

**ART INTEGRATED THERAPY FOR SUPPORTING NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS
IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

by

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A Paper

Presented to the Gordon Albright School of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education in School Counselling

EGC640 School Counselling Project

March 2026

**Art Integrated Therapy for Supporting Neurodiverse Individuals in Social
and Emotional Learning**

APPROVED:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles Scott". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that I work, live, and learn on the traditional and unceded territories of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples as the traditional stewards of the land, along with the W̱SÁNEĆ peoples. I would like to acknowledge all my friends, family, and mentors who have supported me in my studies. I would like to dedicate this capstone to my love for art and nature. Thank you to Charles Scott for advising and supporting me in creating this capstone. You have made me feel valued as an artist and a caregiver throughout my work on my capstone.

Abstract

Neurodiverse individuals are often faced with a public school system that was not created for them to succeed. This paper focuses on the effects that art integrated therapies can and have had on supporting neurodiverse individuals in developing their social and emotional skills. It will address the different mediums, methods, and environments that can affect how art therapy is received by the client. It will discuss the background of these categories and explain the key terminology used in this research. I will analyze several academic sources that have real life experience applying art therapy to support diverse individuals and reflect on their effectiveness and experience. Finally, I will share a connection to how this research is prevalent to school counselors and teachers working within the public school system. I will offer several accessible resources that can be used as an introductory art therapy application.

Key words: neurodiversity, inclusive education, art integrated therapy, social emotional learning (SEL)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This chapter will outline some concerns and ideas surrounding how neurodiverse students are being supported in social emotional learning (SEL). It offers ideas and research to discuss how concerns can be aided using art-based therapies and programs. Neurodiverse individuals experience a unique perspective, and the social systems within our society do not support them effectively. Generally, life is catered to neurotypical individuals. Often, social and emotional skills and expression differ for neurodiverse individuals. By using art-based therapies, forms of expression, communication, and understanding can be broadened to include a spectrum of comprehension and sharing. Wald & Bernstorf (2024) explore how some forms of art can support neurodiverse children by offering the art to speak for them. By sharing a form of art with others, relationships can develop and strengthen the opportunity to connect through their artistic commonalities.

Background Information – Framing of the Problem

This exploration of research will support the recognition that there are different ways that an individual may be thinking or feeling. Within the counselling field, it is important to honor differences and find innovative ways to create an inclusive and safe space. SEL and art can be foundational tools when working towards this goal.

Neurodivergence includes but is not limited to individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive-

compulsive disorder (OCD), dyslexia, etc. It is important to highlight that neurodivergence is not a diagnosis but is commonly seen within the public school system. In the United States, the National Health Interview Survey conducted a study including 14,983 children aged 3-17 years. It looked at autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities and indicates that about 8.5% have ADHD, 6.4% have learning disabilities, and 2.9% have autism. By adding these statistics, it shows that approximately 1 in 10 students are likely to be neurodiverse. (Zablotsky et al. 2022).

Neurodivergent students are often facing specific challenges that require an inclusive and supportive approach from a school team. They also can have unique strengths that need nourishing. “The idea of neurodiversity is really a paradigm shift in how we think about kids in special education. Instead of regarding these students as suffering from deficit, disease, or dysfunction, neurodiversity suggests that we speak about their strengths.” (Armstrong, 2012)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is described as the process through which individuals develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making abilities (CASEL, 2023). It supports individuals in gaining competency to manage and understand emotions and their social interactions. It nurtures the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with themselves and the people around them. Using different tools, the individual can set and work towards goals surrounding self-regulation, empathy, communication, etc.

Art Therapy is a low-pressure form of psychotherapy rooted in expression. It is a way to provide a creative pathway to exploring emotions and developing self-awareness or coping strategies. It is a practice that can be adapted by educators and school counsellors to build communication and emotional support in school settings. For students who feel anxiety around

creating art or feel like they do not have artistic abilities, it could potentially pose roadblocks for art integrated therapy. When encompassing this, reframing the activities with examples or language can be helpful. Art has a ridiculously wide scope; we can almost always find a connection to creation or expression that can be classified as “art”. From finding that, it comes down to connecting art form to art form. For example, When I got into pottery several years ago. I initially thought my art would be shaping clay and painting. Since I started, I have had to learn about glaze chemistry, kiln electrical circuits, brand identity, and much more. If “art” is too stressful of a term, we can call it crafting, woodworking, writing, or technology.

The effectiveness for neurodivergent students is due to its overlap with many tools that are often used to support this population. Examples include “feelings” colour wheels, emotion regulation charts, social stories, mood mandalas, and collaborative projects for building self-awareness and social connection. This form of therapy can be used verbally or non-verbally and provides opportunity for overcoming communication barriers. It commonly includes a sensory component and reduces anxiety through soothing, repetitive, or sensory-friendly art activities

The relationship between art therapy and SEL can be highlighted by analyzing the overlap of how they both support students through emotional expression and communication. They each promote self-regulation and sensory-friendly emotional regulation. Collaboratively, they can foster skills that enhance relationship building and social awareness. Art-based therapy can enhance SEL by utilizing opportunities for neurodivergent learners. It is more accessible than other therapies due to its flexibility and individualized learning approaches.

Statement of the Issue/Problem

My interest in this research has stemmed from my time working within the school system in Victoria, BC. So often, I see neurodiverse students slipping through the cracks. The issue of our public-school systems being limited to supporting the majority of students makes it so that students who have additional needs and exceptionalities are not getting what they need by default. It takes specific programs and adaptations to serve this population in getting their education and making school a safe, inclusive space where students can be themselves. This gap in our system is one I have noticed in my role as a classroom teacher, learning support teacher, and now as a school counsellor. This gap is one of the main contributors drawing me into this field where I can support vulnerable and high needs populations of students. The integration of social emotional learning and art comes from a more personal lens. Social emotional learning is my favourite space in teaching. I feel it is the most foundational area we teach. It holds value that is equal if not more important than the academics that usually take priority. SEL teaches a sense of self and others that aids young people in living harmoniously in our world and society. It teaches them how to identify who they are and how they feel by being in touch with their holistic selves. By bringing in art integrated therapies, I can authentically explore an area of counselling that feels organic and effective to my practice. Art is important to community. By learning more about how to use it in a counselling setting, my practice will stem from a place that is true to myself. Art is an effective use of alternative communication. It evokes feelings and creates options for expression. I see it as is filled to the brim with potential for creating a safe, person-centered, and trusted counselling space. “More discussion, content from disabled artists, and art

projects that explore disability are steps in the right direction as long as they include voices of people with disabilities and embrace the neurodiversity paradigm.” (Larsen, 2018)

Research Question and Purpose of Study

The purpose of this capstone is to research and explore the effectiveness of art-based therapies in supporting neurodivergent students' social-emotional development. The aim is to identify specific art modalities (e.g. visual arts, music, drama) that are beneficial. It will examine their impact on key social emotional learning (SEL) competencies including self-awareness, self-regulation, and social awareness. I want to understand how these interventions can be integrated into school counselling to create a more inclusive environment for neurodivergent students. With an overarching goal of fostering emotional well-being and positive peer interactions, this research can encourage further understanding of how school counsellors can work with the entire student body.

This purpose has created the curiosities that lead me to my research questions. *How can art-based therapies be used to support the development of social-emotional skills in neurodivergent students?*

Significance of the Study

Many students who are neurodivergent often face challenges when developing social-emotional skills. Neurodivergence can include but is not limited to those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), etc. People who are neurodiverse can struggle with emotional regulation, social communication, and empathy.

The unique perspective neurodiverse people have can often also come with unique learning preferences. The traditional methods that the public-school systems often use are not always the best learning environment for all students. Many instructional practices in these systems are a one size fits all approach. Art-based therapies, including visual arts, music, and drama can offer an alternative approach that can better support students who are learning through a different lens. Learning social and emotional skills using art integrated therapies offers a mode of education that is holistic. It allows students to learn based on their strengths. We can scaffold new ideas and concepts from where they are at and individualize education based on prior knowledge and capabilities.

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

In the literature review, first I will discuss the drive and personal experience that brought me to this research as well as my current understanding of the concepts in the field I work in. Then I will discuss the connections between building social emotional skills and art therapy. This will follow with a more in-depth analysis of how art therapy can be applied using different mediums, environment, and connecting to culture. For chapter 3, I will be creating a package of art integrated therapeutic activities that are accessible to use in teaching and school counselling. They do not require further preparation for teachers but do allow for expansion into mindfulness and social emotional learning if need be.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will discuss how to support neurodiverse students with social-emotional skills using art-based therapies. First, I will discuss the challenges and successes that can be noticed for a neurodiverse student in the school system. Many neurodiverse students that enter the traditional school system are undiagnosed. This likely means they do not automatically receive additional support to aid them in the classroom. Entering kindergarten can come with exposure to new social dynamics and surroundings which can highlight and bring out some signs of neurodiversity in students. One of the reasons that this capstone focuses on individuals who fall into the neurodiverse category is due to the soft lines around this term. It is not a medical diagnosis. One can identify or present as neurodiverse without the support or approval from any systems. I want this research to support whoever needs to use it. I want the flexibility of its usefulness to be ingrained in the language. Currently, I work in the public school system as a learning support teacher. I've learned a lot in this job about designations, diagnosis, and how those affect the system and support we get at the school. I like how the term "neurodiverse" is not a diagnosis or a designation. I value how it is outside of the rules and structure of how support is allocated in our system. The reason I wanted to use the term neurodiverse in my capstone question is because I wanted to encompass as many students as possible. Often, neurodiverse individuals are diagnosed with ADHD, autism, or OCD, but these often overlap and can be complicated to define in the early years of a child's life. I will dive further into the definition of neurodiverse in my definition of terms. There are many who fall under the "neurodiverse umbrella" that are undiagnosed. I like the fact that people who are not diagnosed (for any reason) can fall into this area. I work a lot with kindergarten students. This term is

inclusive for students in those early years of transitioning and settling into the school system. I'm utilizing the "catch-all" effect that this term has in this capstone.

Most classrooms are created to fit a neurotypical student. As neurodiverse students grow, they develop the ability to mask and fit into society's neurotypical molds. In the early years of childhood and school, we are granted an authentic representation of them as individuals. The progression of academics throughout school is scaffolded for building on a child's knowledge. For gifted or advanced children, the academic subjects can create a space of time when they are bored and there is opportunity for frustration and impulsive behaviour to manifest. Assessment and reporting for neurodiverse students can pose some challenges as it is not always appropriate to compare them with neurotypical students for certain benchmarks.

Next, the chapter will discuss how art therapy supports social emotional skill building. Social emotional skills such as communication and emotional regulation can develop differently for neurodiverse children. Using an intentionally designed inclusive art-based therapy allows space to communicate and regulate that can overlap with supporting all abilities. A large part of art is connection: connection with yourself and connection with others. Connection is the link that ties art and therapy into each other. Using art integrated therapies is an effective way to build a trusting, safe, therapeutic relationship between client and counsellor. A 2023 study looked at how creating art alongside the client in art therapy has benefits that aid in dismantling the unhelpful power dynamics that are present in therapy between client and counsellor. The act of co-expression brings mutuality to the sessions and supports connection and trust. This form of art therapy allows for building safer spaces, peer/role modelling, increased empathy, and understanding for unique learning experiences (Jewell & Camden-Pratt, 2023). Art therapy

creates opportunities for neurodiverse students to connect using art as a commonality with others or a regulating activity for themselves. There are several appropriate mediums with art therapy including drawing, paint, music, textiles, acting/performance/dance and ceramics.

Lastly, this chapter will discuss how we can use art therapy in a client-centered manner. Using a wrap-around care model to support neurodiverse students is ideal for both the students as their team. At schools, there are the “school-based teams”. These are groups of professionals within the school that work to support the student. The school-based team also connects to supports outside the schools such as occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, counsellors, etc., as well as the students’ parents. It is the responsibility of the school-based team to keep communication flowing between all who support the student. The coping tools used within art therapy can be shared with the client’s community, so they have consistency within their circle, and everyone is well educated. Part of being client centered is making the art therapy practice culturally safe, inclusive, relevant to the student, and accessible. This may mean working outside the school counselling scope and looking into community opportunities for programs and services.

Definition of Terms and Theoretical Framework

Neurodiverse

Judy Singer first introduced the term “Neurodiversity” as a growing concept and title of her book in 1993. She promoted the growing socio-political movement that recognized and included neurodiverse individuals. Neurodiversity is a variation found in the human population. It is a naturally occurring neurological or neurocognitive dissimilitude that affects an individual

in a variety of ways ranging from social and emotional to cognitive and physiological impacts (American Psychological Association, 2023)

“The terms “neurodiversity” and “neurodivergence” are sometimes used interchangeably. This is, I believe, a mistake, as “neurodiversity” is a term of inclusion whereas “neurodivergence” is a term of exclusion. To make the semantic difference clear, note that everyone can be said to be neurodiverse, but that it is impossible for everyone to be neurodivergent: for someone or something to be divergent, someone or something else must be non-divergent.” Legault & Bourdon (2021) bring up the argument to differentiate between “neurodiverse” and “neurodivergent”.

Neurotypical

Neurotypical is the description of a medically and psychologically healthy individual demonstrating a normative pattern of neurodevelopment. Typically, this term is used in contrast with the term neurodiverse. It is seen in scientific publications (Cashin 2006) and well as in less academic sources. In this capstone, the term is the antithesis of neurodiverse.

The distinction between these terms is heavily based on the way individuals are viewed in society today. Our actions and the way we think, or express is constantly being assessed and judged. We categorized characteristics and place each other into definitions to organize who is and isn't falling neatly into our systems that are meant to hold our population. We so often crave a reason or rationale for why someone is not fitting into the system: what is causing this divergence from everyone else? My hope for my work in this capstone is that I can highlight the ways in which our schools can be more open to all with a focus on the various approaches we can employ. In my work, I have learned how these terms and diagnoses can be helpful, but they

can also stand in the way of support for students. I want to look at how we can meet students where they are, honor and appreciate what they bring to the table, and celebrate diversity. “We’re born this way. This is what we are. We can learn to be more like other people if we have to...but wouldn’t it be nicer if we didn’t have to?” (Valeur, 2021, as cited in Hall et al., 2024, p. 42)

Art-Based Therapy (ABT)

“Art therapy is a psychological therapy or medical assistant method combining art with consultation and treatment. It is based on the theory and method of psychotherapy and the specific physiological and psychological activities of people in artistic activities” (Wu & Sang-Yeol, 2022). This mental health intervention uses creativity and artistic freedom to aid in emotional expression and regulation. There is also a connection to Sigmund Freud and his work in studying the unconscious mind. Symbols or colours can represent parts of the mind that a client cannot share with words alone. This is one of the earliest theoretical foundations that sits within art therapy. In this paper, I discuss drama, visual arts, painting, and nature-based arts. I speak to how expansive ABT can be and applaud the vastly expansive definition of “art”. I do not investigate the use of musically art integrated therapy though there is a wide scope of learning that can be gained from this research.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity applies to all groups of difference and serves to bridge identities (DeLuca, 2013). Inclusivity is the action of being inclusive to the client in the counselling practice. To be inclusive is to be open, accepting, and able to make adaptations for anyone who is not being best served within the circumstances. It is being considerate of diverse backgrounds. This includes acknowledging and gaining understanding for varying sociocultural, economic, political,

historical, environmental, and religious factors, avoiding bias and preconceived notions, and integrating a safe, multicultural, accepting space. These factors contribute to the development of a child's identity, empathy, critical thinking skills, confidence, and social and emotional skills. Our need for inclusivity within counselling is tied into the need for creating safe counselling spaces. For neurodiverse individuals, I believe this means we must be inclusive without stigma surrounding one's abilities/disabilities. "The special education perspective effectively presents three forms of inclusion (i.e., segregation, integration, and inclusion) and provides a basis for understanding inclusion for students with exceptionalities, it is limited in its redress of dualistic conceptualizations of ability and disability" (DeLuca, 2013, p. 312). This type of thinking is the same as what is embedded in the term neurodivergent. The black and white thinking creates a mindset around inclusion that requires a judgment of what is right and wrong. One must be diverging from the norm. Inclusivity in its rawest form is about supporting all individuals regardless of their placement in a perceived hierarchy or meeting of a societal norm.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social emotional learning (SEL) is an education methodology that builds and develops social and emotional skills. Often, this is done within the school curriculum. In British Columbia, the school curriculum has 3 Core Competencies that are woven within learning. Personal and social development, communication capacities, and thinking are seen as three integral areas that are integrated throughout both home and school life (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, n.d.). Social-emotional learning stems seamlessly from these core competencies. It holds importance on advancing and progressing students' ability to be caring, responsible, and respectful individuals within their societies. Building social emotional skills is within the

counselling and school counselling lens regarding developing regulating and communication abilities appropriately for their environments. Social emotional learning envelopes a person-centered theory approach towards education. It builds self-awareness through reflection and encourages empathy and social awareness. Carl Rogers founded this theory and brought forth the concepts that I believe can be used within SEL to promote positive relationships using unconditional positive regard.

Review of Research Literature

Across these articles, there is an ongoing theme of how effective art-based interventions were when supporting emotional regulation, identification, and reflection in children. They addressed students with neurodivergence including ASD and anxiety.

Studies such as Abolghasemi and Masooleh (2023) and Rufo (2017) showcase that both structured and self-directed art therapy can help children manage anxiety. This was done by providing opportunities for non-verbal communication and expression. It further connected to developing their emotional skills surrounding self and co-regulation in times when their anxiety was heightened. Their studies increased emotional awareness and positively impacted their relationship with learning. Alter-Muri (2017) similarly found that integrating art therapies into the classroom is an effective tool when supporting students with unique sensory needs. Leigh's (2020) article reinforces that the creation of art is one of the core pedagogies within art therapy. Creativity is a therapeutic practice in and of itself. Expression in a creative way (drawing, acting, writing) of providing an outlet for emotions or stress. Some of the dynamics of creative expression are the processing, control, and insight it can allow. It is an outlet for stressors and

emotions that can otherwise be bottled up and come out in emotional outbursts stay in the physical and mental body as tension.

Some of the gaps within the literature I identified included the direct correlation between SEL and art therapy. I want to learn more about other modalities of art in addition to visual arts. Drama and dance hold a lot of potential in how it could impact SEL, especially within working with young children. Many of the studies address the emotional and social benefits but do not name it as social emotional learning or outline how it specifically supports the five SEL competencies identified by CASEL (2023). Despite this, the connections are clearly indicating a strong bridge between art therapy and social emotional learning. I feel confident that I can identify the self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making learning that can happen in correlation with art integrated therapies. By making this link, it demonstrates how art therapy does more than only nurture artistic skills. It creates pathways to developing social and emotional competence. There is also limited guidance to how educators can implement art-based SEL strategies effectively in inclusive classrooms. I am working towards creating tangible and user-friendly (for educators) resources that can be utilized to teach preventative and social emotional skill building through art therapy techniques. I would be able to support teachers with as a school counsellor with these resources. These resources can also be in the home with parents or self-directed for older students.

I am still researching, continuing to build the connection between therapeutic art practices and structured SEL frameworks. For a nontraditional SEL framework that is more curated to neurodivergent students, I am striving to discover how art-based therapies can create an intentional space for all individuals.

Inclusive Art Therapy Techniques to Build Social Emotional Skill (SEL) Building

This heading explores how multiple studies conducted have analyzed and explored how art therapies can be used to support young, neurodiverse children in building social emotional skills.

Abolghasemi and Masooleh (2023) conducted a study to research how painting-based group play therapy can affect emotional skills of children recently diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder. It used therapy sessions that were centered around painting. Overall, this study showed that there were improvements in the children's ability to express their emotions. There were also improvements in their ability to recognize and regulate their emotions. Using a pre-test/post-test experimental design, it concluded that painting-based play therapy is a useful tool in enhancing emotional development with children who are facing anxiety. Many children who face anxiety disorders can also face problems in communicating their emotions. It can cause strain on interpersonal relationships as well as interactions with peers. A highlight in this study that stood out was the opportunity that early intervention provides for supporting individuals with anxiety. "If this anxiety continues until the end of childhood or adulthood, it can lead to an ineffective understanding of oneself and others (Tamman and colleagues, 2017). (Abolghasemi & Masooleh, 2023, p. 234). This demonstrated the value art therapy has for promoting emotional growth. I can anticipate that a similar strategy could support neurodivergent students who face challenges with emotional regulation and social communication.

Alter-Muri (2017) discusses the effectiveness of art education and art therapy for supporting students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and how they intersect. They explore

sensory processing and non-verbal social and emotional expression through art activities. By discussing education and therapeutic approaches, the author was able to emphasize the importance for routine and predictability, which can be important factors when working with neurodiverse individuals. Dependability and structure are key elements for creating environments that can contribute to reducing anxiety. They also encourage the individualization of activities for the art so that both instruction and expression is created for the student's unique communication and sensory needs and abilities. These contributions address the social and emotional needs of students by creating a safe, therapeutic, and inclusive space. Other tools were also offered in this article such as visuals, manipulatives, and creating a personal, sensory-friendly art environment. The article explains the value of integrating art-based interventions into educational settings. They did this in a strengths-based format by bringing art integrated art therapies into an art classroom. They state that it enhances self-expression, emotional regulation, and social engagement in students with ASD. The connection and trust that from counsellor to client was developed using some of these techniques.

“When given marking instruments to draw, one adolescent that I worked with in an alternative school would insist on drawing the number nine over and over again on the paper. The paraprofessional staff would not allow him to continue talking about or drawing numbers. I joined the student in his world by using art visuals that developed trust. Grandin (2009) describes how a student who creates the same thing repeatedly can be channeled and encouraged to move beyond their fixated images. I showed this student the work of the artist Robert Indiana whose paintings of the number five were reproduced in art books. This recognition that someone painted numbers as an art form intrigued this student. Over time he started to create numbers on

the canvas and to embellish the background of the painting. He was able to move from creating numbers to focus on the design in the background of the image. Eventually he became involved in the process of painting and began to devote attention to the creation of an art piece.” (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 22).

Again, they reiterate one of the common beliefs in art therapy “The process of creating art is more important than the product in art therapy sessions.” (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 20)

In their article, Rufo (2017) discusses a case study of a 5th grade student, Danielle, facing anxiety in math. The student proclaimed to their teacher and peers that they were not good at math. With little response to extra math tutoring and extra encouragement, the teacher one day discovers a comic strip drawn by the student that communicates a bit of her perspective. The comic revealed a crying student saying over and over how she didn’t understand the math and a teacher repeating in a robotic way, “It’s okay, I will teach you”. Using the momentum from this revelation, the teacher began to dissect how this student could utilize art integrated therapies. With support, the student continues to draw her comic and coins the name “math hater”. The comic was a representation of role playing that can be done within art therapy. It provided the student with options for self-expression and communication. The student used a self-directed art therapy to ease and overcome her math anxiety. Rufo discusses the use of art therapy outside of formal therapy settings and how it is a tool that can be flexible to self-direct for certain individuals. The use of drawing and creativity allowed the student to externalize her emotions to better identify and process. “Danielle was allowed to express her math anxiety through her drawings, her defeatist attitude began to wane and her creative work became more light-heartedly humorous and less dark. Eventually, her alter ego, Math Hater, was relegated to the

pages of her comics and she spoke less and less about her own feelings of inadequacy in math class.” (Rufo, 2017, p 9). She was able to reflect on learning challenges by reducing anxious feelings associated with math. This SEL is an example of the self-awareness and confidence that can be associated with art therapy. In this circumstance, art was a form of regulating and processing that supported SEL skills such as perseverance, self-efficacy, and emotional resilience.

Leigh (2020) analyzed and explained different ways that art therapy was used in education. The study conducted had a panel of experienced art therapy educators and practitioners who collaboratively outlined the core teaching methods, values, and learning experiences that shape how art therapy is taught. They outlined the core pedagogies and approaches which included: self-reflection, relationships, experiential learning, and integration of theory with creative practice. This holds importance to my capstone because it explores how learning is doing, then reflecting on personal experience. Becoming self-aware and self-reflective are ethical and social responsibilities for counsellors. This is a practice that can expand to a shared lens for both client and counsellor. “Panelists emphasized the coupling of experiential learning using art with self-reflection, self-exploration, and self-awareness as crucially important.” (p. 8).

Art therapy is inherently relational. Relations between client and counsellor, client and core people in their lives, and relationships to art all affect the therapeutic experience that art therapy can bring. In explaining how pedagogy acts as a bridge between identity and relationship, Leigh notes “the study of signature pedagogies helps educators to identify and examine the teaching methods they use to translate theory into practice and to socialize students

into their new profession,” (p. 6). This is important because it keeps the therapist and client as central tools in the practice. It is client centered and holistic. It addresses not only what to do and how to do but also why. By allowing for understanding of connectivity, we can develop authenticity. The different tools and strategies they agreed upon demonstrate the importance of art as a process and how we can learn through doing. The study labels the central role of art making and emotional processing. To be effective in their practice, therapists create a safe space and frontload a client’s expectations for the session. The power of creativity can be expanded to learning and healing. These findings are relevant to school counsellor scenarios that aim to use art therapeutically to build student’s emotional and social capacities. Activities such as guided drawing, collaborative collaging, or abstract responsive art projects (draw this feeling, or this experience) are some examples of how we can connect the internal experience to external expression.

Incorporating Different Art Mediums

Hartman and Campenni conducted and wrote an art therapy research study done on the effectiveness of creating mandalas in 2022. This was intentionally done with an art therapy lens with a focus on mindfulness and emotional regulation. Findings in the study exemplified the foundational pieces that are stepping stones to developing SEL skills. The mandalas allowed the participants to reduce anxiety and self-regulate. The improvement to their mood can be credited to the mandala mindfulness activities that they completed using standard classroom pencil art supplies. They had participants use materials consisting of pencils, crayons, and markers. This was an effective toolbox for this study due to the accessibility of having minimal cleanup and

setup to orchestrating art. There are many factors that go into matching an art therapy practice to an individual. Contributing considerations include materials, location, access to supplies, and prior history with art. This subheading will be diving into just a few of the potential mediums that can be used in art therapy and how they can affect an individual. Different mediums can offer different opportunity.

In Hartman and Campenni's Study, they choose a drawing based visual art on paper. Coloured pencils, markers, and paper have built the foundation of what "Art" is to many. Children are introduced to using these materials from a young age. The use of these tools corresponds with other fine motor skills we utilize in school. This makes it accessible for most at home and something that teachers or other staff working within the school can use without too much additional preparation. When developing my art therapy resource. I went back and forth on how much weight I wanted to put on the importance of accessibility for mediums. As a teacher, I often find myself downloading resources and sending them to the printer in a hurry. Using supplies that I know the school or the individual child will have is an easy way to ensure a resource will be utilized. On the other hand, these mediums are done daily for many children. A resource with a hook (such as a new or exciting material to use) can be helpful for reaching students who often fall through the cracks when creating wide-spread resources.

A clay art therapy project analyzed the effectiveness of enhancing emotional regulation among secondary students (Nan & Wong, 2021). After participating in several clay art therapy (CAT) sessions. Many of the subjects reported a release of tension and increase in regulation. The youth were able to build skills in adversity and resilience due to the unpredictabilities of the medium. One of the students is quoted saying "I have changed my mentality. Previously, I was

always aiming for precision and delicateness. But I can now accept the imperfect product that I made, it is unique and cannot be recreated by others.” The significance of growth shown from this statement emulates how clay-based therapies can expand an individual’s mind and perspective to creating art. This can expand even further into the daily activities of an individual’s life and further their social and emotional skills. Using clay in art therapy brings in the sensory element that meets the needs of some neurodiverse individuals. Working with your hands by pushing, squeezing, or smoothing encompasses a somatic connection that is unique to this craft. This component is a relevant development with respect to SEL. It releases a sensory activation that can work to regulate breathing, slow heart rates, and releases muscle tension.

Incorporating Different Environments

By broadening the environments in which we can use art therapy, it widens the scope of who it can affect. Environments include spaces within a school or counselling office, but it can be expanded to include community space or the outdoors. To further research this topic, I began looking into nature-based approaches to art therapy. In nature we can find ample opportunity for emotional regulation. It provides options that incorporate sensory exploration and inclusion. In a case study (Berger, 2010) the author noted how the 6-year-old child who was participating in the sessions utilized nature given regulation techniques. “Nature may be able to act as a co-therapist.” “Hearing birds chirp, feeling the wind blow and touching bits of nature.” Art and nature can work in tandem with each other. Nature can offer inspiration to art and freedom from barriers both physical and mental. In nature therapy, clients often report a feeling of there is a balance of power dynamics. The environment acts as a clean slate, and cleanses preconceived notions about positionality in the client-counsellor alliance. This type of impartiality is valuable

for counselling neurodiverse individuals. The openness of this counselling environment is an inclusive avenue to rejecting harmful blind spots and bias we may carry with us. Nature allows us to be free from perception and the weight of environments that can carry association of oppression or exclusion. Perhaps nature-based art therapy can even be relief from much of what neurodiverse individuals hold the lion's share of the time. "Nature-inspired art therapy as a comprehensive framework made use of the sensory and symbolic components of the natural world to foster resilience and improve well-being and self-confidence.". Nature contributes impactfully to how we can open the space for a person-centered approach in sessions. It allows for the client to bring what they need to the space and choose how the focus is drawn. I believe it creates strength in its innate rawness of authenticity the same way art does. Art is what we create or interpret, it is our authentic creation of feelings, past, present, emotions, and so on. Nature is created already; it is unchanging and open to us to be whoever we need to be in it.

Berger speaks to the addition of the "third therapist". This is the triangulation that happens between client, counsellor, and nature. This is not dissimilar to the third presence in art therapy: the artistic product. This approach involves a more active role from the art and nature. It embodies the idea that these both have active roles and dynamic existence with or without clients. This relates to the social and emotional learning. Being interactive and lively are what makes art and nature stimulating to the part of us that is human. By inviting the social piece of reflexivity and relationality to the expression we create and the world around us. Emotions can come to an individual within nature and art with a state of flow and movement. The world is happening around us; we do not need to control what is happening, but we can have the space to feel our emotions.

In his article, Berger (2010) describes his work with kindergarteners in Isreal. The program was developed as a nature-based art integrated programs utilizing the art of drama in addressing trauma. It used the parallels between the trauma caused to the forest by the forest fires in the second Lebanon war and the building of strength and resilience for these students. They act out their fears and coping strategies within a fantasy, storytelling setting in a secure nature-based environment. “The ecological-social activity aids them in creating a link to the sense of cyclicity, meaningfulness and values of attachment to the community and to nature, and to what is larger than themselves.” This work is an example of the “third therapist” that I understand is added into the counselling relationship though environment. The combination of expression though art and connectedness through environment allows for the sense of belongingness to develop safe counselling context.

The way I envision the correct environment for a counselling session reminds me of meditation. In meditation, we are taught to seek the feeling of pure bliss. This was described to me as the feeling right after an “Aha!” moment. Where you have inner peace and are centered within yourself. In Sanskrit, this is called “samadhi”. It is described as an intense meditative consciousness that is seen at the end goal of ultimate enlightenment. Having a secure and person-centered counselling alliance requires a deep sense of safety. Safety looks different for everyone, but being knowledgeable in how different environments can affect individuals allows us as counsellors to curate an art integrated intervention that fits the client’s life instead of the other way around

Indigenous Art Therapy

Dua et al. (2024) discuss the potential impacts of *Gond art*. This is a nature-based art form indigenous to India. It is deeply connected to nature and sustainability. It nourishes these through connection such as storytelling and community. Dua writes about the stigma that therapy faces in India. Highlighting this reminds us how being culturally sensitive allows for art therapy for be more inclusive. Creating non-westernized outlets and activities for art integrated therapy can help create pathways for art therapy to be more widely accepted. Gond includes art that is created with pigmentation found in nature. It uses sustainable materials and creates art using repetitive pattern making, similar to a mandala. The belief is that by creating this art, it allows the mind to enter a meditative space. The creation is accompanied by storytelling; Often inspired by folktales and history. This article discusses the findings that participants in Gond inspired art therapy had an increase of focus, calm, relaxation, and presence. They were able to reduce stress and emotional fatigue. This type of holistic interventions fits well with social emotional learning. It creates a full view of how activities, feelings, and thoughts can affect our bodies, mind, and spirit. When supporting neurodiverse individuals, finding strategies such as Gond can help nourish their identity, sense of self, and confidence by centered themselves into their own minds.

Summary and Positioning

After deepening my learning through these studies and research, I have come to understand, in a practical sense, how the use of art integrated therapies positively change the therapeutic and educational experience for neurodiverse individuals. The use of art enhances the ability to communicate and connect with individuals. Like how play-based therapies create a child-centered focus on sessions, this type of therapy allows for a common language between

counsellor and client. Art speaks without using words, or it speaks in between the lines. This creates a more accessible and less structured way of therapy that allows for individuality to shine through. Art in its expansiveness allows for opportunity to bring art-integrated therapy into categories such as nature, diverse mediums (clay, acting, visual arts), and culture. Creating space for art therapy in the school counselling world aids the issue that I perceive as a lack of inclusivity for neurodiverse students in the schools. Furthermore, this research bought me the power to connect with my work as a school counsellor on a deeper level. The therapeutic alliance is built on trust. For me, authenticity is key for building true, honest trusting relationships. Having art integrated therapy techniques in my repertoire gifted me the ability to bring myself into counselling in a way I could not before. It began with the draw of wanting to share my passion of art with clients and grew into personal growth on how art can connect client-counsellor and client-self in ways that words simply cannot. In the future, I would like to see school spaces set up in a way that is open to art integrated therapies. This would look like more art spaces, more art educators, and more foundational art education. I believe this would create a more inclusive space for neurodiverse individuals at the same time. The biggest shortcoming I see in this research is the inaccessibility to make it work within schools. Our system is built around academics and whenever we want to shift the focus it takes intentional and sometimes exhausting work to create that space. Teachers and school counsellors are busy enough without having to revolutionize their field. For my chapter 3, I wanted to create a resource that works within the system we have now. It is a first step. It is done without demanding new supplies and pushing against a structure that is already set. I am creating mindfulness activities that can be expanded to SEL lessons, used in the counselling office, or even just as colouring sheets. The

goal was to have a gentle offering of art integrated therapy for the schools to have and use as they see fit.

Chapter 3: Art Therapy Resource for Teachers and School Counsellors

Between my education towards becoming a school counsellor and my hands on experience working as a teacher in the public school system, I deduced the need for resources that support teachers with consideration of their lack of time and resources. I see art therapy as an incredibly effective and important tool for education and school counselling. I want to create an offering for the schools to bring it into their space as easily as possible. The resources consist of 5 mindfulness worksheets that allow for self-reflection, mindfulness, and breathing techniques. It can be integrated with out without guidance from an adult and is something can easily be expanded into a social emotional learning lesson or simply be an independent activity for students. The purpose is to create a bridge between art therapy and teaching in a considerate and effective way.

I recommend to anyone wanting to expand into art integrated SEL and therapy to support neurodiverse individuals by offering what they can. Worksheets or activities like those shown below are simple, but offer opportunity for depth in connection between students and counselors or students and self.

BREATH WITH THE WAVES. INHALE AND TRACE A FINGER UP TO THE TOP OF THE WAVE. EXHALE AND TRACE DOWN TO THE BOTTOM OF THE WAVE.



COLOUR THE SWIRLING WATER UNDER THE WAVES.

Figure 1 Wave Breathing Art Therapy Worksheet

**DRAW 4 THINGS YOU CAN "LET GO"
OF TO HELP YOU FEEL LIGHTER.**

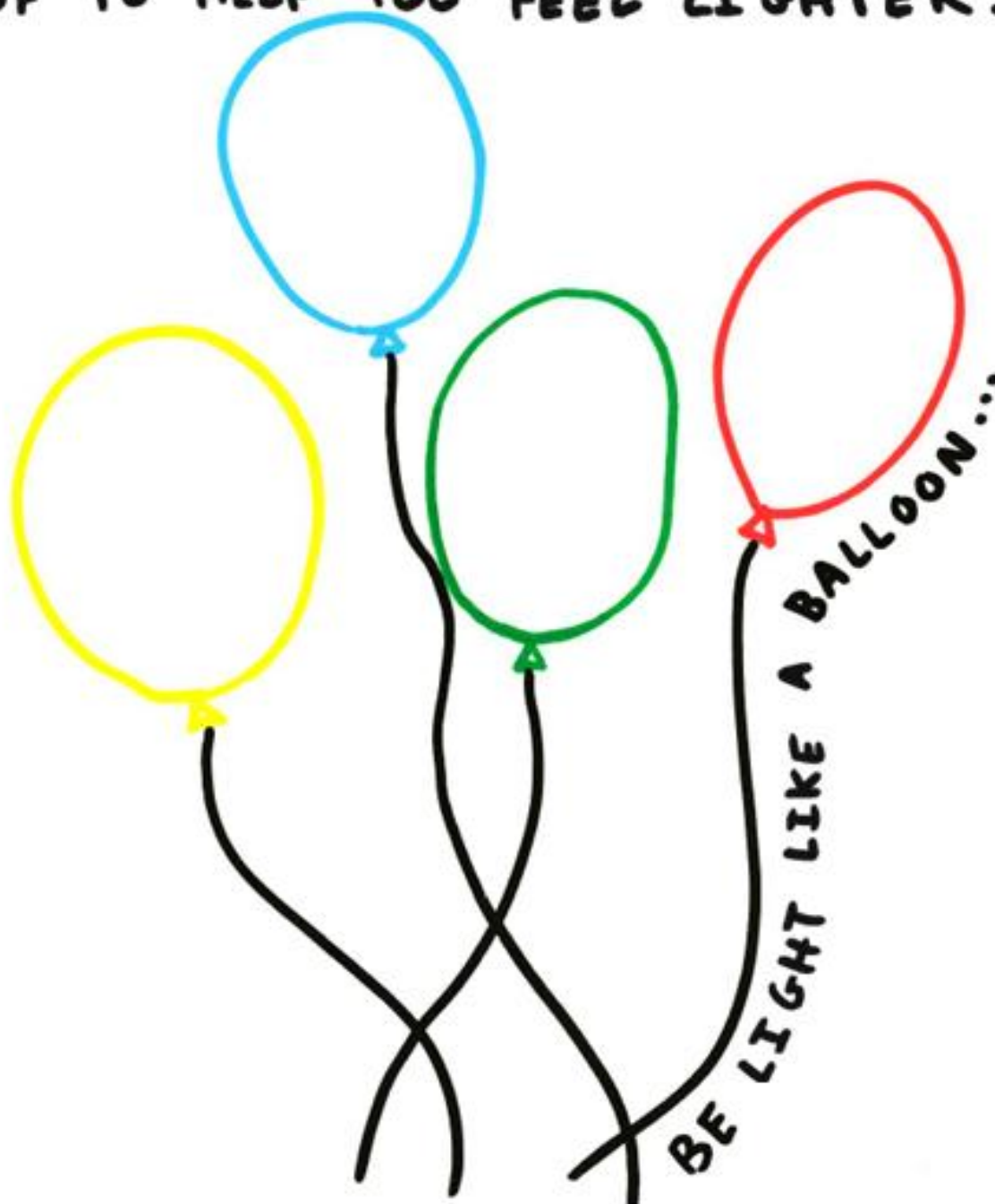


Figure 2 Balloon "Let it Go" Art Therapy Worksheet

**MAKE THIS MANDELA YOUR OWN!
MAKE LAYERS, USE COLOURS, TAKE
YOUR TIME. ADD SHAPES AND LINES.
TAKE 3 BIG BREATHS, THEN START**

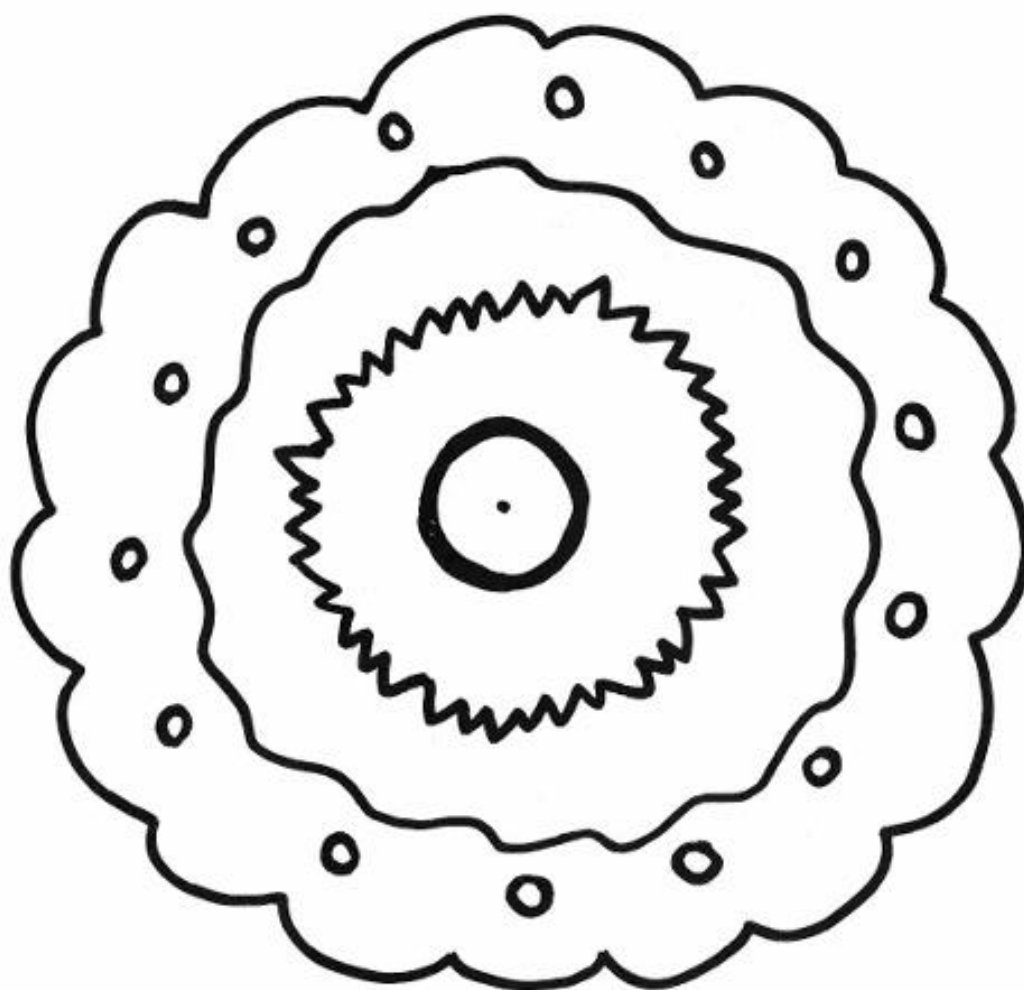


Figure 3 Mandala Art Therapy Worksheet

**CHOOSE SOMETHING THAT YOU LOVE
THEN CHOOSE A COLOUR THAT REPRESENTS
IT. FILL IN A HEART WITH THE
COLOUR. TRY BLENDING OR MIXING
COLOURS.**

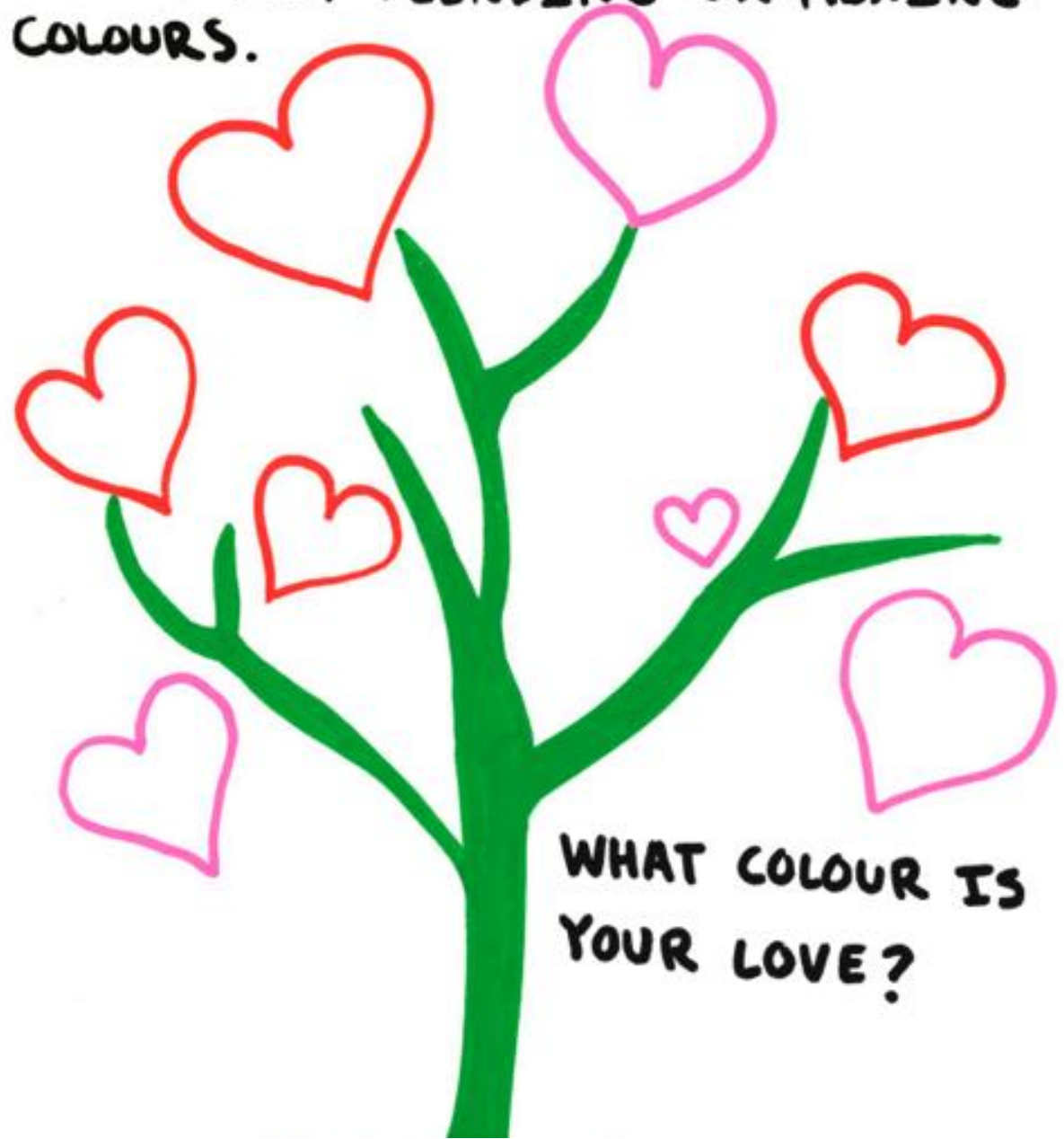


Figure 4 "What Colour is Your Love?" Art Therapy Worksheet



Figure 5 Sun and Clouds Art Therapy WorksheetReferences

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