the middle of the bridge. Isaac seemed more comfortable interacting and working with his peers on the bridge project than he had on projects in earlier group art therapy sessions. In previous group art therapy sessions, Isaac focused more on attempting to log into a computer in the room, and not contributing to group discussions, role plays, and art therapy projects. He and Daniel wrote in the middle of the bridge project that students could make positive friendships if they could find be a good listener, accept differences of opinion, and think of something "cool, funny, fun" to do together. (Field Note, Nov. 1, 2016)

The students altered the directions for the bridge project; instead of putting the figures on one side of the bridge, Isaac and Daniel placed them in the middle of the bridge and put strategies for maintaining friendships at one end of the bridge (see Figure 9). Daniel also created a clay ball to represent a person by himself at one end of the bridge. According to Liebmann (2004) and Moon (2010), when an individual creates a ball or another object to represent a person, this can indicate that the person may be

feeling some anxiety about himself or interacting with others. The clay ball may have been created with some anxiety of how to move to the ball to another part of the bridge to interact figuratively with the people drawn playing a sport together. Additionally, the strategies written were placed away from the clay ball and two figures on the bridge. According to Liebmann (2004) this may have been indicative of the strategies, though helpful to the students, may have felt slightly out of reach. Overall, although the students demonstrated more positive behavior and interactions with one another when working on the bridge project, they may have felt that their ability to maintain positive friendships with others was out of their reach. The students could continue to work developing friendships in future group art therapy sessions.



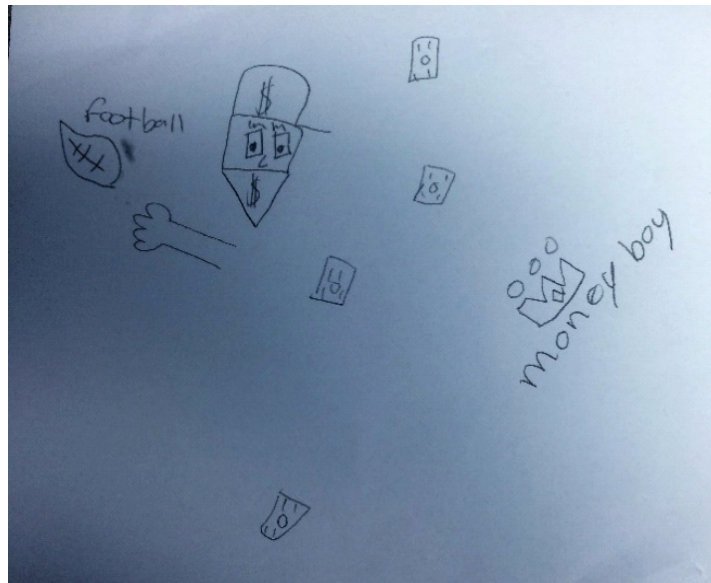
*Figure 9. Bridge Project*

In addition to more positive behaviors and interactions with others when working on an art therapy project with other students, I also observed Isaac interacting in a more positive way with others when I observed him in his classroom after he had participated in group art therapy sessions. In my journal I wrote:



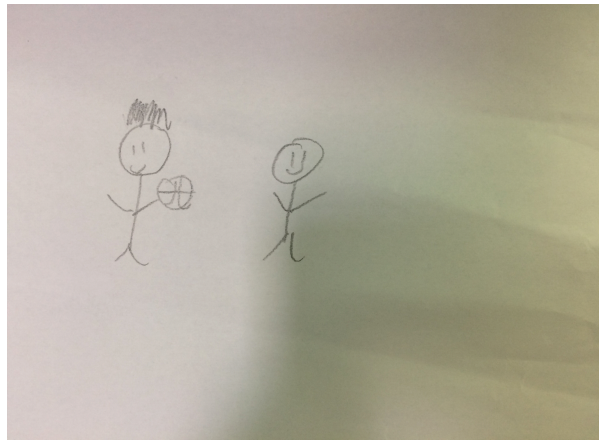
I observed Isaac focusing on finishing his work instead of the discussions going around him with his peers. After about 10 minutes, he was given praise for his efforts by Mr. Thomas, and Isaac smiled and maintained eye contact with him when given this compliment. Even though three different peers raised their voices, and two of the students were asked to leave the classroom, Isaac continued to concentrate on his math worksheet until he had completed his work. (Field Note, December 6, 2016)

Isaac also demonstrated the emergence of more positive behavior and peer interactions through the Kinetic School Drawing created in the fifth cycle of this study (see Figure 10). Although his drawing, according to Liebmann (2004), still indicated isolation with the use of one color only, the drawing included figures playing sports together. When he completed his first Kinetic School Drawing, he did not include more than one figure in each drawing, which indicated isolation from others (Liebmann, 2004).



*Figure 10.* Isaac's First Kinetic School Drawing

According to Liebmann (2004), Isaac's inclusion of figures playing a game together in his second Kinetic School Drawing indicate that Isaac may be interacting in a more positive way with his peers.



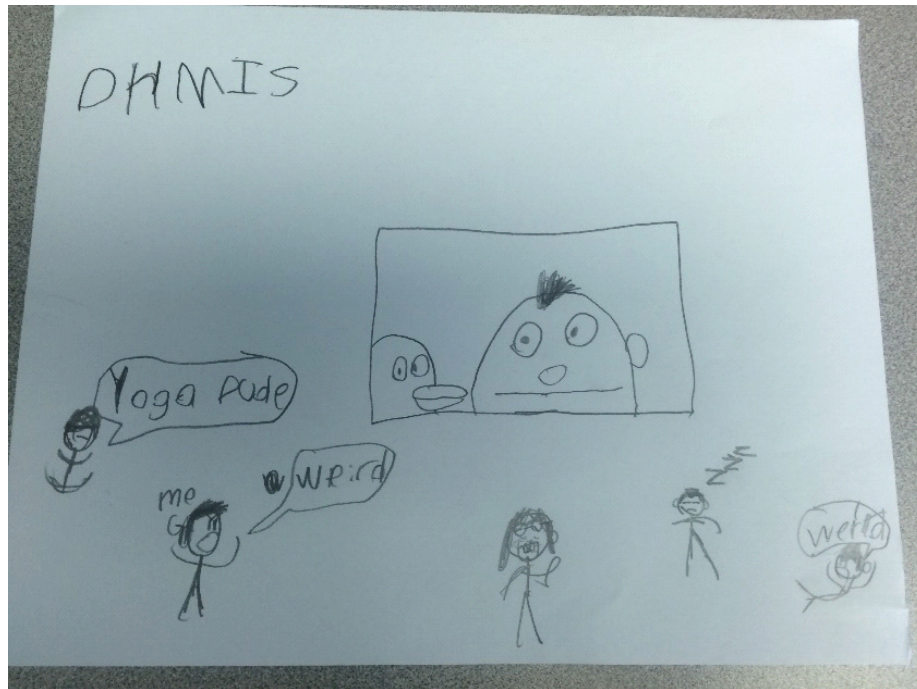
*Figure 11.* Isaac's Second Kinetic School Drawing

Isaac verbalized that he was playing basketball with another student who attended the group art therapy sessions. Although Liebmann (2004) reported that when stick figures were used, it could indicate that an individual is anxious about the subject matter that the drawing is about, the fact that two figures were in the drawing doing something together demonstrated growth in friendships and interactions with others. Liebmann (2004) and Moon (2010) note that growth is also seen in an individual when they begin to create figures that are complete instead of in separate parts. In his first drawing, Isaac created a person that has a head but no other body parts. In his second drawing, the two figures he drew playing basketball together were complete figures. Overall, in the changes seen in his Kinetic School Drawings, and classroom and group art therapy observations, Isaac demonstrated more positive behavior and interactions with others.

Devon, like Isaac, demonstrated more positive behaviors in his classroom when he was observed after he participated in his group art therapy session. In my journal I wrote:

I noticed that Devon worked on his Language Arts work for 10 minutes and finished his work before walking over to two other students who had also finished their assignments and began to speak with them about computer games that they all liked. Although I thought Devon could work on sitting down next to his two peers instead of standing over them in conversation, he interacted throughout the discussion with his classmates in a positive manner for the rest of the class period. (Field Note, December 6, 2016)

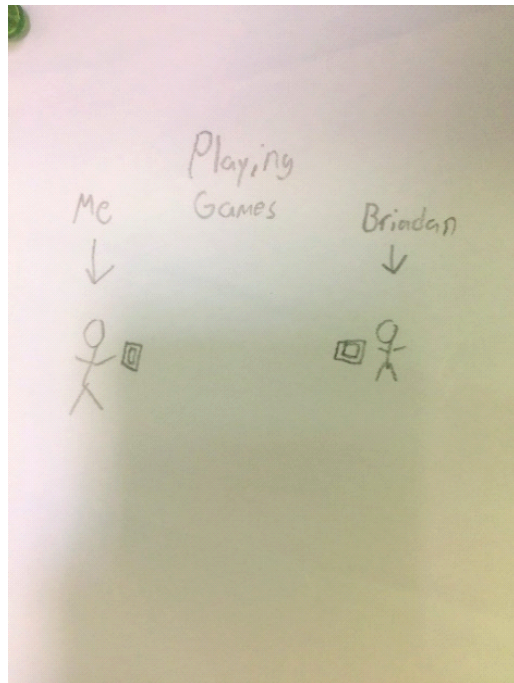
Devon also demonstrated more interaction with others and less isolation in the drawings he created after participating in the group art therapy program. Although he continued to use one color in his drawing, which Liebmann (2004) reports can indicate isolation from others, in his second Kinetic School Drawing, Devon drew himself with another member of the group trading Pokémon cards. This was in contrast to the Kinetic School Drawing he completed in the second cycle; although Devon drew several figures in that drawing, they were all involved in different activities and were not interacting with each other. His first Kinetic School Drawing is shown in Figure 12.



*Figure 12. Devon's First Kinetic School Drawing*

In his first Kinetic School Drawing, each of the students shown in the picture were involved in their own activities and did not seem to be interacting with each other. The second Kinetic School Drawing showed Devon and another student playing games together. The second Kinetic School Drawing is shown in Figure 13.

Although according to Liebmann (2004), Devon's drawing continued to demonstrate isolation from others as evidenced by one color used only and the two figures have a large space between them, the figures were facing each other and were playing a game together. Overall, based on observations of Devon in his classroom and a drawing completed after he participated in the group art therapy sessions, he demonstrated increased positive behavior and interactions around others.



*Figure 13. Devon's Second Kinetic School Drawing*

Like, Isaac and Devon, Andrew also demonstrated more positive behaviors when he was observed in their classrooms after they participated in the group art therapy program. In my journal I wrote about Andrew:

I was concerned when I noticed that Andrew did not begin his work when his assignment was given because he was engaged in a conversation with another student in the class. He listened carefully to the other student and made joking comments that were appropriate when he offered his opinion about a Pokémon game. Without needing reminders from his teacher, he began and seemed to be able to concentrate on his classwork after finishing the discussion with his peer. (Field Note, Dec. 6, 2016)

Daniel also demonstrated more positive interactions with others when I observed him walking to the sixth art therapy group session on October 21, 2016. In my journal, I wrote:

Daniel started to walk with me to the room for the session today, while the other students in the group were also starting to make their way to the same room.

Andrew came out of his classroom by dragging his body across the floor, and stopped right outside the classroom taking deep breaths. Andrew looked fatigued and seemed to be having a hard time getting to the room we used for the group sessions. Daniel asked Andrew's teacher if he could lift Andrew and help him walk the rest of the way to the group room. Andrew's teacher showed Daniel how to hold Andrew up; Daniel started to lift Andrew up and asked Roger to help him as well. Andrew was smiling as Daniel and Roger helped him safely walk the rest of the way to the group room. (Field Note, Oct. 21, 2016)

Daniel also demonstrated increased positive behaviors and interactions with others when he was observed in his classroom after he had completed the group art therapy program. I recorded my observations in my journal:

Daniel seemed to feel good about himself and those around him during his Health class. He followed directions from his teacher about watching part of a video and answering questions that his teacher asked about how he would handle different types of bullying situations. His teacher praised his efforts and his ideas, which made Daniel smile. He refrained from making jokes at anyone's expense; I noticed he made inappropriate jokes and comments toward others earlier in the study. Instead, he spoke with and listened to his peers as they worked on a group assignment toward the end of the class period. (Field Note, December 8, 2016)

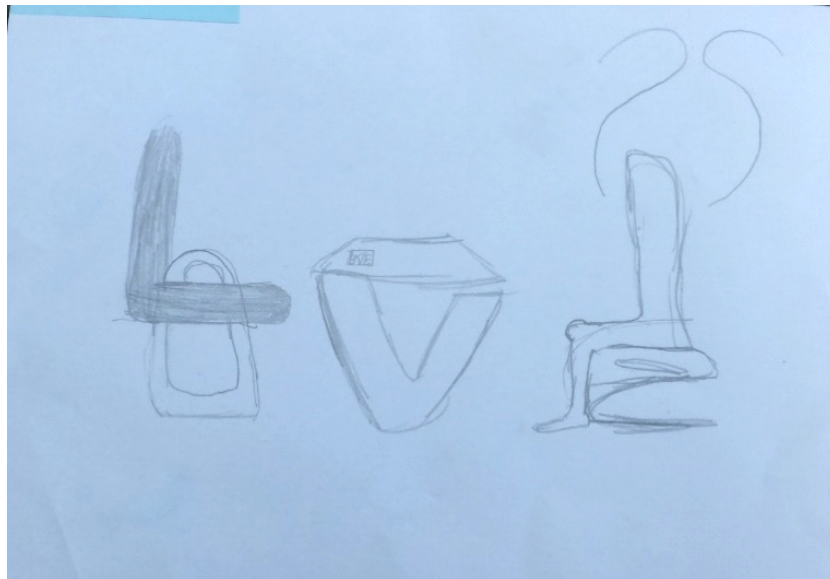
Roger also demonstrated a more positive role in his classroom when he was observed after he participated in the group art therapy program. I wrote in my journal:

Roger realized that he had left his jacket in the school gym. He politely asked if a staff member could walk him back to the gym so that he could get his jacket. When he returned to the classroom, Roger walked in speaking respectfully to the staff member that had walked with him to the gym. Then he began to speak with and joke around with one of his classroom peers. When his teacher reminded him about the classwork that he needed to complete, Roger was able to begin his work without any difficulty and without needing any other reminders. He continued to complete his classwork quietly for the rest of the observation period. (Field Note, Dec. 7, 2016)

In addition to his classroom observation, Roger demonstrated more positive interactions with others when his discipline records were reviewed after his participation

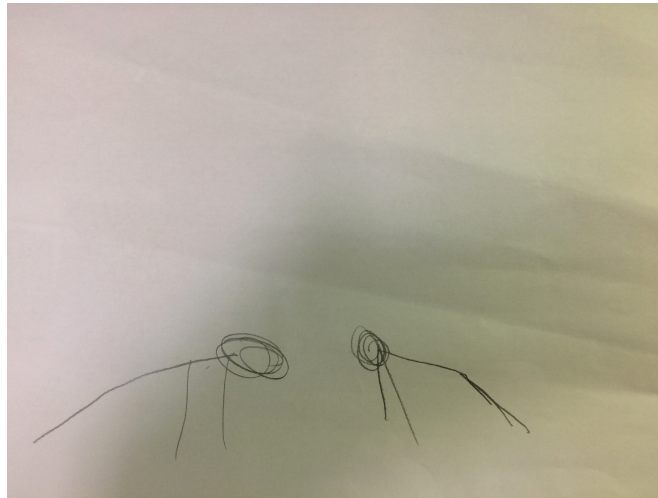
in the group art therapy program. In contrast to his discipline records before the art therapy group in which he hurt his peers when he was upset with them, after the art therapy group Roger did not have any recorded incidences of hitting or pushing others. This may have demonstrated an easier time handling conflicts with peers in a more positive way.

More positive interactions with others were also evident through the drawings Roger created after participating in the group art therapy program. Although the two drawings he created during the fifth cycle showed isolation from others as reported by Liebmann (2004) to be a lack of color used, in his second Kinetic School Drawing he drew a picture of himself and Isaac facing each other and doing push-ups together. This was in contrast to the Kinetic School Drawing that he completed in the second cycle of this study, which contained a table and chairs for chess but no people present in the drawing (Figure 14).



*Figure 14.* Roger's First Kinetic School Drawing

Although he used stick figures in his second Kinetic School Drawing, which Liebmann (2004) notes could indicate that the student was anxious about the subject matter, Roger created figures that were interacting and doing an activity together, which could indicate more positive interactions with others. His second Kinetic School Drawing is pictured in Figure 15.



*Figure 15.* Roger's Second Kinetic School Drawing

**Discussion.** After mixing the data from both the quantitative and qualitative measures, two themes emerged. One was that the students continued to have difficulty handling peer-to-peer conflicts. Second, in spite of these continued challenges, the students increased their positive interactions with others.

***Peer-to-Peer conflicts.*** On the School Behavior Survey, the teachers gave most of the students scores that were in the clinically significant range for the verbal aggression and physical aggression domains. These scores showed an increase in student verbal and physical aggression in comparison to their behavior earlier in the study. Based on those



domains, most of the students in this study were making inappropriate comments toward their peers, cursing at others, making physical threats toward others, and hitting, kicking, or pushing their classmates. Through an increase in verbally and physically aggressive behaviors, the students would benefit from focusing on handling peer conflicts in future group art therapy sessions. Continued challenges in their interactions with others were also noted in the student discipline records. For example on November 30, 2016, when Isaac was asked to leave the gym and return to his classroom, he made inappropriate comments to a staff member. Additionally on December 1, 2016, Devon attacked a peer when he was having difficulty transitioning with his classmates into his gym class. Although these negative interactions occurred, the students were also observed displaying more positive behaviors toward staff members and peers in the classroom.

***Positive interactions.*** The students demonstrated positive interactions with others in their group art therapy sessions, classroom observations, and student artwork created. A summary of their positive interactions is given here; more detailed descriptions of each session was provided in the third and fourth cycles of this study. In their sixth group art therapy session on October 21, 2016, the students were able to communicate effectively with one another to create group rules, a group name, and a group song. In the eleventh group art therapy session on November 7, 2016, the students worked together without conflict to create a group magazine collage. In the sixteenth session on November 22, 2016, the students interacted and communicated with each other in a positive way to create a group painting. The students also displayed positive interactions with others in their classrooms. On December 6, 2016, when he was observed in his classroom, Isaac was able to smile easily at and maintain eye contact with others in the classroom. On that

same date, Devon completed his class work first before going over to a male peer and beginning a discussion with him about a computer game that they both liked. On December 7, 2016, Daniel smiled easily and approached his peers in a friendly manner as he entered his classroom at the beginning of the period. Additionally, the students began to include figures in their drawings that were interacting with one another, which Liebmann (2004) reports, showed that they were beginning to experience more positive interactions with their peers. For example, Devon included a picture of himself and a peer trading Pokémon cards, Daniel created a picture of himself and Roger playing basketball together, and Roger created a picture of himself and Isaac doing pushups together. Moon (2010) further notes that the inclusion of members of the art therapy group in their drawings indicated that they felt that they had not only increased their positive peer interactions in the classroom, but in the group sessions as well.

**Summary of Cycle 5.** In the evaluating the art therapy group cycle, data collected in both the fourth and fifth cycles of this study were used to measure each student's classroom behavior and relationship-building skills after participating in the art therapy group. I wanted to assess if the art therapy group impacted on the students' school behavior and interactions with others in a positive way. The data collected from the fourth and fifth cycles would also impact the planning for art therapy groups in future sessions in the monitoring phase of this study. The measures used to collect data in the fourth cycle were group art therapy observations, group artwork, and my self-reflection journal. In the fifth cycle, the assessment measures used were the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale, the School Behavior Survey, Life Space Picture, Kinetic School Drawing, classroom observations, and student discipline records.

In an analysis of and in comparison to the second cycle scores received on the Piers-Harris 2, the students showed some differences in the scores that they received. Isaac gave himself higher scores in this cycle in comparison to the second cycle of this study; he viewed his behavior and interactions in a more positive way than he had earlier in the study. Both Devon and Andrew viewed their behavior around others and their coping with anxiety in a more positive way than they had earlier in the study. Based on the average scores he gave himself for the Intellectual and School Status and Physical Appearance and Attributes domains, Daniel viewed his academic skills and physical appearance in a more positive way than he did earlier in the study. In contrast to the mostly above average scores that he received when the Piers-Harris 2 was administered to him in the second cycle, Roger received mostly average scores, and seemed to view his behaviors around others and his socialization with his peers in a more realistic way.

According to the School Behavior Survey, the students' scores reflected areas of concern after their participation in the group art therapy program. These areas of concern were verbal and physical aggression. For most of the students, the scores that they received on the verbal aggression and physical aggression domains were much higher than the scores they received on those domains in the second cycle of this research. This indicated that their verbal and physical aggression increased since the beginning of the study, and could be addressed in future art therapy sessions.

After reviewing the descriptive coding for the qualitative measures from the fourth and fifth cycles, two themes were developed. These themes were isolation from others, which was influenced by disconnection from others and judging others based on appearance and family background, and emerging positive behavior and interactions.

After mixing the data from both the quantitative and qualitative measures, two themes emerged. One was that the students continued to have difficulty handling peer-to-peer conflicts. Second, in spite of these continued challenges, the students increased their positive interactions with others.

### **Cycle 6: Monitoring the Group Art Therapy Program**

In the monitoring the group art therapy program cycle, the data collected and analyzed in the implementing the art therapy group and evaluating the art therapy group cycles were used to make changes to the group art therapy program (Ivankova, 2015). Both the students and staff members requested that the art therapy group continue with a focus on improved classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. The goal of this cycle was to state the approaches that could continue to help the students develop more positive school behavior and interactions with others. These approaches were: art therapy, relational-cultural therapy, and group therapy strategies (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Kastner & May, 2009; Liebmann, 2004; Moon, 2010; Yalom, 1985) theme-based art therapy group structure (Liebmann, 2004), specific topics of interest to the students (Jordan & Dooley, 2000), using a middle ground approach in thinking, art materials used for groups, art therapy tasks used for groups (Liebmann, 2004), addressing inattentive behaviors, addressing physical challenges, small groupings or pairs, use of humor and pets, and rewards for participating in the group.

#### **Art therapy, relational-cultural therapy, and group therapy strategies.**

Strategies used from relational-cultural therapy, group therapy, and art therapy that helped the students to more openly express themselves, increase their positive coping strategies, and work together cooperatively in the group art therapy sessions will continue

to be utilized. These were a focus on acceptance and trust among group members (Lachance, 2002; Tucker et al., 2011), group cohesiveness (Yalom, 1985), universality (Yalom, 1985), self-expression through art (Liebmann, 2004; Yalom, 1985), role-play in groups (Kastner & May, 2009) and modeling prosocial behaviors for the students (Yalom, 1985).

**Theme-Based art therapy group.** The students would continue to have the opportunity to follow the theme-based art therapy group structure which included the following: welcome to the group, opening group discussion about a relational-cultural therapy topic, role-play, art therapy project, and discussion of artwork created (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004). I observed that when the students followed this structure when the group art therapy program was implemented, they seemed comfortable contributing their thoughts and ideas to each part of the group, and they seemed comforted by the consistent structure for each group art therapy session.

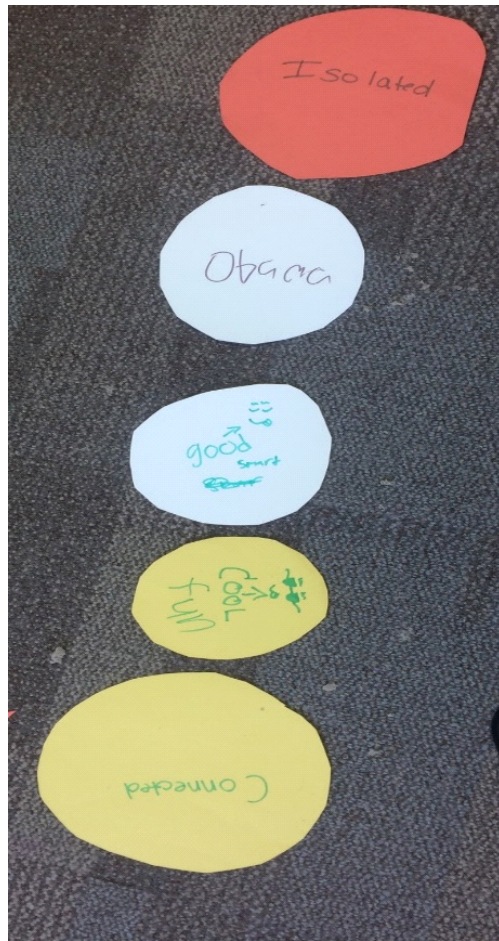
**Specific topics of interest.** The students seemed open to discussing, giving examples from their own experiences, and participating in role-play activities when the following topics were discussed: judging others based on outer appearances, impact on the group of the physical challenges of one of the group members, disconnection from others, acceptance by others, and supportive friendships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985). I would continue to discuss these concepts in future art therapy groups.

**Middle ground.** The students would have the opportunity to continue to work on their coping skills for moments in school when they are feeling angry or frustrated, especially when they disagree or in conflict with someone else. In the evaluating the art therapy program cycle, the students showed improvement in their interactions with others

in the classroom, but continued to have difficulty making positive choices when upset with their peers. Often the students expressed that a friendship ended if a disagreement occurred. By establishing a “middle ground,” not thinking in extremes when upset about a school situation, the students could begin to break down how they were feeling and what they could do that was a more positive choice for them.

For example, in the implementing the art therapy program cycle, the students worked on an art therapy project during the sixth session, in which they created a stone path from disconnection or conflict at one end, and connection at the other end. The stones in between disconnection and connection had words and drawings of coping ideas to help them handle conflict situations more appropriately. The students were able to think of strategies to go from having a conflict with a peer to working things out and having a more positive experience. A picture of the artwork is displayed in Figure 16.

By providing students with the opportunity to use visuals to come up with strategies in their peer interactions, the students could develop more ways of developing a middle ground for handling conflicts with others.



*Figure 16. Group Artwork From Session 6*

**Art materials.** Students showed more of an interest in sculpture rather than two dimensional art projects; additionally, paints seemed to help the students express themselves more easily. I noticed that clay was difficult for them to manage and work with, and other materials such as cardboard and wood, which were less frustrating for the students, could be offered. Lastly, I observed that the students seemed to become overwhelmed and unfocused when a large variety of art materials were on the table and offered to them at the same time. In future group sessions, I would provide students with a limited amount of art materials to work with in each session.

**Art therapy tasks.** Based on their preference for three dimensional art materials and paint, and their interest in expressing how they feel about themselves and friendships with others, I would offer several different art therapy tasks that would encourage the students to continue develop positive behaviors and relationships with others. These tasks would be: create an advertisement about yourself, create people out of wood and cardboard doing something together, create your own stress ball, create a three dimensional classroom you would like to visit, create a group story about agreeing to disagree, create a stage to perform school-appropriate jokes, work on a group animal painting, and create a tile mural about building friendships (Lachance, 2002; Liebmann, 2004).

**Inattentive behaviors.** When the students first entered the group room for each session, they had a difficult time sitting down and focusing on the group activities. I noticed that when they had the opportunity to use a fidget object or kinetic sand, the students were able to focus more quickly on the different activities in the group. I would like to have fidget objects and kinetic sand available to the students each time they come to the art therapy group in future sessions.

**Physical challenges.** One of the students had great physical challenges that make it difficult for him to attend a majority of the group sessions. I would check in with this student before each group meeting to see how he is feeling, and what will be the best time of day, room, and equipment to be used to help him feel less fatigued and be more apt to attend the group regularly.



**Small groups or pairs.** I observed that when the students had the opportunity to work in small groups or pairs, they seemed more comfortable contributing to group discussions and practicing strategies to interact in a more positive way with others. I noticed that if a student became anxious about participating in a group activity, he seemed to feel more secure about his social abilities when he had someone else to work with to complete the tasks given.

**Humor.** I will continue to encourage the students to use humor as a way to connect with one another, and will incorporate discussions and projects about animals into group sessions. Students seemed to be connected through humorous comments; at times though the joking became offensive to others or inappropriate. I would provide students with the opportunity to use humor as a way to feel that they are a part of the group, but set parameters for what is considered appropriate joking around at school.

**Animals.** I also observed that the students were interested in art projects in which animals were the main subject. Liebmann (2004) reports that an animal can serve as a buffer for students' feelings and concerns about something that was challenging for them to address (Liebmann, 2004). For example, a student could report that an animal was going through a difficult time that was similar to something that he had experienced, but had difficulty verbally expressing to others.

**Snacks and gift cards.** I noticed that the students were excited to receive a snack for participating in the group each week. They seemed to feel a sense of accomplishment when they received this reward for completing all the activities for each session and appeared to be more motivated and excited to return to the group for the next session. When the art therapy program was implemented, the students were given a gift card at the

end of all the sessions to thank them for participating in the group. The gift card also served as a motivator to continue attending the group each week, as well as seemed to make the students feel good about working toward the goal of earning the gift card. The snacks at the end of each group, and the gift cards at the end of all the sessions would continue to be used.

**Summary of Cycle 6.** In the monitoring cycle, the data collected and analyzed in the implementing the art therapy group and evaluating the art therapy group cycles were used to make changes to the group art therapy program (Ivankova, 2015). Both the students and staff members requested that the art therapy group continue and with a continued focus on improved classroom behavior and relationship-building skills. Based on approaches that the students responded to positively and were used in the fourth and fifth cycles of this study, several approaches would be utilized in future group art therapy sessions.

The following approaches would be utilized: art, relational-cultural, and group therapy strategies, theme-based art therapy group structure, using topics of student interest, use of a middle ground in thinking, use of specific art materials and tasks, addressing inattentive behaviors, addressing physical challenges, working in pairs and small groups, use of humor, and rewards at the end of each for participating.

The students responded well to a variety of art, relational-cultural, and group therapy approaches. These approaches would be included in future group art therapy sessions and are the following: a focus on acceptance and trust among group members (Lachance, 2002; Tucker et al., 2011), group cohesiveness (Yalom, 1985), universality (Yalom, 1985), self-expression through art (Liebmann, 2004; Yalom, 1985), role-play in

groups (Kastner & May, 2009) and modeling prosocial behaviors for the students (Yalom, 1985).

The theme-based art therapy group structure would continue to be used and has the following order: transition into the group, opening group discussion about a relational-cultural therapy topic, role-play activity, art therapy task related to the group discussion, and talking about artwork created (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Liebmann, 2004).

The students would continue to discuss specific topics that held their attention and that they shared through personal experiences. These topics were: judging others based on outer appearances, impact on the group of the physical challenges of one of the group members, disconnection from others, acceptance by others, and supportive friendships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Yalom, 1985).

The students would continue to use a "middle ground" in their resolving conflicts with others. Often the students expressed that a friendship ended if a disagreement occurred. By establishing a "middle ground," instead of thinking in extremes, the students could think of other strategies to handle conflicts and maintain friendships with others in the process.

Specific art materials will also be utilized. There will be a focus on sculpture projects and materials such as paint, cardboard, and paper that seem to help students express themselves more easily. I noticed that when the students had the opportunity to use those art materials, they were able to work with and interact with their peers in a more positive manner.

Based on their preference for three-dimensional art materials and paint, and their interest in expressing how they feel about themselves and friendships with others, I

would offer several different art therapy tasks. These tasks are: create an advertisement about yourself, create people out of wood and cardboard doing something together, create your own stress ball, create a three dimensional classroom you would like to visit, create a group story about agreeing to disagree, create a stage to perform school-appropriate jokes, work on a group animal painting, and create a tile mural about building friendships.

The students would also have the opportunity to use kinetic sand and fidget objects when they come into the room to address more inattentive behaviors. The student with physical challenges will be supported with the day, time, and room location that will make it easy for him to attend the group on a consistent basis. The students will also have the opportunity to work in pairs and small groups, which seemed to help them feel comfortable addressing more challenging group activities. Humor will be encouraged, as long as subject matter that is appropriate for school is used. Students can also continue to use animals in their artwork as a buffer for topics that are difficult to discuss, but may be easier to address in an art project of an animal. Finally, the students will have the opportunity to continue to earn snacks and gift cards for their participation in the group.

## Chapter VI

### Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

According to past research literature, students with Emotional Disturbance exhibit social difficulties that impact the majority of their school experiences (Evans et al., 2012). Behavioral therapy strategies have been used with students with emotional difficulties in an effort to increase their positive experiences with others in school. These types of strategies include providing rewards and privileges to students for displaying positive behaviors and giving students consequences for negative behaviors exhibited (Crow & Small, 2011; Theisinger, 2014).

Although behavioral strategies alone help students experience more successes in school, challenges with these approaches have also been noted, such as a lower self-esteem and only a temporary change in negative behaviors displayed (Banks, 2006; Cain & Carnellor, 2008). More recent research, as well as my own observations in my workplace, indicate that these students also improve their academic, emotional, and social development when they have the opportunity to build connections and relationships with others (Galassi, 2007).

Several theories of therapy that focus on positive relationship-building practices could help this student population be more successful. These different therapeutic approaches include relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy (Golden, 2002; Jordan, 2010; Moon, 2010). This study focused on the impact a Group Art Therapy program with relational-cultural therapy concepts had on the classroom behavior and relationship-building skills of students with Emotional Disturbance.

In relational-cultural therapy, when individuals have the opportunity to focus on positive relationship-building skills, they have more successful developmental

experiences, increase their empathy for others, and improve their overall psychological well-being (Comstock et al., 2008; Tucker et al., 2011). Students can also focus on these strategies through the incorporation of art therapy concepts and techniques. According to Golden (2002) and Stafstrom et al. (2012), art therapy provides children with the opportunity to express themselves through artwork, when verbal expression is difficult for them. Carlton (2014) notes that this can be accomplished through the use of drawings, paintings, sculptures, photography, and computer art.

The concepts of relational-cultural therapy and art therapy were presented in a group therapy format for the participants in this study. Moon (2010) reports that individuals thrive emotionally and mentally when they have the opportunity to connect with others, to create meaning for themselves in relation to others, to be acknowledged, and to be supported in a group format.

The purpose of this mixed method action research study was to assess the effect of alternative therapeutic strategies and interventions on the classroom behavior and relationship-building skills of students with Emotional Disturbance. The participants in this study were five middle school students attending a small, private, suburban alternative Kindergarten through eighth grade setting for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. This study included a mixed methods action research approach, in which six cycles of action research contained mixed methods to study the impact of a Group Art Therapy program on the classroom behavior and relationship-building skills of Emotionally Disturbed students.

The first cycle in this study focused on diagnosing the challenges and treatment of students classified with Emotional Disturbance. In the second cycle of the study,

which was the reconnaissance of student behavior and relationships with others, I concurrently used a variety of quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to develop a student-participant baseline for classroom behavior and relationship-building skills, which would help me develop the group art therapy program in the third cycle of this study, and the implementation of the program in the fourth cycle of this study.

The planning of the art Group Art Therapy program occurred in the third cycle of this study, based on the information gathered in the first two cycles of this study. In the fourth cycle, the implementation of the Group Art Therapy program, observations and reflections of the 16-session group process was documented. In the fifth cycle, evaluating the Group Art Therapy program, both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments were used to measure the impact of the art therapy group on the students' school behavior and interactions with others. In the monitoring the Group Art Therapy program cycle, which was the last cycle in the study, the data collected and analyzed in the implementing the Group Art Therapy program and the evaluating the Group Art Therapy program were used to make changes for future group sessions.

This chapter consists of a discussion of the findings and implications. Recommendations for future research with students with Emotional Disturbance are also included.

### **Benefits of the Study**

The results of this study may benefit both educators and mental health professionals by providing therapeutic strategies and approaches that could complement behavioral therapy approaches and could help students with emotional difficulties improve their classroom behavior, their relationships with others, and their overall school

experiences. Researchers note that in the United States in the past four decades, there was an increase in the number of students that had been classified under the special education category of Emotional Disturbance (Mooney et al., 2003). In addition to an increase in their numbers in the school setting, students with behavioral and emotional difficulties had shown an increase in bullying and teasing others, throwing objects, banging objects, knocking over furniture, leaving the classroom without permission, making sexual gestures toward others, and having frequent temper tantrums (Evans et al., 2012; Mooney et al., 2003).

Erbas (2010) reports that without an exploration into interventions that complement behavior therapy approaches and address low self-worth and distrustfulness, students may have more of a tendency to drop out of school, and have increased negative social experiences with others as adults. An understanding of the therapeutic approaches that guided this study could benefit school professionals by increasing their focus on alternative strategies both in and out of the classroom that could help students increase their relationship-building skills.

The first research question, “To what extent did participation in the group art therapy program impact Emotionally Disturbed students’ positive relationships with others?” was addressed using qualitative data consisting of student artwork, classroom and group observations, and student discipline records. The quantitative data that addressed this first question consisted of the results from the School Behavior Survey, teacher version (SBS), and the Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale, student version (Piers-Harris 2). The second research question “Which components of a group art therapy program addressed the behavioral characteristics of students with Emotional



Disturbance?” was answered using qualitative data from the observations and student artwork from the group art therapy program.

The third research question, “What was the impact of relationship-building skills on the classroom behavior of students with Emotional Disturbance?” was answered by using qualitative data consisting of classroom observations, and student discipline records. The quantitative data that addressed this question consisted of the results from the SBS and Piers-Harris 2. The fourth research question “How did my servant leadership style, which included helping others reach their full potential, nonjudgmental acceptance of others, and self-reflection, impact the development and delivery of a group art therapy program?” was addressed by my recorded field notes throughout the study.

### **Answers to Research Questions and Discussion**

**Research question one.** The first research question asked: “To what extent did participation in the Group Art Therapy program impact Emotionally Disturbed students’ positive relationships with others?”

**Findings.** Based on the data collected from the second, fourth, and fifth cycles, the students continued to struggle in handling conflicts in different school situations after they had participated in the Group Art Therapy program. According to the School Behavior Survey administered to the students in both the second and fourth cycles of the study, most of the students demonstrated an increase in verbally and physically aggressive behaviors after they had completed the 16 Group Art Therapy sessions. According to student discipline reports reviewed after their participation in the group, both Devon and Isaac acted in a negative way toward others when peer conflicts occurred. Devon attacked a peer when his classmates were having a difficult time transitioning to

the gym from their classroom. Isaac made negative and inappropriate comments to a staff member when he was asked to return to his classroom after an extended time playing basketball in the gym. According to Liebmann (2004), the students continued to express isolation from their peers that was demonstrated by pencil only used and figures that appeared to be floating through space.

In spite of the continued challenges handling conflict situations with others, after the students participated in the Group Art Therapy program, they began to display more positive behaviors and interactions with others during their school day. According to his teacher's ratings of him on the School Behavior Survey, Daniel demonstrated improved behavior in his academic habits and social skills after participating in the Group Art Therapy program. In the classroom observations conducted after the completion of the Group Art Therapy program, Devon was observed in making an effort to speak with two other students about a computer game after classwork was completed. This was in contrast to an earlier classroom observation, in which Devon spoke over and interrupted his teacher's efforts to engage his classmates in a task. Isaac, during his second classroom observation, smiled easily at his peers and the staff members in the room, and maintained eye contact when others spoke to him. In contrast in his first classroom observation, Isaac sat separately from his peers, and did not interact with others unless to mumble inappropriate comments about them. Roger, in his second classroom observation, conducted polite conversation with a staff member who helped him find his jacket. In contrast in his first classroom observation, Roger attempted to push another peer who accused Roger of taking his iPad.

The emergence of more positive interactions with others was further documented in the drawings that the students produced before and after they participated in the Group Art Therapy program. In the students' second Kinetic School Drawings, most of them showed themselves with someone else doing something together in school instead of by themselves. For example, Roger, in his first Kinetic School Drawing, drew a picture of a table and chairs set up to play chess, but did not show any people in the drawing. In his second Kinetic School Drawing picture, Roger showed himself with Isaac doing pushups together. In Isaac's first Kinetic School Drawing, although he stated that he was playing football with other people in his drawing, Isaac only showed himself in the picture, which Liebmann (2004) notes can indicate isolation from others. In his second Kinetic School Drawing, he showed himself playing basketball with Roger. In his first Kinetic School Drawing, Devon created a picture of himself with several classmates that were not interacting or facing each other, which can indicate isolation from others (Liebmann, 2004). In his second Kinetic School Drawing, Devon drew a picture of himself and a school peer trading Pokémon cards.

***Implications.*** Although the students demonstrated continued difficulties handling conflict situations with others, the students demonstrated through observations and drawings that they were beginning to show improvement in their peer interactions in the classroom. The data collected throughout the study demonstrated that the students were making progress in how they related to others, but it was not a change that happened immediately or occurred without some regression to earlier and more negative behaviors at times. This indicated to me that the students could benefit from continuing to participate in the group sessions to recognize even more what positive ways they could

handle themselves with others, instead of negative behaviors that they utilized a great deal in their past.

**Research question two.** The second research question asked: “Which components of the Group Art Therapy program addressed the behavioral characteristics of students with Emotional Disturbance?”

*Findings.* Several components of the group art therapy sessions were used to address the students’ behavioral challenges. First, I observed in the sixth group art therapy session that the students did not display as many negative behaviors toward one another when they engaged in tasks that solidified their identity as a group (Yalom, 1985). For example, I asked the students to brainstorm group rules, a group name, and a group song. Roger introduced different ideas about rules, name, and song, and Daniel kept track of who liked the ideas and who did not. Devon, Andrew, and Isaac brainstormed new ideas for the group if the students were having a difficult time coming to an agreement. Once the students made the final decisions about group rules, to call themselves “The Turtles” and to have their group song be “The turtle song,” they seemed to identify themselves as a more united community, argued less, and displayed more respect toward one another.

Second, I observed that the students handled conflicts with one another more easily when they were reminded that there was a middle ground to consider; an argument did not mean that a friendship with someone else was ending. Both Isaac and Roger mentioned in group sessions that they did not think that there was a way to repair a friendship if a disagreement occurred. Instead the students tended to think that they needed to curse or threaten their peer, or leave the situation in which the conflict had

happened. I observed that the students had more success handling conflict situations when I emphasized thinking of a “middle ground,” not focusing on love or hate, or other extreme points on a continuum (Tucker et al., 2011). When the students were encouraged to think of things in a middle ground area such as remembering what they liked about each other and things that they liked to do together, I saw that their negative behaviors toward one another decreased.

Third, the students were more successful when certain types of art materials were introduced into the group sessions. When clay was introduced to the students they seemed to become frustrated and had trouble manipulating this material in the way they wanted to during the session. According to Liebmann (2004) clay can sometimes be difficult for individuals to use because it is not easy to control. Roger, for example, was having difficulty with his clay and constantly destroyed what he created and started over. He even destroyed a clay figure that Daniel created, which seemed to raise negative feelings toward one another in the group. The students demonstrated more pride in what they created, more control over the art media, and less negative behaviors when they were able to use the following materials: cardboard and tape to build sculptures, paint, and magazine pictures. The students also became easily distracted and spoke over me when a large variety of art materials was made available to them. I limited the types and amounts of art materials they could use in an effort to increase their attention and focus on what they wanted to accomplish in the session.

Finally, when I modeled prosocial behaviors for students when they were displaying more negative behaviors toward themselves and others, they were able to make more positive choices with their behaviors around others (Yalom, 1985). For

example, when students made negative comments about themselves or their artwork in the group, I modeled how they could speak about themselves in a more positive way and assert their feelings and concerns to others without putting themselves in a negative light.

**Implications.** When several components were incorporated into the art therapy group, the students were more positive in their behavior toward others. These components could be utilized in future group art therapy sessions and included the following: involve them in activities that promote a group identity (Yalom, 1985), utilize a “middle ground” to handle conflicts with others (Tucker et al., 2011), provide them with cardboard, tape, paint, and magazine pictures to complete art projects with a sense of accomplishment (Liebmann, 2004), and model prosocial behaviors for the students when they are negative about themselves or others (Yalom, 1985).

**Research question three.** The third research question asked: “What was the impact of relationship-building skills on the classroom behavior of students with Emotional Disturbance?” The quantitative data that addressed this question consisted of the results from the SBS and Piers-Harris 2. This question was also answered by using qualitative data consisting of classroom observations and student discipline records.

**Findings.** Overall, the students demonstrated increased verbal and physical aggression in their classrooms based on the scores that their teachers gave them on the School Behavior Survey after they participated in the group art therapy program. Although the scores on the School Behavior Survey demonstrated that the students’ school behavior was worse than before their participation in the group art therapy program, the students demonstrated improvements in their interactions with others through the classroom observations conducted and the student discipline reports reviewed.

Based on the comparisons made between the two observation periods for each of the students, Isaac had an easier time following staff directions and interacting in a positive manner with peers after he participated in the group art therapy program. Devon demonstrated improvement in completing his work before interacting with others after he participated in the group sessions. Andrew demonstrated improvements in listening to and taking turns to voicing opinions about different topics without becoming frustrated with others. Daniel demonstrated improvements in focusing in on the class activity with the assistance of preferred seating and fidget objects in the classroom. Roger demonstrated politeness and cooperation around others after participating in the group sessions. He did not attempt to physically attack one of his classmates when he became frustrated as he had before participating in the group art therapy program. In addition to improvements seen in his behavior around others in the classroom, Roger did not have any documented discipline reports after his participation in the group art therapy program.

***Implications.*** Although the students received scores that indicated increased verbal and physical aggression on the School Behavior Survey, the students demonstrated improvements in their classroom behavior based on the data received from the classroom observations before and after they participated in the group art therapy program. This indicated that a continued focus is needed for revisions and modifications to the art therapy program to help the students improve their classroom behaviors.

**Research question four.** The fourth research question stated “How did my servant leadership, which included helping others reach their full potential, nonjudgmental acceptance of others, and self-reflection impact the development and delivery of a group art therapy program?”

*Findings.* This fourth research question can be answered using the research literature related to Emotionally Disturbed students, the developed conceptual framework, and my self-reflection notes from the Reconnaissance, Acting, and Evaluating cycles of the study. Three main areas of servant leadership were focused on throughout this study. Those were using servant leadership to focus on building relationships with others and a sense of community, empowering others and providing empathy, and helping students improve their school experiences as a goal in itself (Pescosolido, 2002).

The research literature indicates that servant leadership emphasized relationship-building on a one-to-one basis, as well as in a group or community format (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). When I conducted a literature review in the Diagnosing cycle of this study, I reviewed relational-cultural therapy strategies that could be used to help the students build relationships and a sense of community in the group. These strategies were emphasized in the planning for the group art therapy sessions.

In the Reconnaissance and Evaluating cycles of this study, I worked to create a supportive atmosphere to build relationships with each of the students individually when they were completing the Life Space Picture, Kinetic School Drawing, and Piers-Harris 2 Self-Concept Scale. The supportive atmosphere was aided by the non-judgmental approach I used in these sessions. I reviewed with each of the students that they would not be graded for what they had completed; my interest instead was on the unique perspectives and opinions that they expressed.

In the Acting cycle of this study, I observed the students' behavior in each group and reflected on what revisions would be needed to help the students build relationships with one another and feel that they were part of a supportive community. Each time the



students participated in the group art therapy session, I would take notes about their comments, behavior, and how well they were able to work together as a group. I needed to keep in mind what was challenging for each of them as well as what were their strengths when designing the next art therapy group session.

In addition to the emphasis on relationship-building practices, I also focused on empowering the students by providing empathy and support (Pescosolido, 2002). In the Diagnosing cycle, I reviewed aspects of group therapy strategies introduced by Yalom (1985) that emphasize empowering others by providing an opportunity to express their thoughts and concerns, and for individuals to improve their cohesiveness as a group. These strategies were documented in the Planning cycle for use for the art therapy groups in the Acting cycle.

In the Diagnosing and Evaluating cycles, I reviewed the data collected from each of the measures the students completed, which included the art therapy raters' comments about the drawings. I focused on the current levels including social and emotional abilities of each student in order to understand, empathize, and be able to work more effectively with the students at each of their individual levels, including their strengths and challenges.

In the Acting cycle, I focused on creating a positive, supportive, and accepting environment that could encourage the students to feel good about themselves and their ability to get along with their peers. Past servant leadership literature emphasized empowering individuals in order to help them improve their lives and make positive changes (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006).

In my Servant leadership style, I also focused on providing cues and guiding students to help them improve how they get along with others. Barbuto & Wheeler (2006) emphasize that the positive behavior of the servant leader provides modeling for others to follow and make improvements in how they related to others. In the Acting cycle, I incorporated in most of the group art therapy sessions a group therapy strategy employed by Yalom (1985). This strategy emphasized modeling positive social behaviors for the students when they had made negative comments, or when they had negative interactions with others in the group. I observed in the sessions that when I incorporated this strategy that students were able to more easily express their concerns and conflicts with others in a more constructive and positive manner.

***Implications.*** I observed that the components and strategies of relational-cultural therapy, art therapy, and group therapy provided supportive, non-judgmental, and accepting techniques that corresponded well with my servant leadership approach. I could utilize the conceptual framework in future counseling work where I incorporate the servant leadership style.

### **Validity, Reliability, Inference Considerations, Rivals, and Research Limitations**

The answers to the questions derived from the study could also have been impacted by validity, reliability, inference considerations, rivals, and research limitations. These areas were explored as part of a thorough review of the study, the cycles of the study, the data collection instruments used and the data results.

**Validity measures.** The following validity measures were used as a part of this study: content validity, construct validity, criterion validity, democratic validity, process validity, outcome validity, and catalytic validity.

**Content validity.** Content validity focuses on assessing whether or not the quantitative measurements used answer the research questions. The Piers-Harris 2 and SBS were examined to note if these measures focus on assessing students' relationships with others and their classroom behavior (Ivankova, 2015). The Piers-Harris 2 contains the following domains, which include questions that focus on students' relationships with others: physical appearance and attributes, freedom from anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction. The remaining two domains on the Piers-Harris 2 focus on classroom behavior, which are behavioral adjustment and intellectual and school status. The School Behavior Survey contains the following domains that focus on peer relationships: social skills, emotional distress, social problems, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. This scale also focuses on classroom behavior and includes the following domains: academic performance, academic habits, health concerns, unusual behavior, behavior problems, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant, and Conduct problems. Overall, the Piers-Harris 2 and SBS contain domain areas that assessed both students' classroom behavior and their relationships with others.

**Construct validity.** In construct validity, each item on a quantitative measure is reviewed for a focus on the research questions of the study. In this study, each question on the Piers-Harris 2 and SBS was analyzed individually to determine if there was a focus on relationships with others and classroom behavior (Ivankova, 2015). Below are the questions on the Piers-Harris 2 that addressed classroom behavior, relationships with others, as well as questions that did not relate to those areas.

*Piers-Harris 2 - Classroom behavior.*

- I get nervous when the teacher calls on me
- I get worried when we have tests in school

- I am well behaved in school
- I give up easily
- I am good in my schoolwork
- I am an important member of my class
- I do many bad things
- I am slow in finishing my schoolwork
- I can give a good report in front of the class
- In school I am a dreamer
- I often get in trouble
- I often volunteer in school
- I am cheerful
- I forget what I learn
- I cry easily

*Piers-Harris 2 - Relationships with others.*

- My classmates make fun of me
- It is hard for me to make friends
- I am shy
- I am a leader in games and sports
- I am unpopular
- It is usually my fault when something goes wrong
- I am an important member of my family
- I behave badly at home
- My friends like my ideas
- I feel left out of things
- I am among the last to be chosen for games and sports
- I am often mean to other people
- My classmates in school think I have good ideas
- I have many friends
- I get into a lot of fights
- I am popular with boys
- People pick on me
- My family is disappointed in me
- In games and sports, I watch instead of play
- I am easy to get along with
- I am popular with girls
- I am different from other people
- I cause trouble to my family
- My parents expect too much of me

*Piers-Harris 2 - Unrelated to classroom behavior and relationships with others.*

- I am a happy person
- I am often sad
- I am smart
- My looks bother me
- I am strong
- I am nervous,
- I am lucky
- I worry a lot
- I like being the way I am
- I have nice hair
- I wish I were different
- I hate school
- I am unhappy
- I am dumb about most things
- I am good-looking
- I have a pleasant face
- When I grow up, I will be an important person
- I am a good reader
- I am often afraid
- I think bad thoughts
- I cry easily
- I am a good person

The School Behavior Survey questions addressed classroom behavior and relationships with others. This scale, like the Piers-Harris 2, also included items that were unrelated to classroom behavior and relationships with others.

*School Behavior Survey - Classroom behavior.*

- Clearly expresses thoughts and ideas
- Completes class assignments, completes homework assignment
- Demonstrates a logical and organized approach to learning
- Eager to learn new material; motivated
- Follows the teacher's directions
- Maintains alert and focused attention to class presentations
- Performance consistent with ability
- Persists even when activity is difficult
- Remembers teacher directions
- Stays seated
- Sits still when necessary
- Waits for his turn
- Works independently without disturbing others

- Participates in class activities
- Takes successes and failures in stride
- Becomes upset for little or no reason
- Behavior is strange and peculiar
- Daydreams or seems preoccupied
- Says strange or bizarre things
- Seems lost or disoriented
- Talks or laughs to himself
- Interrupts when others are speaking
- Complains about the requests of adults
- Insults other students
- Swears at school personnel
- Teases or taunts other students
- Threatens other students
- Threatens school personnel
- Attempts to hurt another student
- Destroys property when angry
- Hits or pushes other students
- Starts fights with other students
- Strikes or pushes school personnel
- Blames others for his problems
- Disobeys school or class rules
- Disrupts class by misbehaving
- Impulsive; acts without thinking
- Lies to school personnel
- Misbehaves unless closely supervised
- Overactive; constantly on the go
- Sent to the office for misbehavior
- Skips classes
- Steals from others
- Suspended from school because of behavior
- Talks excessively
- Cries or appears tearful
- Does not seem to have fun,
- Expects to fail or do poorly
- Mood changes without reason
- Overcritical of himself
- Pessimistic about the future
- Talks about hurting or killing himself
- Worries about little things
- Uses alcohol or drugs
- Preoccupied with sex.

*School Behavior Survey - Relationships with others.*

- Demonstrates polite behavior/good manners

- Helps other students
- Liked by other students
- Listens when other students speak
- Maintains eye contact when speaking
- Works cooperatively with other students
- Becomes upset by constructive criticism
- Blames himself for the problems of others
- Worries about what others think
- Confused by what other people say
- Does not trust other people
- Angers other students
- Appears uncomfortable when talking to other students
- Avoids social interaction in class
- Criticized by other students
- Engages in solitary activities
- Ignored/rejected by other students
- Overly dependent on other students
- Prefers the company of adults over peers
- Shy/uncomfortable with adults
- Teased by other students
- Unaware of the feelings of others
- Argues and wants the last word
- Associates with students who are often in trouble.

*School Behavior Survey - Unrelated to classroom behavior and relationships with others.*

- Parent expectations of school resources and responsibilities are realistic
- Parents meet with school staff when asked
- Parents cooperate with school efforts to improve class behavior and achievement
- Parents encourage achievement
- Parent expectations concerning child's potential for achievement are realistic
- Parents facilitate completion of homework when necessary

In both the School Behavior Survey and the Piers-Harris 2, the number of test items related to classroom behavior and relationships with others was greater than the test questions that were not related to these areas. On the School Behavior Survey, six items out of 102 were unrelated to classroom behavior and relationships to others. On the Piers-

Harris 2, 22 items out of 60 were unrelated to classroom behavior and relationships to others.

***Democratic validity.*** Democratic validity assessed the use of multiple rather than one perspective to draw conclusions in a study. In this study, I wanted to focus on gathering as many perspectives as possible to better understand specifically students with Emotional Disturbance and how they functioned in a small, private, suburban, alternative setting for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. I triangulated the data, by using both quantitative and qualitative measures and the use of teacher and student input to incorporate a variety of perspectives into the data results. These results could assist in the implementation of an ongoing group art therapy program to help students improve their behavior and interactions around others (Ivankova, 2015).

***Outcome validity.*** Outcome validity determined whether or not the action taken as a part of the research helped improve and resolve the main research questions (Ivankova, 2015). The mixed methods action research model that was used for this study helped me to gather information about the strategies, structure, and materials used that helped students understand and start to improve their behavior. Although this information was gathered, the students demonstrated through the review of the discipline reports, SBS, and Piers-Harris 2 that more student improvements were needed. This necessitated ongoing revision to the group art therapy program as the group continued.

***Process validity.*** Process validity focuses on whether a study is composed in an ongoing and cyclical format to answer the research questions in the study. I chose to address my research questions and study through the MMAR format, which was cyclical



in nature and ongoing (Ivankova, 2015). The group art therapy program was part of an ongoing process to help students increase their positive experiences in school. This was a program that will be revised and modified in an ongoing basis to best help students increase more positive behavior and interactions with others

***Catalytic validity.*** Catalytic validity includes educating staff members about the study and encouraging them to revise their strategies with their students (Ivankova, 2015) I had spoken about my findings with staff members when talking in groups about the students that were included in my study. I reported that the students were interested in forming positive friendships with others, but were not sure how to initiate these relationships with others. I noted that when the students focused more on how to develop relationships, their classroom behavior improved.

I will continue to have these discussions on my findings in lectures and group discussion at the school setting to report how students began to develop a more positive role in their classroom and with their peers. I will emphasize that when students with emotional and behavioral difficulties learn relationship-building skills, this would include encouraging others through this research process to make changes in how they address behavioral issues with students. I encouraged the staff to talk about examples of relationship-building activities that they incorporated into their classrooms and what the students' responses have been. This type of feedback could help me to use ideas or suggestions from the teaching staff members to create future group art therapy sessions (Ivankova, 2015).

**Reliability measures.** I utilized the following to assess the reliability in this study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

***Credibility.*** Credibility includes assessing if the results received from the qualitative data are believable and represent an accurate picture of the student population (Ivankova, 2015). I focused on credibility in the study by triangulating the data from the qualitative measures, which were classroom and group art therapy observations, student drawings, and student discipline records, with the quantitative measures used, which were the SBS and Piers-Harris 2 (Ivankova, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two themes emerged when the data were triangulated: students tended to be isolated from others and had difficulty handling conflicts with others.

***Transferability.*** Transferability focuses on assessing whether or not the results obtained from this study could be used to improve programming with similar students in other educational settings (Ivankova, 2015). I kept detailed records of the students' behavior, reactions, and interactions with others during the 16 group art therapy sessions in the Acting cycle of this study; the information could be used with other groups of students in this setting and other educational settings. I noted that the students tended to be more successful in their behavior and interactions with others when they had the opportunity to utilize fidget objects or kinetic sand when they entered the group room, understood new concepts more when group discussions and role-plays took place, and expressed how they felt about themselves and others in detail when they had the opportunity to participate in group art therapy projects. Students with a similar special education classification and psychiatric diagnoses in other educational settings could benefit from incorporating the group art therapy program to help their students improve their classroom behavior and relationships with others.

***Dependability.*** Dependability in a study assesses whether or not the study could be duplicated. I analyzed the dependability of the measures used in this study by creating and documenting a research design map that included the procedures used to conduct, analyze, and interpret the data in each cycle of the study for future replications (Ivankova, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). (See Table 6).

Table 6

*Research Design Map*

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Research Cycle	Conduct	Analyze	Interpret
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Diagnosing	Problem Rationale Literature review Conceptual framework	Compare research problem, research rationale, literature review, and conceptual framework for patterns and themes	Use this information for group planning.
Reconnaissance	SBS Piers-Harris 2 Life Space Picture Kinetic school drawing Classroom observations Discipline records	Data results Mean of quantitative data Qualitative data themes Mixing of quantitative and qualitative data	Student baseline for classroom behavior and peer relationships Group planning
Planning	Review results of diagnosing cycle Review results of reconnaissance cycle	List strategies from both diagnosing and reconnaissance cycle Note similarities between the strategies	Group planning
Acting	Group artwork Group discussion Group role-play Group observations Self-reflection	Note themes and patterns Note strengths and weaknesses Primary and secondary coding of data	Effective strategies for improving classroom behavior and peer relationships Ineffective strategies for improving classroom behavior and peer relationships
Evaluating	SBS Piers-Harris 2 Life space picture Kinetic school drawing Classroom observation Discipline records	Data results Mean of quantitative data Qualitative data themes Mixing of quantitative and qualitative data	Similarities and differences in student classroom behavior and peer relationships
Monitoring	Review data results and interpretation from the Acting cycle. Review data results and interpretation from the Evaluating cycle	Note themes and patterns Note strengths and weaknesses	Effective group strategies for improving classroom behavior and peer relationships Ineffective group strategies for improving classroom behavior and peer relationships

**Confirmability.** Confirmability includes utilizing methods to assess the study's unbiased nature; I utilized a research journal throughout the study to evaluate whether or not the data results were objective and impartial (Ivankova, 2015). Throughout this study,

a majority of my journal entries focused on my own anxiety about the research process based on my prior knowledge of the behavior of the student-participants.

I had observed before I started the study that the student-participants had a tendency as a group to be impulsive and had difficulty following the classroom and counseling plans that had been put into place for them. This group of students also had a tendency to become angry easily and would leave the school area where a specific activity was taking place. During this study, I frequently wrote about my anxiety of not knowing what to expect from their behavior and to be careful not to let a prediction of how they would behave and act influence what was genuinely happening in the research.

**Inference considerations.** The inference considerations that I reviewed include design suitability, theoretical consistency, interpretive agreement, and integrative efficacy (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009).

**Design suitability.** Design suitability includes reviewing the different methods that I employed in this study and whether or not those approaches answer this study's research questions (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). I broke down the methods I used with each research question in Table 7.

Table 7

*Design Suitability*

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Question	Data collection methods	MMAR cycles
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<p>To what extent did participation in the group art therapy program impact emotionally disturbed students' positive relationships with others?</p>	<p>SBS, Piers-Harris 2, student observations, student artwork, discipline records</p>	<p>Reconnaissance, Acting, Evaluating</p>
<p>Which components of a group art therapy program addressed the behavioral characteristics of students with Emotional Disturbance?</p>	<p>Student observations, self-reflective notes, student artwork</p>	<p>Planning, Acting, Monitoring</p>
<p>What was the impact of relationship-building skills on classroom behavior in students with Emotional Disturbance?</p>	<p>SBS, Piers-Harris 2, student observations, student artwork, discipline records</p>	<p>Reconnaissance, Evaluating</p>
<p>How did my servant leadership style, which included helping others reach their full potential, nonjudgmental acceptance of others, and self-reflection, impact the development and delivery of a group art therapy program?</p>	<p>Self-reflective notes, student observations, student artwork</p>	<p>Reconnaissance, Acting, Evaluating, Monitoring</p>

Based on Table 7, the School Behavior Survey, Piers-Harris 2, classroom observations, group art therapy observations, student artwork, and discipline records provided a more thorough look at the impact of the program as well as the incorporation

of multiple perspectives (Ivankova, 2015). The research questions were addressed by both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study, and were addressed through a mixed methods action research study.

***Theoretical framework consistency.*** Theoretical consistency includes reviewing the theories of therapy included in the conceptual framework to note if the therapies helped the participants to increase positive classroom behaviors and relationships with others (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). Below is a review of each theory of therapy utilized in the conceptual framework, the data collected, and if the classroom behavior and relationships with others were addressed.

*Art therapy.* According to Liebmann (2004), art therapy provides a visual language to help individuals express current concerns that may not be easily communicated through words. The art therapy strategies utilized in this study included a variety of group artwork tasks that focused on helping the students express what type of relationships they had with others, and positive ways to handle peer conflicts. These tasks included the following: group armor, clay figures, friendship magazine collage, ladder, stone pathway from disconnections to connections, group magazine collage, feeling stuck sculpture, and group painting. The artwork created contained words that described how students felt about current friendships as well as ways to handle disagreements among peers. I also observed in the fourteenth through sixteenth sessions that the students were more comfortable working together and within a closer space to each other in order to collaborate on group art project.

*Relational-cultural therapy.* Based the descriptions of Tucker et al. (2011), this type of therapy approach focuses on relationship-building skills in order to promote more

positive friendships with others. The students spoke in great detail about the following relational-cultural therapy concepts that I introduced into group discussions: self-acceptance, a trusting and accepting atmosphere, controlled/relational images, and disconnections/connections (Tucker et al., 2011). When the student classroom observations were conducted before and after the students discussed these concepts in the group art therapy program, the students displayed more positive classroom behavior and relationships with others.

*Group therapy.* According to Yalom (1985) group therapy techniques include group projects and activities that promote a sense of community in the group and more of an ability to communicate and collaborate on group projects. The group therapy strategies that were incorporated into the group art therapy program included the following: imparting of information, role-play, catharsis of thoughts and feelings, universality, group cohesion, modeling of positive and prosocial behaviors (Yalom, 1985). These strategies emphasized teaching students in the moment how to handle different peer conflicts and understanding that others had similar challenges in relating to others. When I observed the students before and after their participation in the group art therapy program, I noticed that their classroom behavior and relationships with others had improved, which may have been due in part to the group therapy strategies they learned as they participated in the group art therapy program.

*Interpretive agreement.* I reviewed past research literature that focused on a similar population and research design to help determine if other scholars would reach the same conclusions as I did (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). In my study, I noticed that the student-participants responded well to relational-cultural therapy concepts, which



included self-acceptance, positive and negative relationships, connections and disconnections, controlled or stereotypes images, and getting unstuck (Tucker et al., 2011). Several past studies had also utilized relational-cultural therapy with students. Sassen et al. (2005) note that after students were introduced to relational-cultural therapy concepts and strategies, they increased their communication of thoughts and concerns. Duffey and Somody (2011) documented that when they introduced relational-cultural therapy to students in their study, the students increased their sense of community and support for each other. When Jordan (2000) utilized relational-cultural therapy concepts with middle school students, the participants demonstrated increased maturity and empathy toward others.

In this study, I observed that students utilized art therapy to express themselves as well as increase their interactions with others. Several past art therapy studies also report the benefits of this treatment modality with school students. Alavinezhad et al. (2014) focused in their mixed methods study on the impact of art therapy on aggressive behavior in children. After 10 weeks of participating in the art therapy program, the child participants demonstrated a decrease in anger and an increase in self-esteem. Freilich and Shechtman (2010) conducted a qualitative study with a similar student population to the participants in the study conducted by Alavinezhad et al., (2014). Results indicated that students made significant emotional growth after participating in the art therapy program. Khadar et al. (2013) studied the impact of art therapy on students that were having difficulty communicating their concerns to others. After the children participated in art therapy sessions, they increased their verbal communication of feelings and concerns (Khadar et al., 2013).

In this study, the students also seemed to benefit from the group therapy format, and this type of therapy structure impacted positively on their classroom behavior and relationships with others. Past research studies had also seen positive changes in students after they have participated in group therapy. Galassi (2007) conducted a mixed methods research study to examine the impact of a group therapy program that focused on social skills instruction for students with Emotional Disturbance. The students participated in a daily social skills group therapy program over a 30-day period. As a result of their participation in the group therapy format, the students demonstrated progress in the following areas: positive social skills, classroom behavior, and academic achievement (Galassi, 2007).

In a similar study that focused on the impact of group therapy on social skills, Waxmonsky et al. (2012) found that after the student participants participated in group therapy, they demonstrated a decrease in depressed mood and negative interactions with others.

In addition, Hicks (2012) conducted a quantitative study to measure the impact of a group therapy program on the social skills of students. Twelve students were participants in this study and each of these children participated in the group therapy program once a week for eight weeks. Results of this study indicated that participation in the group therapy program demonstrated a decrease in aggressive behaviors, and an increase in communication and social skills.

*Integrative efficacy.* I reviewed the data for inconsistencies, and used the theoretical framework to back up the results of the study (Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009). Although the students demonstrated improvement in classroom behavior and

relationships with others when they were observed in their classrooms and in the drawings they produced, these differences in behavior and relationships with others were not reflected in the School Behavior Survey, and the Piers-Harris 2. The inconsistencies in the data may be due to characteristics of the student population itself, and how students respond to art therapy, group therapy, and relational-cultural therapy.

Cooper et al. (2007), Knight (2002), and Sugai and Horner (2002) report that students with emotional and behavioral difficulties do not respond in the same way to interventions and programs that had been designed to help them to be more successful in school. Instead the researchers discovered that each student with Emotional Disturbance could have a unique response to counseling programs. In my current study, the students' inconsistent data results related to improvement in behavior and interactions around others, could be due to a variety of unique and individual reactions and changes in the students after participating in the group art therapy program.

### **Rivals.**

*Direct rival.* There were several direct rivals that may have impacted changes in the students' relationships with others. First, Devon had the opportunity to work with the principal to create a classroom reward system that focused primarily on Pokémon products. He seemed extremely excited about this new classroom plan, and spoke about many meetings and positive attention he received from the principal. His general excitement seemed to impact more positive relationships with others in his classroom as he spoke about the Pokémon rewards with his peers, and may have influenced his improved classroom behavior and relationships. Roger was new to the school at the beginning of the study, and had made many friends on his own and had adjusted to the

school routine by the end of the study. His familiarity and positive relationships with his peers outside of the group may have impacted on his classroom relationships and behaviors more than the group art therapy sessions.

***Implementation rival.*** The implementation of the group art therapy program itself may have impacted student changes in classroom behavior and relationships with others. The five student participants seemed to respond positively to being invited to a group that was new to them and could provide them with the opportunity to receive increased positive support and attention from staff members. The students seemed to thrive on increased opportunities for individual attention and support.

***Rival theory.*** One of the theories of therapy included in the conceptual framework for this study was relational-cultural therapy. Relational-cultural therapy focused on individuals learning positive ways to relate to others (Tucker et al., 2011). Client-centered therapy, which focused on positive support and unconditional acceptance, could also promote changes in relationships with others (Rogers, 1986). The client-centered approach had always been a part of my therapeutic style, had been incorporated into the foundation of all my therapy sessions, and could be considered a rival theory.

### **Research limitations.**

***Educational setting.*** This school was a small, private, alternative site for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Although academic activities were important to their school day, therapy took priority in this program. Staff members provided me with support to help students come into the group session, and had been flexible with my

scheduling group days and times. Other types of school settings may not be as flexible with the days and times the group would meet. Staff instead might focus more on academic areas and may not be comfortable with students missing class time for the art therapy group twice a week.

*Students' outside influences.* Other factors may have influenced four of the student responses that were recorded in this research and may not be solely influenced by their participation in the group art therapy intervention. Isaac had to leave the school twice by ambulance to go to a crisis center for trying to hurt himself and others in school. This student has a great deal of outside services involved in his psychological treatment. The individuals that provide this outside treatment had encouraged his mother to take away many items he enjoyed at home, such as playing video games. Isaac verbally expressed the frustration with decreased access to things he enjoys doing and had become angry more easily at school.

Devon was coping with his father's diagnosis of alcoholism, his father's treatment, and how that made changes and influenced the other members of his family. Often his verbalizations in and out of the group reflected concern for his father. Andrew had ongoing difficulties with his physical strength in his legs and his balance to be able to walk around the school building. During the study, he was given permission to take a break from physical therapy in order to decrease the emotional pressure he felt about physical activities in general. He was more out of breath and physically frail during his school day and had some difficulty traveling to different rooms around the school. His physical challenges impacted his ability to get to the room regularly for the group art therapy sessions.

Roger had moved from South Africa to the United States after his father passed away. He came to the school setting in September and throughout his time in the research study spoke about his father passing away and missing his friends and family in South Africa. Overall, the changes described in the lives of four of the students may have impacted their self-concept or relationships with others during the study (Tucker et al., 2011).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for further research were developed after reviewing the data collection procedure, analyzing the data qualitatively, quantitatively, mixing the two data types, and reviewing the findings. First, similar studies need to be conducted to continue to increase the research literature related to helping students with Emotional Disturbance have more positive experiences in school. Past research literature document that students with emotional and behavioral challenges have difficulties in many areas both in and out of school. This student population would benefit from continued research that could help them experience more success in their classroom behavior and relationships with others. This current study contained only male participants; future studies could explore the effectiveness of group art therapy programs with a mix of male and female participants, or only female participants.

Second, future research studies could fine-tune the discussions, role-plays, and group art projects that helped these students to improve their classroom behavior and relationships with others. For example, the students had an easier time participating in some role-play activities in comparison to others; future research could explore what types of role-play programs are more suited to the Emotionally Disturbed student

population. In this current study, students had a harder time expressing themselves and getting along with one another when clay was introduced into the session; future research could also focus on what art materials are best suited to this student population.

Third, future research could continue to focus on introducing relational-cultural therapy concepts and strategies in a way that is easier for the student-participants to understand. The students had a more difficult time with the concepts presented that required more abstract thinking. Future research could focus on presenting relational-cultural therapy concepts to these students in a more concrete manner.

Fourth, future research could also focus on the effect of group art therapy when more sessions are offered to the students. The students participated in 16 group art therapy sessions, and began to show improvements in how they related and worked with each other toward the end of the sessions. Future research could focus on the impact of group art therapy sessions that are offered for half or the entire school year.

## **Conclusions**

More and more students who have demonstrated emotional and behavioral difficulties have been classified as Emotionally Disturbed. When exploring strategies to help these students improve their behavior and interactions around others, not only were behavioral therapies explored, but other therapies were utilized to help these students understand their behavior around others, and learn new strategies to interact with others in a more positive way. This study assessed the impact of a Group Art Therapy program on the behavior and relationships of Emotionally Disturbed students. A mixed methods action research format was utilized to measure what type of impact Group Art Therapy had on students with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

The students' behavior and interactions around others in school was measured before and after they participated in the 16-session Group Art Therapy program. After the data were collected and analyzed from each of the six cycles included in this MMAR study, I was able to answer the four research questions of the study. First, the students were making progress in how they related to others, but this change did not happen immediately or sustain over an extended period of time. For students with Emotional Disturbance, they can benefit from an ongoing Group Art Therapy program that gives the students the opportunity to learn about and practice ways of relating to others.

Second, several strategies in the Group Art Therapy program helped the students improve their behavior and relationships with others. These strategies would be recommended for future group sessions. The strategies were: involving them in activities that focused on developing a group identity (Yalom, 1985), using a "middle ground" instead of extremes to handle conflict situations (Tucker et al., 2011), providing them with cardboard, tape, paint, and magazine pictures to express themselves visually (Liebmann, 2004), and modeling positive behaviors and strategies for the students when they were negative about themselves or others (Yalom, 1985).

Third, the students received scores that indicated increased verbal and physical aggression on the School Behavior Survey after participating in the Group Art Therapy program; although these scores were recorded, the students demonstrated improvements when they were observed in their classroom after they finished the group sessions. The students demonstrated that they had the ability to change, but would benefit from more group programming that focused on school behavior and relationships with others to help them make greater improvements.



Finally, the servant leadership style that I had utilized with the students in the study corresponded directly with the strategies that were used in art therapy, group therapy, and relational-cultural therapy. These included creating a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere in which students could genuinely express themselves (Liebmann, 2004; Yalom, 1985). Additionally, I focused on the current social and emotional abilities of each student in order to work more effectively with their current strengths and challenges (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). I would continue to adopt a servant leadership style to encourage students to express how they feel about themselves and others, and help them to brainstorm ways to more effectively interact with others.

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## Appendix

### Student Observation Protocol

Student-participant:

Date and time:

Number of students in the classroom:

Academic subject:

Number of staff members in the classroom:

Describe the activity taking place in the classroom:

#### **Student participant behavior plan:**

What are the goals of the behavior plan?

What are the incentives?

What are the negative consequences?

What is the student's reaction to the plan?

#### **Classroom behaviors observed:**

What are the positive classroom behaviors observed?

What happened before these behaviors?

What happened after these behaviors?

What are the negative classroom behaviors observed?

What happened before these behaviors?

What happened after these behaviors?

Noise level in the classroom:

What interventions were used by teaching staff to redirect students?

**Relationship-building activities:**

What actions did the student participant take to interact in a positive way with others?

What actions did the student participant take to interact in a negative way with others?

What actions did the teaching staff take to interact in a positive way with the student-participants?

What actions did the teaching staff take to interact in a negative way with the student participants?