

**Possible Therapeutic Effects of Using Art Materials on Potential Anxiety/Depression in  
Elementary Students in the Fifth to Sixth Grade Transition**

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### **Abstract**

This study surveyed an adolescent population around the time of elementary to middle school transition. The elementary to middle school transition period has the potential to influence adolescents for the rest of their lives. A mixed methods convergent parallel design was used to examine the following research question: *Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students going to middle school next year?* An extensive literature review examined adolescent populations, relevant psychological theories regarding adolescent development, common obstacles faced in educational transition, and ways to ease those obstacles. There is little research on the therapeutic use of art supplies during the elementary to middle school transition. An online survey consisting of twelve questions was conducted with fifth grade students (N=9). A comparison was made of quantitative and qualitative information collected at the same time. The quantitative findings revealed which emotions students reported around the time of elementary to middle school transition and their experience with art supplies. The qualitative data described common emotions, potential art images, and thoughts on art therapy. Two overall themes emerged: emotions-based responses and arts-based responses. A convergent parallel analysis strongly suggests a link between the therapeutic use of art supplies and effects on potential anxiety/depression in fifth grade students preparing to enter middle school. The discussion compares results, explains the limitations and strengths of the study, and provides recommendations for future studies in support of the research question.

*Keywords:* adolescent, art supplies, art therapy, emotions, middle school

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Take a moment to think about when you were in elementary school, middle school, or even high school. Do you remember what emotions you felt as you went from one stage of your school career to the next? Maybe you felt anxiety, depression, anger, or even excitement, as you adjusted to your new environment. The transition from elementary to middle school is one of the first and perhaps most important milestones for a young person in the education system (e.g., Bailey et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Niznik, 2021). A *transition* is a major change, switch, or adjustment in a person's life (Coelho et al., 2017). These changes can produce difficulties for adolescent students (Akos et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2015; Spier, 2010). Difficulties in the transition to middle school potentially cause symptoms associated with anxiety and/or depression (Coelho et al., 2017; Madjar et al., 2016). In addition to anxiety and depression, there are symptoms associated with adjustment disorders, behavior disorders, and comorbidities (Coelho et al., 2017; Madjar et al., 2016). This researcher previously worked with adolescents, their families, and in the education system. Throughout this time, they witnessed the mental health difficulties that students experience when making educational transitions. The aim of this study was to investigate, advocate for, and support mental health in the adolescent population while introducing art therapy to support students throughout their school transition.

Mental health information from adolescents can be gained through secure attachments between mental health professionals and their guardian(s) (Huang et al., 2020). In psychology, attachment is explained as the emotional bond between two people (Goldner & Sharf, 2011; Huang et al., 2020). Adolescents must have a secure attachment with an adult or peer before they share any personal information (Huang et al., 2020). An adolescent's perspective must be heard

in order to accurately understand their experience (Coelho et al., 2017). An adolescent individual's reaction to the transition to middle school influences their attachment to future education (Dawes et al., 2020; Madjar et al., 2017). Education, the process of obtaining knowledge, takes place between an instructor and a group of students in centralized rooms. Public and/or private education is a mandatory process for the majority of US citizens (Boden, 2020). This requirement often causes adolescents to have a negative attachment toward education (Crane & Broome, 2017; Edwards et al., 2014).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “adolescent” as an individual between the chronological ages of 10 and 19 (WHO, 2015). Cornell Law School states that an adolescent is a minor, i.e., an individual under the age of legal consent (Cornell Law School, 2021). Consent is the legal act of a parent/guardian providing approval on behalf of an adolescent (Roth-Cline & Nelson, 2013). Assent is the legal act of an adolescent providing permission (Cornell Law School, 2021; Smith, 2018). The American Psychological Association (APA) further protects the confidentiality of adolescents with legal acts for biological and psychological development (APA, 2020). In general, legal acts are found in the form of written or typed documents signed and dated by the guardians and adolescents concerned (Cornell Law School, 2021).

This study, reviewed and approved by the Saint Mary-of-the-Woods Institutional Review Board, used legal acts. The study followed consent and assent protocols to properly and beneficially advocate for the adolescent population. The study is supported by literature that identifies the elementary to middle school transition as a potential cause of mental health issues such as anxiety and/or depression among adolescent students. As students are shepherded through the elementary to middle school transition, they have set routines to follow (Coelho et al., 2017). Adolescent thoughts or voices may be muted by those of parents/guardians, teachers,

or school officials (Coelho et al., 2017; Madjar et al., 2017). Direct responses from adolescent students aimed to shed light on how to provide support in times of change (Madjar et al., 2017; Spier, 2010). The use of consent and assent protocols protected the responses of adolescents by ensuring safety, understanding, and anonymity of participants.

The APA explains symptoms of anxiety as mental and physical experiences that cause stress, apprehension, or invasive perceptions (APA, 2020). Specifically, anxiety may present in adolescence as actions, body language, or verbal communication (Plaisted et al., 2021). Anxiety may be caused by anticipation, uneasiness, or trauma from a previously intense or traumatic experience (McNaughton, 2017). There are many ways to manage anxiety, including deep breathing, coping skills, and therapy (Decker et al., 2019; Sarman, 2022).

Comparatively, the APA defines depressive symptoms as immense sorrow expressed by an individual (APA, 2020). An adolescent with signs of depression may show disinterest, circadian rhythm difficulties, or attention deficits (Berryhill, 2022). Causes of depression may include unmet basic needs, previous intense or traumatic experiences, or significant life adjustments (Berryhill, 2022). Similar to anxiety, depression has many solutions, including healthy peer or community engagement, increased hobby or leisure activities, and therapy (Decker et al., 2019; Sarman, 2022).

In addition, this research aimed to raise awareness among both adolescents and school officials of mental health issues. This researcher hoped to measure adolescents' understanding of certain emotional terms, their prior use of art supplies, and their verbal perspectives on art therapy and creative prompts. An analysis of the survey questions allowed the researcher to translate responses into valuable information for parents/guardians, school officials, and health professionals. This study increases our knowledge of how students experience emotions and their

thoughts on art supplies as they approach educational transition. Additionally, this study acknowledged a correlation between the use of art supplies and mental health in adolescents.

In this study, art supplies are defined as materials used in the process of artistic creation. Public elementary school students have been given basic information about art supplies and their properties by the time they transition into middle school (Moon, 2016; Spier, 2010). Gustlin and Gustlin (2018) provide an extensive list, which further explains the materials and methods that are considered art supplies. Examples of therapeutic art supplies include drawing and mark making materials, scrapbook items, clay, and organic supplies (Moon, 2016). Adolescent students benefit from the introduction and use of therapeutic art supplies put to use as creative outlets (Hinz, 2019; Moon, 2016; Spier, 2010). Creative outlets are defined as safe, healthy ways to express, release, and regulate emotions (Malchiodi, 2012; Moon, 2016). In addition, creative outlets for adolescents include music, recreation, or other expressive activities, which use different materials to therapeutically assist individuals (Sarman, 2022; Spier, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2010).

The overall purpose of this study is to advocate for the adolescent population, better understand their views on mental health, explore their knowledge, and understand the therapeutic use of art supplies as a form of art therapy. Additionally, this study serves to correlate the use of art therapy with a decrease in mental health symptoms. These specific purposes guided the research question: *Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students going to middle school next year?* In order to answer this question, this investigator collected information from existing literature, research, and psychological theories to create a formal survey. The formal survey contained questions designed for a fifth-grade population to shed light on their perspectives on emotions, prior use of art supplies, and the

potential effects of art therapy. Survey responses were analyzed on several platforms to organize and reflect the prominent data. The analysis found correlations between adolescent emotions, their thoughts about art therapy supplies and prompts, a decrease in anxiety/depression related to the use of art supplies, and personal perspectives on the transition to middle school.

The results of this study identified the emotions that the sample fifth grade students reported at the time of their elementary to middle school transition, their prior and future use of art supplies, and the potential therapeutic effects of those art supplies. Each survey question was analyzed independently. Individual questions and responses were placed into categories. Overall results from each question were categorized into two parallel themes: arts-based and emotions-based. Arts-based results were those that included responses related to art supplies, the creative process, and elements of art. Emotions-based results were those that described symbolism, references to mental health, and relationships between art therapy and emotion. These two themes best supported the research question “Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students transitioning into middle school?” and the hypothesis “The therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school.”

### **Conclusion**

Adolescents enrolled in elementary schools will experience the transition into middle school. This is an emotional transition that impacts mental health and educational attachment (Madjar et al., 2016). The use of formal and informal support throughout this time benefits adolescents. Existing literature supports the research question “Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students transitioning into middle school?” and the hypothesis that “the therapeutic use of art supplies will help students who

experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school.” Once supported, this researcher created and conducted an online survey with Institutional Review Board approval from Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College and approval from a Midwestern school district. The purpose of the online survey was to investigate, support, and advocate for the mental health of adolescents and for the therapeutic use of art supplies through the field of art therapy.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

The transition from elementary to middle school is an important life experience that can be mentally and emotionally challenging for adolescents (Coelho et al., 2017; Spier, 2010). Mental and emotional challenges can present themselves in small social events, individual communication, or large groups. Adolescents report difficulties in peer and adult relationships, self-confidence and inner knowing, as well as classroom participation. Previous research provides more in-depth information about the adolescent population, the common obstacles they face, helpful psychological theories, methods to ease the transition, and background information on art therapy (Bailey et al., 2015; Coelho et al., 2017; Fite et al., 2018; Loke et al., 2014; Spier, 2010; UNICEF, 2018). Major gaps still exist concerning the use of art supplies as a therapeutic approach for adolescent students. There is significant research on the elementary to middle school transition in general (Coelho et al., 2017; Madjar et al., 2016).

Research on the elementary to middle school transition typically includes assessments or surveys to get to know individual student participants (Malchiodi, 2012, Moon, 2015). Questions are presented in multiple choice, open ended, or checkbox form (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Malloy & Stolzenberg, 2019). Multiple choice mental health assessment questions are typically Likert scale in format, similar to a rank order, or open ended (Sarwanto et al., 2021). The Likert scale format allows individuals to provide feedback in an organized format (Creswell et al, 2018; Ohdoko & Tamamiya, 2016). Open ended survey questions allow participants to freely express opinions, whereas multiple choice questions require decision making (Araya et al., 2018; Nassaji, 2015). Multiple choice questions initiate a sense of pressure as respondents are only allowed one answer (Ohdoko & Tamamiya, 2016). Checkbox questions allow the selection of

multiple answers to give participants a variety of choices rather than one (Ohdoko & Tamamiya, 2016). Adolescents report that they feel better supported by adults when given multiple answer options (Malloy et al., 2019; Smith, 2018).

Support for the adolescent population through the elementary to middle school transition comes from parents/guardians, school staff, or others within their community (Fite et al., 2018, Sutherland et al., 2010). By definition, *informal* or *voluntary support* includes help or assistance from family, friends, or other individuals. Conversations with cousins and being tutored by a neighbor are considered informal (Akos et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2014). *Formal support*, on the other hand, comes from trained individuals in the form of paid services (Crane & Broome, 2017). Art therapy is a specific method of formal support where professionals incorporate psychological and developmental theories in practice (Bailey et al., 2015; Boden, 2020; Gnezda, 2015; Spier, 2010). Adolescents throughout the United States benefit from both types of support during the transition from elementary to middle school (Braitto et al., 2021; Harpazi et al., 2020). Informal and voluntary support assist students as they practice social skills in a more comfortable environment. Formal support benefitted students as they advocated for themselves in order to receive assistance.

### **Adolescent Demographics**

In 2019, there were approximately 41 million adolescents in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). These individuals, classified between the ages of 10 and 19 years, live within metropolitan or city areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Out of those 41 million, 15 million adolescents lived in suburban areas and another 8 million lived in rural or farmland environments (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The categories of metropolitan, suburban, and rural environments are defined by available resources, economics, and population size (Welsh et al., 2020).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has found that the average metropolitan elementary school has a student population of 450; this increases to 550 in middle school (NCES, 2017). The increase in students is due to the filtering and distribution of students in several schools. Comparatively, suburban urban elementary schools have a student population of less than 300 students and a middle school population of 500 (NCES, 2017). Throughout the US, many school districts house numerous elementary schools, fewer middle schools, and even less high schools. However, rural school districts often have fewer than 100 students in both elementary and middle school (NCES, 2017). Student numbers can be so low in rural education districts that elementary and middle schools are combined in one building (NCES, 2017).

Regardless of geographical location, elementary school classrooms hold 16 to 28 students, depending on school district population (NCES, 2012). Middle school classrooms hold 11 to 29 students on average (NCES, 2012). The difference in class size is due to the change in student-to-teacher ratio that comes with the grade level increase (Bailey et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Loke et al., 2014). Middle school and high school classes cater more to specific personal interests, which has the effect of organizing attendance (Evans et al., 2018; Loke et al., 2014). As class attendance becomes more interest-based, the relevance of developmental and psychological theories increases (Coelho et al., 2017; Orenstein, 2020). This is due to students' increased autonomy and independence as they grow older (Coelho et al., 2017; Malchiodi, 2012).

### **Adolescent Development: Psychological Theories**

Several psychological theories and approaches were considered to better understand the voices and personal interests of adolescent students. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Victor Lowenfeld, and Liza Hinz have developed concepts to describe human development throughout the course of life (Babakr et al., 2019; Erikson, 1946; Lowenfeld et al.,

1975; Newman & Newman, 2016). Their theories include several stages and suggest individual performance or milestones. These stages and milestones provide details concerning aspects of an individual's life, such as social skills, intellectual thinking, and artistic abilities (Coelho et al., 2017; Hinz, 2019; King-Hill, 2015; Lowenfeld et al., 1975; Orenstein et al., 2020). Each theoretical stage provides a better understanding of the adolescent population and their emotional state as they approach the elementary to middle school transition (Babakr et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2015; Erikson, 1964; Newman & Newman, 2016).

### *Cognitive Development*

From birth, an individual begins to perceive, organize, and understand the world around them. Piaget placed these concepts into four Stages of Cognitive Development which include sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational (Piaget, 1971). These stages span across the lifespan and help determine mental, biological, and cognitive growth (Babakr et al., 2019). Around the time of the transition from elementary to middle school, students experience the concrete and formal operational stages (Bond, 2003). The concrete operational stage occurs between 7 and 11 years of age and includes topics that apply to mathematical concepts (Babakr et al., 2019; Piaget, 1971), such as time, space, and community equations which became more individually independent concepts later in life (Bond, 2003). Difficulties are reduced and development continues when adults provide formal/informal support to students. Around the time of the start of middle school and beyond, adolescents aged 11 years or older experience the fourth, formal operational, stage (Evans et al., 2018). This stage introduces scientific and philosophical thought processes, such as reversibility and decentering (Colombo & Cárnio, 2018). Adolescents inside and outside of schools settings encounter difficulties with these topics as they simultaneously experience the transition to middle school

(Babakr et al., 2019; Bond, 2003; Hong et al., 2018). Difficulties are presented as social anxiety, resistance to authority figures, and withdrawal (Babakr et al., 2019; Harpazi et al., 2020).

### ***Psychological Development***

Similarly, Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development include eight sections and represent different conflicts throughout the life course (Erikson, 1946; Newman & Newman, 2016). Relevant around the time of adolescence is the fourth stage, industry versus inferiority. This stage applies to individuals between five and thirteen years and often occurs throughout the elementary to middle school transition (Erikson, 1946; Newman & Newman, 2016). As adolescents begin to apply themselves in society, they experience an additional sense of vulnerability (Madjar et al., 2016). At this stage, adolescents also find themselves under socioemotional pressure to perform for others while remaining true to themselves (Lemberger et al., 2018). Pressure and vulnerability in adolescence increases competitiveness, social interaction, and sense of individuality (Li et al., 2017; Newman & Newman, 2016; Walters, 2018). The fourth stage specifically causes anxiety or depression in students as they aim for and achieve goals (Coelho et al., 2017; Shell et al., 2014). This is relevant as students experience a new set of classes and expectations as they move into middle school (Madjar et al., 2016). Symptoms of anxiety and depression are reduced when students receive formal and informal support, such as individual and group talk or art therapies (Erath et al., 2018).

### ***Graphic Development***

Relative to art therapy, Viktor Lowenfeld identified five stages of graphic development, two of which occur around the time of the elementary to middle school transition (Lowenfeld, 1947). Lowenfeld suggested that individuals between the ages of 9 and 11 years are in the dawning realism stage (Lowenfeld, 1947). Objects and figures drawn at this stage are planned

more effectively and show light and dark shades. As adolescents begin to express themselves and develop friendships, they also begin to be self-critical and judgmental toward representations (Moon, 2015; Spier, 2010). Images may not be realistic yet but have an exaggerated artist's point of view. Next, the pseudo realistic stage includes adolescents between 11 and 13 years (Lowenfeld, 1947). Color and emotional importance begin to show symbolic representation (Erikson, 1947; Spier, 2010). Artistic creations show themes of importance through subject matter, showing people, places, or everyday objects (Erikson, 1947). Overall, the stages of graphic development alone are not enough to understand the adolescent population (Lowenfeld, 1947; Little, 2022). An essential resource, the Expressive Therapies Continuum, supports the adolescent population in regard to the artistic process. The Expressive Therapies Continuum provides clinicians with a guideline to understand how certain art supplies may enhance or evoke certain emotions (Hinz, 2019).

### ***Expressive Therapies Continuum***

Hinz (2019) published the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) as a guide for art therapists in their therapeutic practice. This resource assists professionals in the implementation of properties, approaches, and processes of different art supplies (Alfred, 2019; Bailey et al., 2015; Lusebrink et al., 2016). Properties of art supplies include the ease or difficulty of use, such as restrictiveness and fluidity (Hinz, 2019). Markers glide across a surface easier than crayons which may leave traces or clumps of wax, for example. The ETC assists art therapists as they plan sessions, or art directives. Art directives are planned interventions with a set goal or therapeutic benefit in mind (Lusebrink et al., 2016). Art directives include introductions of materials and prompts, creative art making, reflection, and dialogue between the artist and the product (Hinz, 2019; Lusebrink et al., 2016).

Additionally, the continuum theorizes different levels of expression found throughout the artistic process (Alfred, 2019; Hinz, 2019). The levels act separately and include kinesthetic/sensory, perceptual/affective, cognitive/symbolic, and creative (Hinz, 2019; Little, 2022). The kinesthetic level uses art materials to engage individuals in bodily movement, while the sensory level incorporates one of the seven senses (Hinz, 2019; Little, 2022). The perceptual level uses art supplies to inspire representations of formal art elements to process cognitive development and fine motor skills (Little, 2022; Valkanas, 2018). On the other hand, when individuals engage with the affective level of the ETC, they typically express direct representations of personal emotions (Hinz, 2019; Valkanas, 2018). Next, the cognitive level allows individuals to dialogue and express artwork with language. The symbolic level focuses on creativity such as elements of art, religion, and intuitive representations (Hinz, 2019; Lusebrink et al., 2016). Lastly, the creative level is an overarching level that signifies a sense of overall satisfaction or flow (Gole et al., 2020; Hinz, 2019; Valkanas, 2018). This comes from within the individual as they balance both hemispheres of their brain (Gold & Ciorciari, 2020; Hinz, 2019; Malchiodi, 2012).

Art therapists plan sessions accordingly to balance out the levels of the continuum. Art therapists work within one level as well as move up the levels. Each side and level of the continuum determines how adolescents respond to specific art materials (Hinz, 2019; Lusebrink et al., 2016). Kinesthetic/sensory levels may focus on fluid materials such as chalk pastels, oil pastels, and various paints to assess the physical force of the individual (Gustlin & Gustlin, 2018; Hinz, 2019; Lusebrink et al., 2016; Malchiodi, 2012). However, when combined with the perceptual/affective level, the client may be asked to create from a certain perspective. Furthermore the cognitive/symbolic level may ask clients to relate their imagery to their life

experiences. When a client is in a safe and healthy place to engage in these three levels, they may recognize the creative level or intuition.

In conclusion, Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development, Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development, Lowenfeld's Stages of Graphic Development, and Hinz's Expressive Therapies Continuum are standard concepts for understanding adolescent growth and milestones (Erikson, 1946; Hinz, 2019; Lowenfeld, 1947; Newman & Newman, 2016; Piaget, 1971). These theories are helpful when considering the difficulties that students express throughout the transition from elementary to middle school (Lusebrink et al., 2016; Bailey et al., 2015). These theories outline goals and expectations, that adults can support adolescent to achieve (Harpazi et al., 2020). As students experience similar difficulties throughout their educational transition, these are considered *common obstacles* (Madjar et al., 2016; Piaget, 1971).

### **Common Obstacles**

Overall, the transition from elementary to middle school presents major challenges to the adolescent population (Evans et al., 2018; Madjar et al., 2016; Spier, 2010). Fite et al. (2018) verified these challenges with a record of students' perceptions toward the experience. The majority of students in their study perceived the educational adjustment as "neutral" or did not have an opinion. A small percentage of students perceived the transition as "very difficult" or reported certain emotions (Fite et al., 2018). Other surveys and assessments have found that academic, emotional, and social difficulties place a strain on adolescents (Conley, 2016; Fite et al., 2018; Smith, 2018). These categories stem from even more specific difficulties, such as personal identity, social interactions, academic pressure, and mental health (Fite et al., 2018, Sutherland et al., 2010).

### ***Identity***

The first major obstacle, which relates to Erikson's stage of industry versus inferiority, is the emergence of identity (Erikson, 1946). As students transition in school, they display a sense of interest in their personal traits (Coelho et al., 2017; Erikson, 1946). Piaget's formal operational stage compares with this experience as they develop an increase in autonomy around the elementary to middle school transition (Piaget, 1971). Students begin to compare their thoughts with those of parents/guardians, teachers, or other adults (Coelho et al., 2017; Erikson, 1946; Madjar et al., 2016). Throughout both of these psychological stages, students begin to create their own opinions (Piaget, 1971). As students develop their individual values and beliefs, many report mental health symptoms associated with anxiety or depression (Coelho et al., 2017; Conley, 2016). Around 35% of individuals between 11 and 13 years describe anxious/depressive symptoms around their elementary to middle school transition. Previous research has found that students disclose their symptoms more often when they have access to trusted adults (Bailey et al., 2015; Fite et al., 2018; Madjar et al., 2016).

### ***Social Interactions***

Another common obstacle in adolescence is social interactions, especially between close family, friends, and community members (Fite et al., 2018). Social interactions are defined by relationships at school between friends and school faculty, at home around family and friends, or out in the community with strangers (Blakemore et al., 2010). Students are influenced by peers in social, academic, and emotional ways (Fite et al., 2018). Around times of educational transition, adolescents are easily influenced by individuals in powerful or guiding positions (Blakemore et al., 2010). Social interactions with others have great potential to influence brain development in

young scholars as they move forward in their education (Blakemore et al., 2010, Malchiodi, 2012; Spier, 2010).

### ***Academic Pressure***

Academic obstacles in adolescence include feelings of connectedness with subject matter, pressure to perform, and personal satisfaction or achievement (Akos et al., 2015; Erikson, 1946; Evans et al., 2018; Piaget, 1971). Course subjects include science, history, math, language arts, and fine arts (Bailey et al., 2015; Coelho et al., 2017). Adolescents find themselves drawn to certain subjects due to their level of difficulty, personal interest, or peer pressure (Engels, 2010; Fite et al., 2018). The introduction of the Grade Point Average (GPA), a systematic rating scale, causes adolescents to experience stress about their performance status and strategies (Conley, 2016; Evans et al., 2018; Rageliene, 2016). Adolescents create various personal and educational goals and strive to reach them (Erikson, 1946; Fite et al., 2018; Piaget, 1971; Rageliene, 2016; Semrud-Clikeman, 2016). Research has found that academic pressure, identity, and social interactions play a part in how adolescents experience their transition into middle school (Erikson, 1946; Evans et al., 2018; Piaget, 1971; Shell et al., 2014; Spier, 2010). These interactions have been known to increase levels of anxiety and depression symptoms in students both inside and outside of public education (Evans et al., 2018; Shell et al., 2014; Spier, 2010).

### ***Mental Health***

In 2017, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) found that adolescents experience some type of mental health challenge around the transition from elementary to middle school (NIMH 2017). Roughly 30% specifically experience an anxiety disorder (Madjar et al., 2016; NIMH, 2017; Spier, 2010; Theriot & Dupper, 2010), while 10% experience depression or another mood disorder (NIMH, 2017). Causes of anxiety and depression in adolescent students

often include situations directly related to the school environment (Bailey et al., 2015; Shell et al., 2014; Spier, 2010). Outside of the school environment students experience alternative stressors related to family, trauma, or poverty (Madjar et al., 2016; Shell et al., 2014). Adolescents, regardless of environment, show signs of anxiety and depression through extreme worry, distress, or resistance in daily activities (Bailey et al., 2015; Erikson, 1946; Piaget, 1971; Spier, 2010). Research has found that the transition to middle school causes fifth grade students to feel rushed, misunderstood, or judged by their classmates (Fite et al., 2018; Shell, 2014).

The common obstacles of identity, social interactions, academic pressure, and mental health are directly related to young individuals who report difficulties throughout their transition to middle school (Antamarian, 2017). The research has found that these obstacles inhibit the personal and academic growth of adolescent students (Madjar et al., 2016; Van Rens et al., 2017). Scholars have taken these inhibitors into consideration, and have found solutions that ease the transition from elementary to middle school (Evans et al., 2018; Van Rens et al., 2017).

### **Current Ways to Ease the Transition**

Various methods have been established to ease the transition from elementary to middle school (Akos et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2014; Madjar et al., 2016; Van Rens et al., 2017). These are often used inside and outside the school environment and are often used interchangeably (Akos et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2014; Spier, 2010; Van Rens et al., 2017). Common school-environment activities include orientation, traditional school counseling, and social skills counseling (Akos et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2014; Madjar et al., 2016). Art therapy is a common neighborhood-based event which may include individual school counseling or cognitive behavioral therapy (Akos et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2014). Altogether, these events have been

shown to decrease discomfort levels among adolescent students who have recently transitioned into middle school (Akos et al., 2015; Madjar et al., 2016; Spier, 2010; Van Rens et al., 2017).

### *School-Environment Events*

Public school districts within urban and suburban areas across the U.S. provide events during school hours to help students in their fifth to sixth grade transition (Madjar et al., 2016; de Mooij et al., 2020). Events such as orientations and teacher introductions provide vital information for adolescents (Akos et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2014; Madjar et al., 2016). School staff additionally provide students with social-skills training to build relationships (de Mooij et al., 2020). School counseling is also provided by staff (Akos et al., 2015; Madjar et al., 2016). Adolescents look forward to these events throughout the transition from elementary to middle school (Akos et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2014; Madjar et al., 2016).

**Orientation.** The most popular way to ease the process into middle school has been found to be orientation (Akos et al., 2015; Madjar et al., 2016). Effective orientation includes the introduction of staff and teachers, a tour of the school, assistance with combination locks, an overview of class schedules (Loke et al., 2014; Madjar et al., 2016). As adolescents get to know the adults in their building, they became more at ease, and less stressed (Madjar et al., 2016). While getting to know their teachers, students are given tours of the building (Loke et al., 2014). Middle school introduces adolescents to movement between classrooms throughout the day (Fite et al., 2018; Madjar et al., 2016). On the way to and from classes, students are provided with lockers with combination locks, causing the students to become aware of time management (Madjar et al., 2016). Schedules are made by school counselors and studies have found that students feel more secure when they know what will happen next in their day (Bailey et al., 2015; Loke et al., 2015). Students have shared positive feelings about learned locations and

facilities with researchers (Bailey et al., 2015; Madjar et al., 2016). Overall, adolescents report that preparatory events reduce anxiety and nervousness as they move to a new school (Loke et al., 2014; Fite et al., 2018).

**Social Skills Training.** Social skills training facilitated by a school nurse or counselor come in the form of recurring sessions (Madjar et al., 2016; de Mooij et al., 2020; Park, 2017). These sessions provide students with opportunities to build relationships, create boundaries, and explore community competencies (de Mooij et al., 2020; Park, 2017). In particular, de Mooij et al. (2020) found that social skills training helps students to grow and explore in their classrooms. They found growth within interactions with peers, regulation of emotions, and participation in extracurricular activities. Over time, sessions build strong relationships between classmates, students, teachers, and special interests (de Mooij et al., 2020; Park, 2017).

**School Counseling.** Throughout the transition to middle school, students meet with guidance counselors (Bellmore, 2011; Coelho et al., 2017; Lemberger et al., 2018). Guidance counselors act as a social support by providing psychoeducation on topics such as character traits, coping skills, and personal care (Bailey et al., 2015; Bowes et al., 2013; Madjar et al., 2016). Madjar et al. (2016) found that the presence of a school counselor helps fifth grade students in a different way than sixth grade students. Elementary student counselors focused more on emotional regulation, transitions, and foundations within the academic environment. Middle school counselors focused more on academic interest, emotional management, and peer social interactions within the school setting (Coelho et al., 2017; Madjar et al., 2016). Elementary students attend group sessions in their classrooms or a counselors office (Coelho et al., 2017; Madjar et al., 2016). Sixth grade students attend group guidance counseling in the form of a class or extracurricular activity (Coelho et al., 2017; Madjar et al., 2016). Group school counseling

assists adolescents in reducing the difficulties associated with school transition (Bailey et al., 2015; Lemberger et al., 2018). There is very little information on school counseling in the form of art therapy. Additional information is required to consider the use of art therapy in the educational environment.

### ***Outside of School-Environment Events***

Support opportunities for students outside of school include medication management and assessment, general talk therapy, and specific therapies such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Art Therapy (AT) (Bode, 2020; Hinz, 2019; Mullen, 2018). These services are provided by licensed professionals in public or private practice (Bode, 2020; Malchiodi, 2012). Medication management and assessment provides individuals, their parent/guardian(s), and professionals with insights on mental health and treatment (Mullen, 2018). General talk therapy assists students in the release and organization of emotions associated with educational transition (Coelho et al., 2017). Cognitive behavioral therapy and art therapy provide specific options for adolescents in times of education change (Gonzales-Dolginko, 2020; Reaven, 2021).

**Medication Management and Assessment.** Medication management sessions begin with an assessment and a series of questions asked to establish the therapeutic relationship (Engels, 2010; Malchiodi, 2012). These assessments are performed verbally and recorded electronically or with pencil and paper (Miller, 2017; Sarwanto et al., 2021). Assessment questions include checkboxes, multiple choice, and open-ended questions (Desai & Reimers, 2018; Sarwanto et al., 2021). Checkbox questions provide participants with a list of answers and allow the individual to select multiple options (Lavrakas, 2008). In comparison, multiple-choice formats provided individuals with a list of answer options but only one response is allowed (Lavrakas, 2008). Open-ended or textbox questions support phenomenological approaches (Betts & Deaver, 2019;

Creswell & Creswell, 2019). Open-ended questions collect direct quotes from the participant and allow analysis of themes (Betts & Deaver, 2019; Sarwanto et al., 2021). Different assessment options allow adolescents to provide a variety of personal responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Miller, 2017). Responses are used in prescription, analysis, and distribution of medication to adolescents (Mullen, 2018).

**Individual or Group Therapy.** During school transitions, adolescents attend individual or group therapy to support their emotions, learn coping skills, and interact socially (Brouzos et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2019). Individual and group sessions bridge elementary and middle school education and help students to feel more at ease with social interactions (Bailey et al., 2015; Erath et al., 2018). Students who feel more at ease with social interactions report less mental health symptoms associated with anxiety or depression (Bailey et al., 2015; Brouzos et al., 2017). Students who struggle in group environments have individual therapy sessions to increase social skills and bodily awareness to practice in public settings (Brouzos et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2019). Individual sessions occur over a longer period of time and reduce symptoms associated with anxiety and depression in adolescents (Brouzos et al., 2017; Fite et al., 2018). Group therapy provides students with the space to practice emotional regulation, improve intellectual skills, and try new activities (Brouzos et al., 2017; Erath et al., 2018). Therapists focus their attention on adolescent personal matters and provide guidance oriented to group environments (Decker et al., 2019; Fite et al., 2018). Adolescent students report that group and individual therapy reduces symptoms associated with anxiety and depression related to the elementary to middle school transition (Brouzos et al., 2017; Erath et al., 2018; Spier, 2010). The use of these sessions has seen a decrease in mental health symptoms in adolescents headed into middle school (Bailey et al., 2015; Decker et al., 2019; Erath et al., 2018).

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) explains the cycle of individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Boden, 2020; Shumaker, 2017). Similar to cause and effect, an adolescents' thoughts influence behaviors which, in turn, influence emotions (Boden, 2020; Reaven et al., 2021). CBT is used individually or within groups to assist the adolescent in self-reflection and growth (Reaven et al., 2021; Shumaker, 2017). Research by Boden (2020) and Spier (2010) found that licensed therapists practiced CBT with students of all grade levels before, during, and after educational transitions. Throughout elementary school, CBT applications are helpful in engaging students in routine and daily rhythms (Van Rens et al., 2017). CBT practices are applied in middle school to encourage students to practice healthy social interactions and thought processes (Semrud-Clikeman, 2018; Van Rens et al., 2017). As adolescent students experience difficulties throughout the transition, the use of CBT raises emotional awareness, allows individuals to better analyze their responses, and promotes the incorporation and use of healthy habits (Boden, 2020; Shumaker, 2017).

**Art Therapy.** A relatively new profession, art therapy is defined by the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) as an “integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship” (AATA, 2017). This is a unique therapeutic practice that benefits a variety of populations through an intentional engagement with expressive materials. Further established by the Art Therapy Credentials Board (ATCB), the goal of art therapy is to enhance an individual's wellbeing (ATCB, 2021). Art therapy first establishes rapport between the client and therapist to encourage the use of art supplies and reduce the negative impacts of trauma (Gonzales-Dolginko, 2020; Steele & Malchiodi, 2015). Art therapy sessions come in a variety of schedules and

regimens. Some professionals meet with clients once or twice a week, over a few or several weeks, and run sessions in individual, group, or family environments (Moon, 2015; Harpazi et al., 2002; Sutherland et al., 2010). Art Therapy sessions were conducted inside or outside of the school environment and use mixed verbal and nonverbal communication (Harpazi et al., 2020; Hinz, 2019). Spier (2010) studied older adolescent students within their school transition; however, there is little research on art therapy with young adolescent students.

**Art Therapy with Adolescents.** Researchers have found that participation in art therapy sessions increases positive moods in the adolescent population both inside and outside of the school environment (Braito et al., 2021; Goldner & Sharf, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2010). Art therapy differs from traditional talk therapy as the therapist guides the client through creative art making rather than verbal dialogue. Art therapy has the ability to occupy the individual's physical body while uncovering cycles caused by or related to trauma (Malchiodi, 2012; Moon, 2016; Nguyen, 2018; Spier, 2010). Additionally, art therapy explores the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) and places creative interventions along a spectrum. An emphasis on ETC allows for consistent flow between both hemispheres of the brain (Goldner & Sharf, 2011; Hinz, 2019). Adolescents use art supplies therapeutically to manage, release, and understand their emotions and to establish and achieve treatment goals (Gonzales-Dolginko, 2020; Malchiodi, 2012). Art therapy sessions have even been found to reduce the stressful or depressive emotions that adolescent students report around the educational transition (Gonzales-Dolginko, 2020; Spier 2010). Previous art therapy directives include asking the individual to create a collage of items they will need or to draw themselves in the next grade level (Bailey et al., 2015, Malchiodi, 2012). When directives like these are implemented and compared with psychological theories, students may show development in communication, social, and creative skills

(Gonzales-Dolginko, 2020; Nguyen, 2018; Spier 2010). More research is required to better understand how art therapy impacts students within educational environments.

## **Conclusion**

Millions of adolescent students across the United States experience the same developmental milestones, such as the elementary to middle school transition. This specific life change is better understood through knowledge of Cognitive Development, Psychological Development, Graphic Development, and the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Erikson, 1946; Hinz, 2019; Lowenfeld, 1947; Newman & Newman, 2016; Piaget, 1971). Researchers have found that students making the transition from elementary to middle school face common obstacles. Identity, social interaction, academic pressure, and mental health are all obstacles that elementary students struggle to balance as they experience major life transitions. Throughout the elementary to middle school transition, students experience symptoms associated with anxiety and depression. Supports implement ways to ease the process and studies have explored which actions are perceived by adolescents to be the most helpful (Madjar et al., 2016).

In addition, different forms of therapy provide adolescent students with opportunities to learn new skills, interact with peers, and gain confidence (Coelho et al., 2017; Lemberger et al., 2018). Specific forms of therapy include Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Art Therapy, which are conducted inside and outside of the school environment. These therapies assist adolescents in their transition from elementary to middle school (Boden, 2020; Gonzales-Dolginko, 2020).

Overall, the use of therapy increases positive interactions between students, improves emotional regulation, and raises mental health awareness (de Mooij et al., 2020; Madjar et al., 2016). More information is necessary in order to analyze the research question: Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students going to middle school next

year? Specifically, more research on the therapeutic use of art supplies with the adolescent population in their transition from elementary and middle school is needed.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This study investigated fifth grade students' experiences of their transition to middle school. Through a mixed methods approach, the researcher created an online survey to determine the emotions experienced by students and their thoughts on the therapeutic use of art supplies. The online survey contained an information page, consent and assent protocols, followed by individual questions. Participant responses were coded by hand through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis placed responses into categories which were made into overarching themes. The aim of the study was to support the adolescent population in the elementary to middle school transition and to answer the research question "Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students transitioning into middle school?" and the hypothesis "The therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school."

### **Participant Recruitment**

Following review approval from the Saint Mary-of-the-Woods Institutional Review Board and approval from the elementary school, approximately 60 students enrolled at a public elementary school in the Midwest were recruited to participate in the study. Students were required to be in fifth grade and transitioning into middle school in the next academic year. Access to the internet and an electronic device was necessary to complete the online survey. Participation in the survey was not limited by any additional demographic, socioeconomic, or material criteria. No developmental or artistic requirements were expected of the participants or their families. Students were not required to have knowledge of art supplies or art therapy.

The researcher visited a local elementary school and verbally introduced the study to classrooms of fifth grade students. All students were given the chance to ask questions and receive more information. Flyers were provided for students to take home to their parents/guardians. The school principal also sent digital flyers to the email addresses of parents/guardians. The flyer indicated the research question, dates of the survey window, estimated length of completion, and the researcher's background and contact information. The flyer also stated that compensation art supplies were available for students. In order for participants to receive compensation materials, parents/guardians of students were required to email this researcher after completion of the survey.

Flyers and emails advertised space for 12 respondents, which is less than the average classroom size for fifth grade students. A number lower than the average classroom size established a first come first served atmosphere. This number also emphasized that this was a unique opportunity and allowed the researcher to comfortably analyze the data. The survey opportunity was open for five months throughout the fall semester, between September and January. This length of time allowed students to decide, meet with their parent/guardian(s), and access and respond to the survey. In order for participants to access the survey, electronic devices with an internet browser, such as a smartphone or computer, were required. Once on the internet browser, participants were instructed to enter the hyperlink and visit the survey website. The survey website home page consisted of information about the purpose, design, aims, and support associated with the survey. Consent (Appendix A) and assent (Appendix B) were also included in the survey process. Consent and assent were mandatory in order to ensure participant confidentiality. All questions were presented sequentially without a timer or time limit.

Participants were estimated but not required to complete the survey in fifteen minutes. They were also allowed to leave and return to the survey to complete or change questions if necessary.

### **Research Design**

The research used a mixed methods approach. Specifically, it consisted of a convergent parallel design, which collected qualitative and quantitative information. This approach allowed the researcher to gather information together, analyze it separately, and then compare results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Survey questions were designed to collect mixed methods responses that answered the research question: *Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students transitioning into middle school?* Qualitative questions were designed to elicit open-ended responses about direct experiences. Quantitative questions were designed with a set of answer options to acquire statistical data. All questions were designed, organized, and executed with adolescent vocabulary in mind, in order to make the process easier for participants (Semrud-Clikeman, 2016). Twelve questions and their answer options (Appendix C) were included in the survey.

### **Question Design**

Most questions used an open-ended design that allowed participants to input their own responses in order to gain qualitative information. A small number of questions were checkbox/multiple choice design to gain quantitative or numerical data. Each question and its answer choices were presented to participants (Appendix C). All questions worked together to find results in the investigation of the research question and hypothesis.

The first question, “Think about starting middle school, what emotion(s) do you feel?” aimed to confirm or not confirm the research question and hypothesis. Students were given the answer choices of “happy/joyful,” “sad/unhappy,” “worried/scared,” “mad/angry,” and “other,”

which allowed them to input their own responses. Participants were allowed to select more than one response. Specifically, the question aimed to confirm or not confirm the emotions of anxiety or depression. Overall, the researcher designed this question to find out which emotions students reported as they transitioned into middle school. This question foreshadowed others in the survey as the same emotions were used in later questions through the repeated use of emotion words.

The second question, “Do you think using art supplies can help you express those emotions? Why or why not?” directly related to emotions that participants reported in the first question. This open-ended item allowed participants to associate the use of art supplies with their own emotions. The question supported the study to find out whether or not adolescents think that the use of art supplies has therapeutic benefit. The intent of the additional question “Why or why not?” was to address whether or not students supported their answers. This question related with others as the first of many open-ended items in the study.

The third question, “Which art supplies have you used before?” allowed participants to choose multiple answers from a preset list. Answer options included markers/crayons/colored pencils, paints, chalks, scissors/glue/tape, clay/slime/kinetic sand, and construction paper. Participants also had an “other” option, which allowed them to input other materials they had used. This question supported the research question by surveying the art supplies used by fifth grade students and allowed participants to reflect on the use of art supplies as they prepared to answer more survey questions. This question related to the hypothesis by surveying which art supplies students use before further exploring the potential to experience their emotional influence, or effects of art therapy.

The fourth question, “How did using those art supplies make you feel?”, is another check-box question. Answer options included “happy/joyful,” “sad/unhappy,” “worried/scared,”

“mad/angry,” and “other,” which allowed respondents to input their own responses. This item asked participants to select which emotions they felt after using art supplies. In order to answer the research question, the options consisted of emotions that adolescents related to the use of art supplies. Related to the hypothesis, this item surveyed the potential therapeutic use of art supplies. In addition, it reiterated other questions in the survey by asking participants to associate the use of art supplies with emotion words.

Questions five through eight, listed in Appendix C, were similar in design and sought to qualitatively collect adolescents' open-ended descriptions of their emotions. The questions included the same emotions listed in preceding answer options – happy/joyful, sad/unhappy, worried/scared, mad/angry. Reiteration of the same emotion words supported the research question and hypothesis, familiarizing the participants with the terminology and flow of the survey. The emotions of sad/unhappy were used in relation to depression and worried/scared in relation to anxiety. Emotions of happy/joyful and mad/angry were used to increase the emotional aspects of the study. In addition, happy/joyful and mad/angry were included with the intention of decreasing fatigue respondents might experience through the focus on certain emotions. Each question was coded by hand and responses were categorized.

The ninth question, “What do you think ‘art therapy’ means?” was an open-ended item. It related to the research question to see how students explained the term art therapy. The question also related to the hypothesis because art therapy includes the use of art supplies. Overall, the design of this question supported all others in the study to explore whether students associated the term “art therapy” with certain emotions or art supplies. This question also acted as a transition into the last three items.

The tenth, eleventh, and twelfth questions were open-ended and presented on the same page. All questions were placed together to support adolescent responses and to reduce potential confusion. At the top of the page, question ten asked, “If you made an artwork of ‘starting middle school’ what would you make?” This item supported the study because art supplies would be used to create the artwork. Artwork could also be made symbolically and with therapeutic intent, to represent the elementary to middle school transition.

Item eleven asked, “What art supplies would you use?” This widened the researcher’s ability to investigate the research question: Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students transitioning into middle school? and the hypothesis that the therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school. The ability to understand art therapy widened as students described or stated their preferred art supplies. Instead of selecting them from a list participants were able to practice autonomy and decision making.

Finally, question twelve, “What would you title that artwork?” asked adolescents to label their potential creation. This related to the preceding questions because of the relation to art and potential emotions. The researcher asked participants to provide a title to evoke an emotional connection. As individuals title their artwork they create a dialogue with themselves. Between choosing the art supplies they would use, expressing what they would create, and adding a title the participant explores a psychological experience. Question twelve supported the research question and hypothesis because the respondents had previously shared which art materials they would choose and the artwork they would make when asked to think about the transition to middle school. All twelve questions supported each other in the investigation of whether the

therapeutic use of art supplies can impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary school students transitioning into middle school.

### **Data Collection**

The survey data were collected on platforms accessed through private devices with password protection. The information was collected directly from the participants via the online survey site *SurveyMonkey*. All answers were submitted anonymously. The answers were saved automatically when each survey page was submitted. Throughout the survey window, responses were transferred from *SurveyMonkey* into Google Spreadsheets for analysis. Responses were also collected within Microsoft programs to assist with data analysis. Regardless of the platform, collected data will remain in password protected accounts for three years, after which time any stored files will be deleted via policies and procedures established by *SurveyMonkey* or the associated platform.

### **Data Analysis**

Mixed methods strategies were used to analyze the responses. Quantitative data from checkbox questions were subjected to descriptive analysis to find statistics such as mean, median, and mode (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data from open-ended questions were subjected to phenomenological inquiry, also known as thematic analysis. Within both sets of data, descriptive investigations were made, meaning that the analysis focused on words and phrases rather than entire responses (Betts & Deaver, 2019; Creswell & Creswell 2018).

The researcher followed suggestions outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018) on how to find and quantitatively analyze descriptive statistics. First, all data were transferred from the *SurveyMonkey* account into a Google Spreadsheet and formulas were used to find the mean, median, and mode. The mean or average answer in each set of numerical data was highlighted.

Next, within the same spreadsheet, the range of answers was highlighted through the use of statistics, and outliers were coded by hand. Finally, datasets were translated into figures, tables, or narrative descriptions to share key points.

Several steps were then taken to thematically analyze the qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). First, all responses were transferred from into Google Spreadsheets and were coded by hand. To ensure that responses were not altered or lost, responses to each question were saved as photo images. Next, the researcher read all data to gain a sense of the population's approach to the study. This allowed for reflection on the answers before data coding began. Responses to each question were coded individually and then categorized, depending on the question. Next, the researcher assigned all the question results to two parallel themes – arts-based and emotions-based. These categories compared results from all questions and themes in order to report adolescent experiences related to the elementary to middle school transition. Finally, these descriptions were represented through written information, tables, and figures.

### **Methodological Integrity**

To maintain methodological integrity, the researcher practiced adequacy, researcher perspective, groundedness, meaningfulness, context, coherence, and consistency (APA, 2020). Throughout the study, these terms were applied to mixed methods analysis practices. Adequacy applied to the way the researcher approached survey responses by keeping the original research question and hypothesis in mind. The researcher's perspective was maintained through a triangulation between the researcher, officials from a local Midwestern school district, and individuals associated with the Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College Institutional Review Board (SMWC IRB). All individuals involved supported each other and balanced the analysis procedures. Direct quotations from participants were collected to enforce groundedness

throughout the analysis. This supported the results and discussion. Meaningfulness and context bloomed as the study supported the field of art therapy through its investigation of the therapeutic use of art supplies. The responses were also approached in such a way as to advocate for mental health in the adolescent population. To maintain coherence, the researcher ensured that the details were presented to the participants in an organized and easy to follow manner. Finally, the researcher practiced methodological integrity by being consistent throughout. Responses to all questions were organized, analyzed, and presented by the same coder throughout the study.

### **Conclusion**

All participants were recruited from the same elementary school and given an identical online survey. Survey questions were designed specifically for the adolescent population. Data were collected and analyzed using a mixed methods convergent parallel approach. The collection of quantitative and qualitative data happened at the same time. Answers to questions were coded and analyzed individually. Once analyzed, results from each question were coded and analyzed into overall themes. All methodologies performed in this study followed methodological integrity practices such as groundedness, coherence, and context. The methodologies of this study were used to investigate the research question, “*Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students transitioning into middle school?*” and the hypothesis, “The therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school.”

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

Demographic information collected from research participants included their age range and education level. Participants were adolescents, around the age of 11, who attended the same Midwestern elementary school. All individuals were enrolled in the fifth-grade level and anticipated the move to middle school. These demographic details were identical for all nine students who completed the online survey (N=9). Questions in the online survey investigated the research question: *Can the therapeutic use of art supplies influence potential anxiety/depression in adolescents headed into middle school.* Responses aimed to support or challenge the research question in light of the hypothesis that the therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school

#### Survey Responses

Each survey question and response were approached under a convergent parallel design. In other words, quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time and then compared. Quantitative analysis found the average response while qualitative analysis coded responses by hand and placed them into categories. In order to compare quantitative and qualitative information, results from each question were placed into two overarching themes. These two themes were emotions-based and arts-based. These are not to be confused with arts-based research approaches. These themes concluded the investigation of the potential therapeutic use of art supplies on potential anxiety/depression in fifth grade students transitioning into middle school.

**Question 1**

There were nine responses to question one, “Think about starting middle school, what emotion(s) do you feel?” (Table 1). In this question, students were able to select multiple emotions. These emotions were happy/joyful, sad/unhappy, worried/scared, and mad/angry. Seven out of nine students selected one or more of these predetermined checkbox options to identify which emotion(s) they associate with the transition to middle school. Two students selected “other” and input their own emotion word. One participant submitted “excited/worried” and the other “nervous.” These responses were coded by hand and categorized as “worried/scared.” Overall, six out of nine students submitted worried/scared, while six out of nine also selected happy/excited. No students reported feeling sad/unhappy or mad/angry toward the move to middle school (Figure 1).

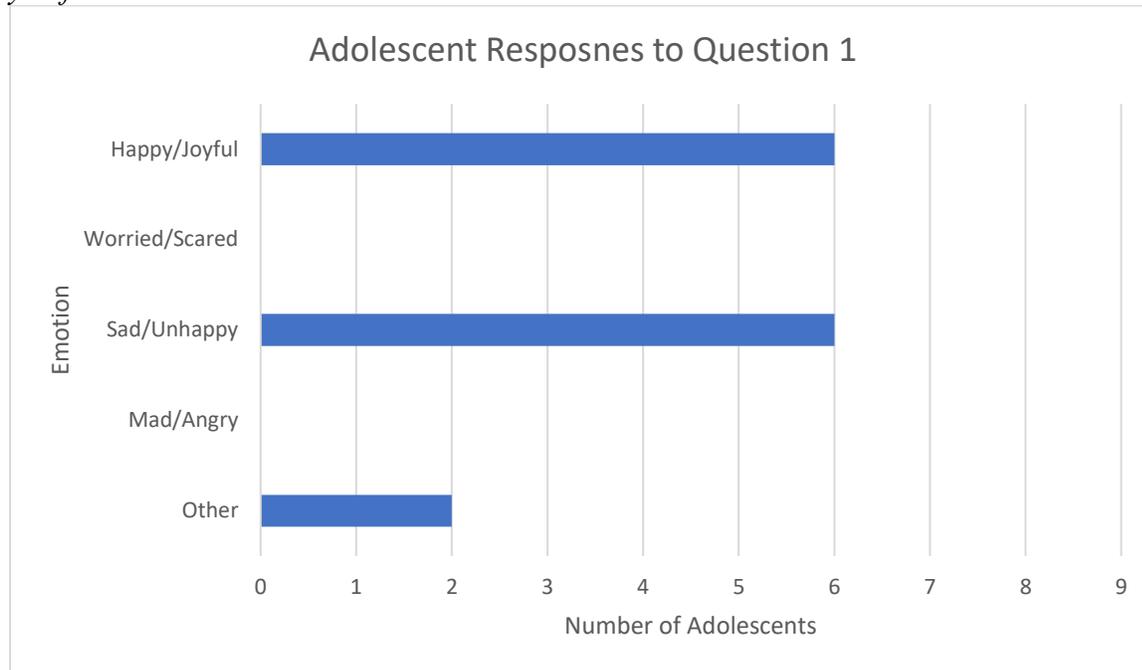
**Table 1**

Participant responses to Question 1: “Think about starting middle school, what emotion(s) do you feel?”

Participant	Response				
	Happy/Joyful	Sad/Unhappy	Worried/Scared	Mad/Angry	Other (Please name):
1	X		X		
2	X				
3	X				
4			X		“Nervous”
5	X		X		
6			X		“Exited/ worried”[sic]
7	X				
8	X		X		
9			X		
Number of Students:	6	0	6	0	2

**Figure 1**

*Participant responses to Question 1: “Think about starting middle school, what emotion(s) do you feel?”*



### **Question 2**

Listed in Table 2 are the responses to question two, “Do you think using art supplies can help you express those emotions? Why or why not?” Open ended responses to this question included “Yes art can tell what you feel with no words. I like art it makes me happy,” “no i dont because art supplies dont always help how i fill” [sic], “Yes because it is fun to play with” [sic], “Yes because I love to draw I’m really good at drawing eyes so I draw eyes to express myself” [sic], “Yes, because art is a form of expressing emotion,” “Yes, because you’re able to say things with pictures that you might not be able to say with words,” “Maybe. It’s fun to draw sometimes,” “Yes, because I get to draw how I feel,” and “Yes, it would allow me to be creative.” These responses were thematically coded by hand. Responses were categorized into three codes. Code 0 meant the participant indicated that they thought the use of art supplies could help them express emotions. Code 1 meant the participant did not think the use of art supplies

could help them express emotions. Code 2 signified an undecided response. Results from question two reveal that 78% (n=7) of students believe that the use of art supplies can help with the expression of emotions (n=7), while 11% (n=1) believed that art supplies cannot help with the expression of emotions and 11% (n=1) were undecided (Figure 2).

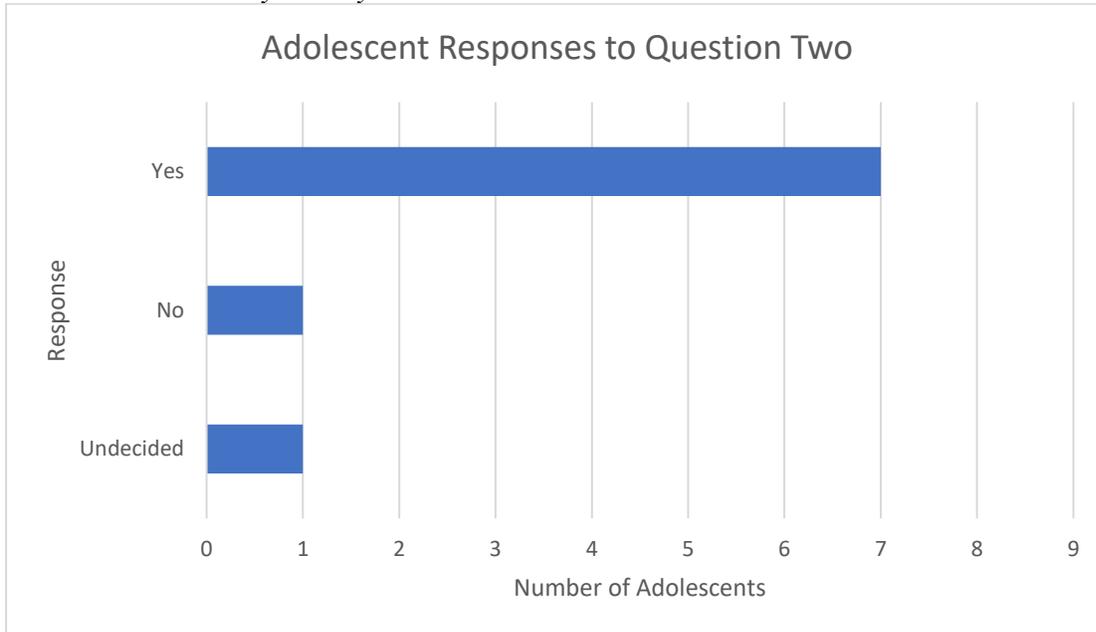
**Table 2**

*Participant responses to Question 2: “Do you think using art supplies can help you express those emotions? Why or why not?”*

Participant	Response	Code
1	“Yes art can tell what you feel with no words. I like art it makes me happy.”	0
2	“no i dont because art supplies dont always help how i fill.”	1
3	“Yes because it is fun to play with”	0
4	“Yes because I love to draw I'm really good at drawing eyes so I draw eyes to express myself”	0
5	“Yes because art is a form of expressing emotion”	0
6	“Yes, because you’re able to say things with pictures that you might not be able to say with words.”	0
7	“Maybe. It’s fun to draw sometimes.”	2
8	“Yes, because I get to draw how I feel.”	0
9	“Yes, it would allow me to be creative”	0

**Figure 2**

*Participant responses to Question 2: “Do you think using art supplies can help you express those emotions? Why or why not?”*



### **Question 3**

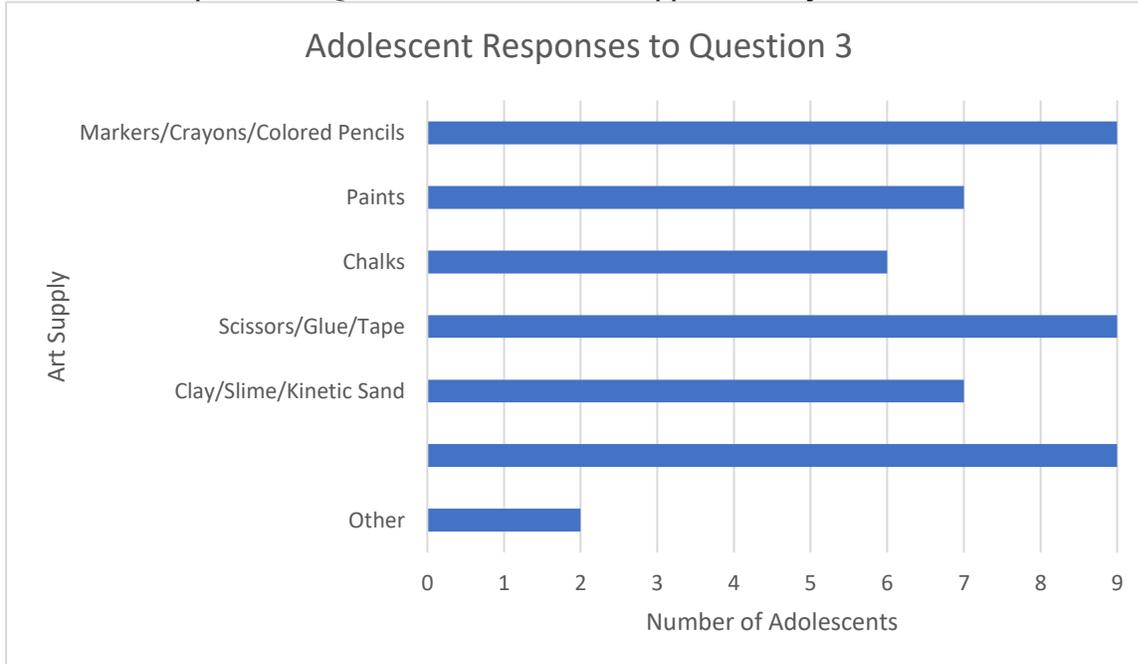
Question three asked participants, “Which art supplies have you used before?” Responses were analyzed to find the average use of different art supplies. As with question one, participants had multiple choices and could enter their own “other” option. These data are reported in Table 3. The predetermined selections included: markers/crayons/colored pencils, paints, chalks, scissors/glue/tape, clay/slime/kinetic sand, construction paper, and other. Open-ended responses were not coded into pre-existing categories. Markers, crayons, and colored pencils were used by 100% (n=9) of students. Paints were used by 68% (n=6), chalk was used by 67% (n=6), scissors, glue, and tape were used by 100% (n=9), clay, slime, and kinetic sand were used by 78% (n=7) and construction paper was used by 100% (n=9) of participants. In addition, 22% of participants (n=2) chose the “other” option (Figure 3). One student reported using “hot glue gun/paint brush/jel pens” [sic] and the other student wrote, “Stuff from my grandma.”

**Table 3***Adolescent responses to Question 3: "Which art supplies have you used before?"*

Participant	Art Supply						
	Markers/ Crayons/ Colored Pencils	Paint	Chalk	Scissors/ Glue /Tape	Clay/Slime /Kinetic Sand	Construction paper	Other (Please name):
1	X	X	X	X	X	X	
2	X	X	X	X	X	X	"hot glue gun/paint brush/jel pens"
3	X	X	X	X		X	
4	X			X	X	X	
5	X	X	X	X	X	X	
6	X	X	X	X	X	X	
7	X	X		X	X	X	"Stuff from my grandma"
8	X	X	X	X	X	X	
9	X			X		X	
Total students (in %):	100%	78%	67%	100%	78%	100%	22%

**Figure 3**

Adolescent responses to Question 3: “Which art supplies have you used before?”

**Question 4**

Question four asked participants: “How did using those art supplies make you feel?”

Participant responses are listed in Table 4. Students were given multiple choice categories and could also write their own response. The multiple-choice categories were happy/joyful, sad/unhappy, worried/scared, and mad/angry. Of the nine participants, 100% (N=9) reported that the use of art supplies made them feel happy/joyful. In addition, 11% (n=1) reported feeling mad/angry and happy/joyful. One student reported happy/joyful and “other” and reported feeling “the same way i felt befor i used them” [sic]. Answers typed into the “other” option were coded by hand into the best fit category, “the same way i felt before i used them” was categorized with that respondent’s initial response of “happy/joyful” (Figure 4).

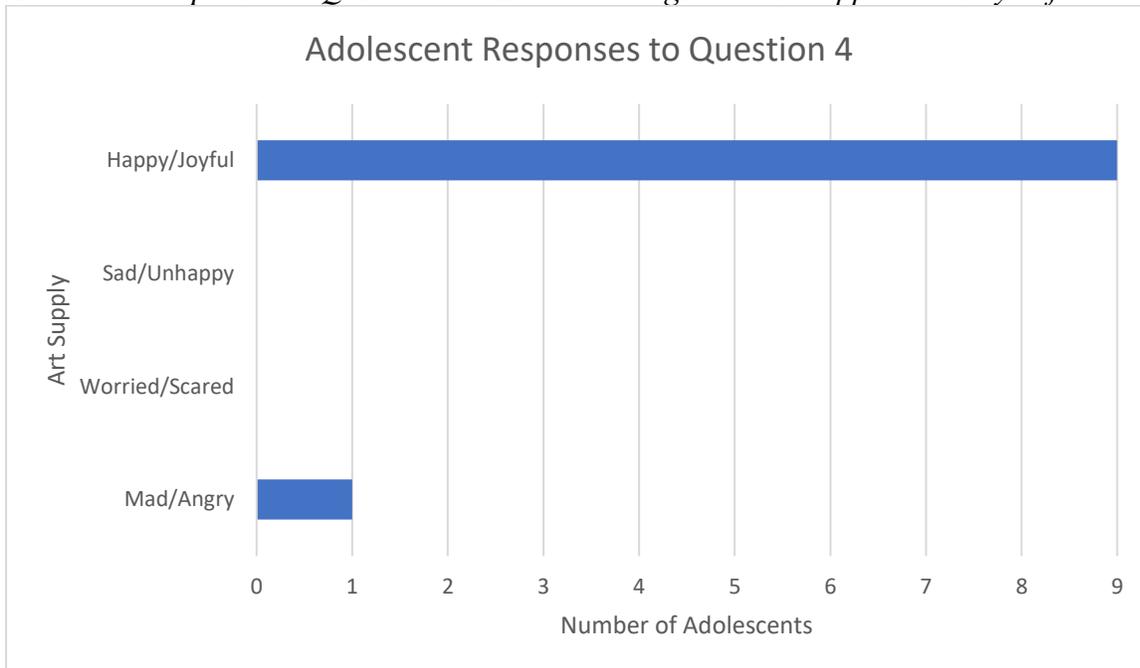
**Table 4**

*Adolescent responses to Question 4: “How did using those art supplies make you feel?”*

Participant	Response				
	Happy/Joyful	Sad/Unhappy	Worried/Scared	Mad/Angry	Other (Please name):
1	X				
2	X				“the same way i felt befor i used them”
3	X				
4	X				
5	X				
6	X				
7	X			X	
8	X				
9	X				
Number of Students:	9	0	0	1	1

**Figure 4**

*Adolescent responses to Question 4: “How did using those art supplies make you feel?”*



*Question 5*

Question five asked, “What does being happy/joyful look like?” (Table 5). Opened ended responses to this question included “colors, rainbows, flowers, and hearts,” “smiling all day and being positive,” “smiling playing around,” “smiling at their drawings,” “smiling,” “smiling, generally happier energy,” “happy face,” “smile and laughing,” and “smiling.” Responses were coded by hand and placed into three categories related to nouns: body language responses, artistic representation responses, and overall common words/phrases (Figure 5).

Body language responses accounted for 78% (n=7) of participant descriptions. These responses included “smiling all day and being positive,” “smiling playing around,” “smiling at their drawings,” “smiling,” “smiling, generally happier energy,” “smile and laughing,” and “smiling.” Responses were coded into the body language responses category because they included facial expressions, social interactions, and visual representations.

Artistic representation accounted for 22% (n=2) of the responses and included creative descriptions. One participant stated “colors, rainbows, flowers, and hearts” and another stated “happy face.” These responses were considered artistic representation because they described real objects or images.

Common words/phrases accounted for 78% (n=7) of responses. The most common word/phrase to describe what happy/joyful looks like were those that included the suffix “-ing”, represented an action verb. Common words/phrases included “smiling all day and being positive,” “smiling playing around,” “smiling at their drawings,” “smiling,” “smiling, generally happier energy,” “smile and laughing,” and “smiling.”

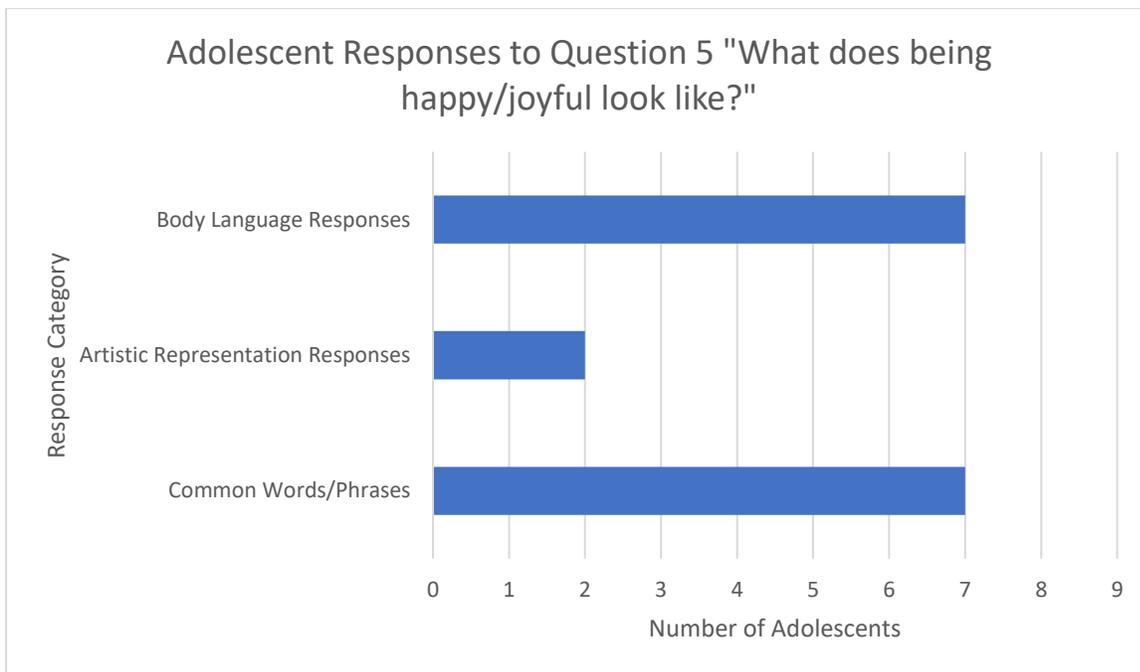
**Table 5**

*Adolescent responses to Question 5: “What does being happy/joyful look like?”*

Participant Response		Response Category		
Participant	Response	Body Language Responses	Artistic Representation Responses	Common Words/Phrases
1	colors, rainbows, flowers, and hearts		X	
2	smiling all day and being positive	X		X
3	smiling playing around	X		X
4	smiling at their drawings	X		X
5	smiling	X		X
6	smiling, generally happier energy	X		X
7	happy face		X	
8	smile and laughing	X		X
9	smiling	X		X
	Frequency of responses in category (in %)	78%	22%	78%

**Figure 5**

*Frequency of participant responses to Question 5: “What does being happy/joyful look like?”*



***Question 6***

Question six asked: “What does being sad/unhappy look like?” and collected open-ended responses (Table 6). Responses included “wet,” “tears,” “clouds,” “frowning, not having much fun,” “frowning face,” “drawing more than usual,” “crying not playing around,” “frowning and quiet,” and “black, gray, blue, storm, broken heart.” Responses were coded by hand via an Excel spreadsheet and placed into three categories of nouns: body language responses, artistic representation responses, and overall common words/phrases. The distribution of responses to question six are listed in Figure 6.

Body language accounted for 67% (n=6) of responses. Body language responses included adolescent descriptions of what sad/unhappy looks like. These responses included “tears,” “frowning, not having much fun,” “frowning face,” “drawing more than usual,” “crying not playing around,” and “frowning and quiet.”

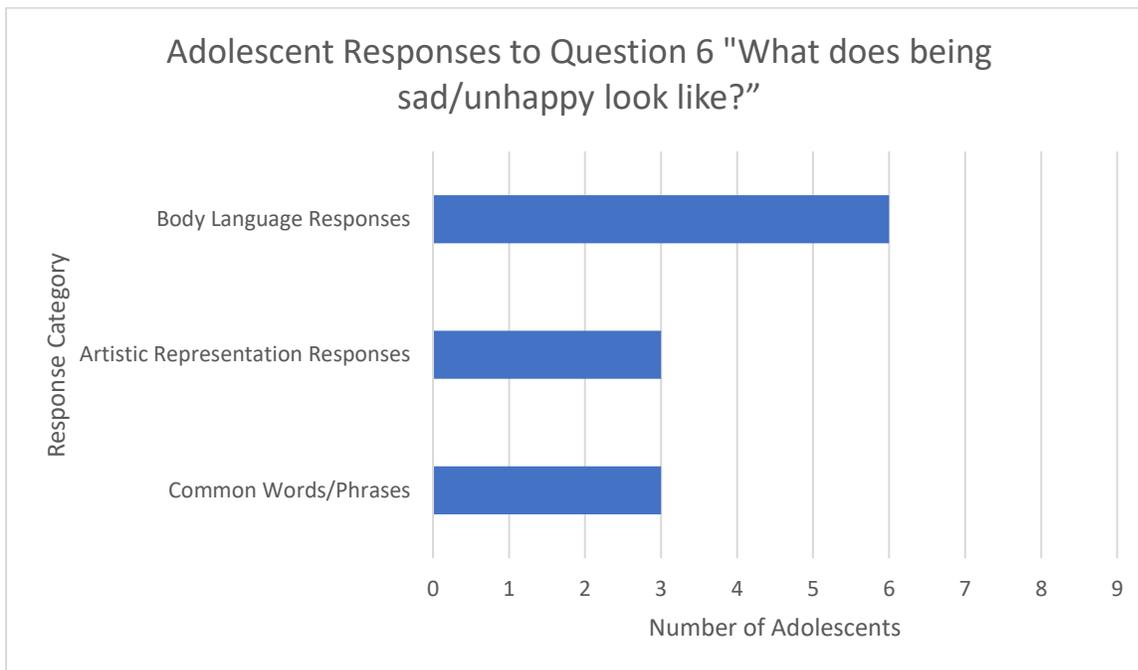
Descriptions of artistic representation accounted for 33% (n=3) of responses. These included visual descriptions related to objects rather than body language. The three responses included “wet,” “clouds,” and “black, gray, blue, storm, broken heart.” “Frowning” was the most common word/phrase in response to the question “What does being sad/unhappy look like” and accounted for 33% (n=3) of participants. Individual responses included “frowning, not having much fun,” “frowning face,” and “frowning and quiet.”

**Table 6***Participant responses to Question 6: "What does being sad/unhappy look like?"*

Participant Response		Response Category		
Participant	Response	Body language Responses	Artistic Representation Responses	Common Words/Phrases
1	Wet		X	
2	Tears	X		
3	clouds		X	
4	frowning, not having much fun	X		X
5	frowning face	X		X
6	drawing more than usual	X		
7	crying not playing around	X		
8	frowning and quiet	X		X
9	black, gray, blue, storm, broken heart		X	
	frequency of responses in category (in %)	67%	33%	33%

**Figure 6**

*Participant responses to Question 6: "What does being sad/unhappy look like?"*

**Question 7**

Responses to question seven, "What does being worried/scared look like?" are presented in Table 7. The nine responses included "raised eyebrows," "big eyes," "barf," "keeping to yourself and not interacting with anyone," "fidgety and shaking," "I don't draw at all and I bite my nails," "paranoid," "like youre sad" [sic], and "I'm not sure like this 😬." All responses were coded into the categories that best fit open-ended descriptions of emotions. These categories included body language responses and artistic representation responses. None of the responses to this question were categorized as common words/phrases. Table 7 contains a list of all participant responses and associated category.

References to body language accounted for 89% (n=8) of responses. These statements included "paranoyed" [sic], "like your sad" [sic], "I don't draw at all and I bite my nails," "fidget

and shaking,” “keeping to yourself and not interacting with anyone,” “barf,” “big eyes,” and “raised eyebrows.”

Descriptions of artistic representation accounted for 11% (n=1) of responses. One participant submitted “I’m not sure like this 😬.” The emoji is the artistic representation within this response.

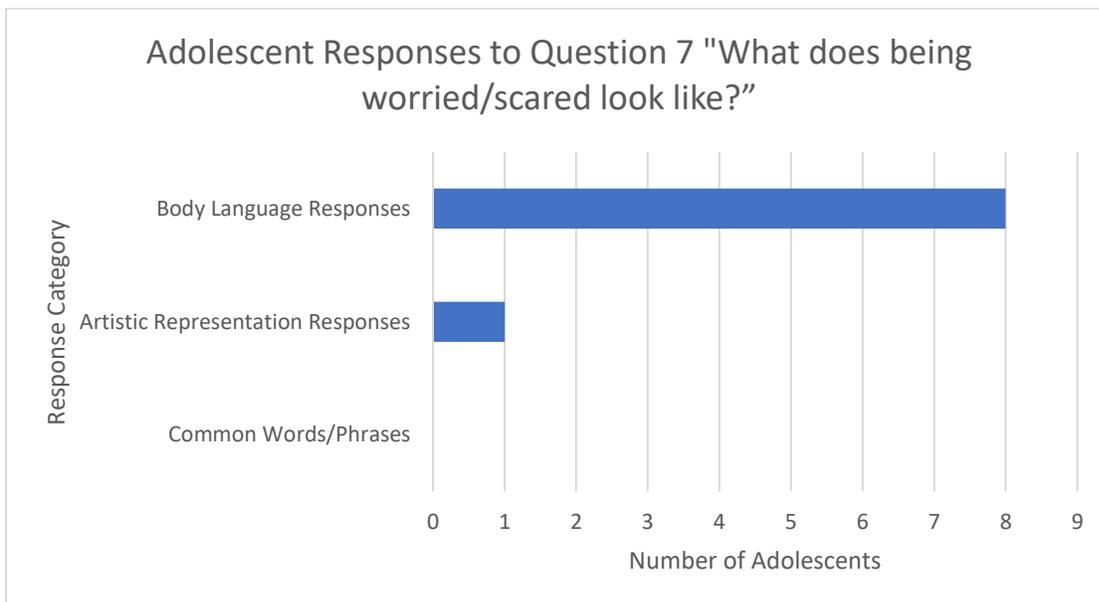
**Table 7**

*Participant responses to Question 7: “What does being worried/scared look like?”*

Participant Response		Response Category		
Participant	Response	Body language Responses	Artistic Representation Responses	Common Words/Phrases
1	I'm not sure like this 😬		X	
2	Paranoyed	X		
3	Like your sad.	X		
4	I don't draw at all and I bite my nails	X		
5	Fidgety and shaking	X		
6	Keeping to yourself and not interacting with anyone.	X		
7	Barf	X		
8	Big eyes	X		
9	Raised eyebrows	X		
	Frequency of responses in category (in %)	89%	11%	0%

**Figure 7**

*Frequency of participant responses to Question 7: “What does being worried/scared look like?”*



**Question 8**

Question eight asked: “What does being mad/angry look like?” Responses included “crazy painting maybe red,” “thoring stuff” [sic], “cussing yelling fighting,” “being disrespectful and arguing,” “drawing with my pencil really hard,” “crying or balling up hands screaming and yelling,” “lashing out at people, not enjoying anything,” “hot,” “tense,” and “red.” Responses to question eight (listed in Table 8) were coded by hand and placed into three categories that best fit open-ended descriptions of emotions. These categories include body language responses, artistic representation responses, and overall common words/phrases (Figure 8).

Body language accounted for 78% (n=7) of all responses to the question “What does being mad/angry look like?” and included one-word responses such as “tense” and “hot.” Other responses included “thoring [sic] stuff cussing yelling fighting,” “being disrespectful and arguing,” “drawing with my pencil really hard,” “crying or balling up hands screaming and yelling,” “lashing out at people, not enjoying anything.”

Artistic representation accounted for 22% (n=2) of responses. One participant wrote the single word, “red,” while the other wrote “crazy painting maybe red.”

Overall, 67% (n=6) of participants submitted common words or phrases. Similar to question five, these common words or phrases ended with the suffix “-ing” and included “crazy painting maybe red,” “thoring stuff” [sic], “cussing yelling fighting,” “being disrespectful and arguing,” “drawing with my pencil really hard,” “crying or balling up hands screaming and yelling,” and “lashing out at people, not enjoying anything.”

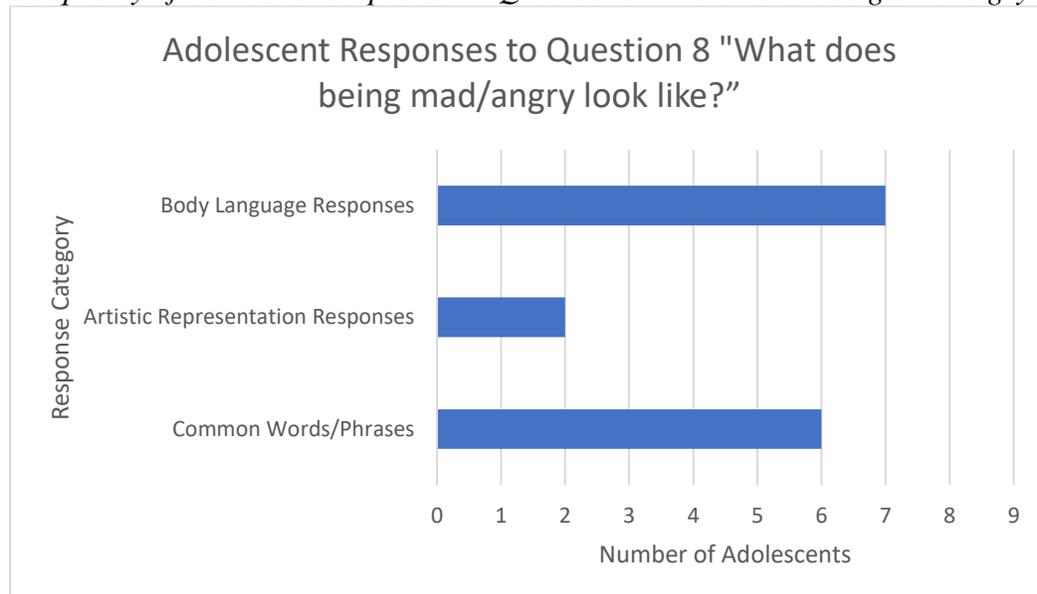
**Table 8**

*Participant responses to Question 8: “What does being mad/angry look like?”*

Participant Response		Response Category		
Participant	Response	Body Language Responses	Artistic Representation Responses	Common Words/Phrases
1	Crazy painting maybe red		X	X
2	thoring stuff cussing yelling fighting	X		X
3	Being disrespectful and arguing	X		X
4	Drawing with my pencil really hard	X		X
5	Crying or balling up hands screaming and yelling	X		X
6	Lashing out at people, not enjoying anything.	X		X
7	Hot	X		
8	Tense	X		
9	Red		X	
	Frequency of responses in category (in %)	78%	22%	67%

**Figure 8**

*Frequency of adolescent responses to Question 8: “What does being mad/angry look like?”*



***Question 9***

Question nine asked: “What do you think ‘art therapy’ means?” Responses included “to use art to explain my feelings,” “to draw my feelings,” “talking about art,” “using art as an outlet for your emotions,” “expressing how you feel through pictures,” “drawing my feelings,” “helps you calm down,” “a fun time,” and “I don’t [k]now doing art to make me happy.” The researcher coded responses by hand into two categories – leisure activity or emotion management – listed in Table 9. Responses were coded as leisure skills if they included casual hobbies. Emotion management responses were coded because they referenced emotional regulation or relaxation.

Among the participants, 22% (n=2) considered art therapy to be a leisure activity (Figure 9). One respondent wrote, “talking about art” and another wrote, “a fun time.” Meanwhile, 78% (n=7) of respondents considered art therapy to be related to mental health. These responses included “to use art to explain my feelings,” “to draw my feelings,” “using art as an outlet for your emotions,” “expressing how you feel through pictures,” “drawing my feelings,” “helps you calm down,” and “I don’t [k]now doing art to make me happy.”

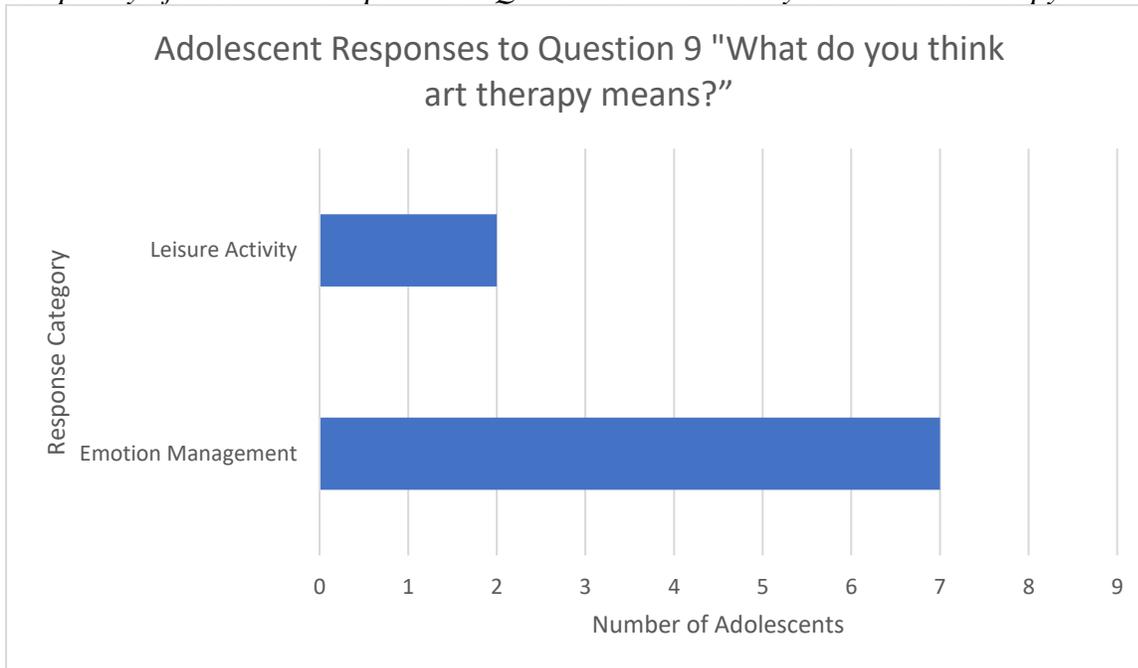
**Table 9**

*Participant responses to Question 9: “What do you think ‘art therapy’ means?”*

Participant Response		Response Category	
Participant	Response	Emotion Management	Leisure activity
1	To use art to explain my feelings	X	
2	To draw my feelings	X	
3	Talking about art		X
4	Using art as an outlet for your emotions	X	
5	Expressing how you feel through pictures	X	
6	Drawing my feelings	X	
7	Helps you calm down	X	
8	A fun time		X
9	I don’t now doing art to make me happy	X	
	Frequency of responses in theme category (in %)	78%	22%

**Figure 9**

*Frequency of adolescent responses to Question 9: “What do you think ‘art therapy’ means?”*



***Question 10***

Question ten asked, “If you made an artwork of ‘starting middle school’ what would you make?” Responses included “me walking with backpack a school maybe a rainbow to show I’m happy but a cloud and lightning [sic] because I’m scared,” “a graduation hat,” “cat art,” “anime manga,” “friends,” “someone outside of a school who looks both worried and anxious but also excited,” “a big backpack,” “a picture of school supplies,” and “a school bus.” These responses were coded by hand and placed into four categories related to nouns: person, place/scene, thing, or undecided (Table 10). Responses in the person category included those who referenced themselves, people, or figures. The place/scenes category contained responses that included background and other details. The responses categorized as things contained tangible objects. Finally, undecided responses did not fit any of these categories.

Of the nine participants, 22% (n=2) described a person, 11% (n=1) described a place/scene, and 67% (n=6) described a thing (Figure 10). Responses describing people included “friends” and “someone outside of a school who looks both worried and anxious but also excited.” The one response that included a place/scene described “me walking with a backpack a school maybe a rainbow to show I’m happy but a cloud and lightning [sic] because I’m scared.” Finally, the six responses that named things included “a graduation hat,” “cat art,” “anime manga,” “a big backpack,” “a picture of school supplies,” and “a school bus.”

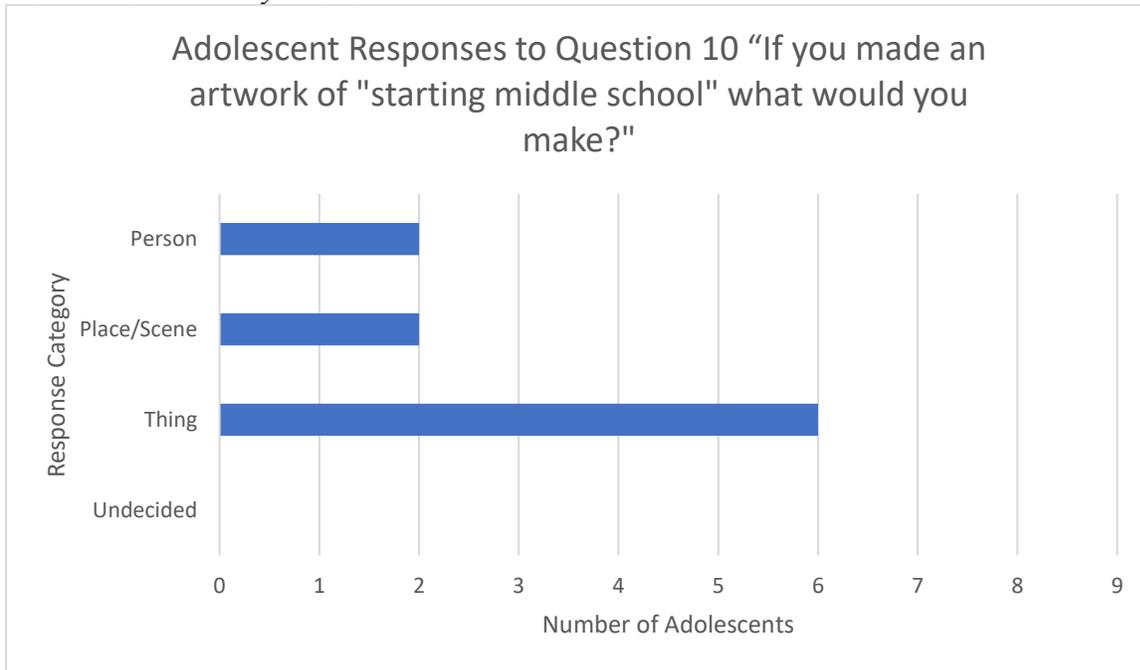
**Table 10**

*Participant responses to Question 10: "If you made an artwork of 'starting middle school' what would you make?"*

Participant Response		Response Category			
Participant	Response	Person	Place /Scene	Thing	Undecided
1	Me walking with backpack a school maybe a rainbow to show I'm happy but a cloud and lightning because I'm scared		X		
2	A graduation hat			X	
3	Cat art			X	
4	Anime manga			X	
5	Friends	X			
6	Someone outside of a school who looks both worried and anxious but also excited.	X			
7	A big backpack			X	
8	A picture of school supplies			X	
9	A school bus			X	
	Frequency of responses in category (in %)	22%	11%	67%	0

**Figure 10**

*Frequency of adolescent responses to Question 10: "If you made an artwork of 'starting middle school' what would you make?"*



***Question 11***

Question eleven was open-ended and asked, “What art supplies would you use?” Responses included “Paint! or crayons and markers,” “paint pens,” “pencils crayons colored pencils,” “pencils and pro markers,” “lots of colors,” “a pencil,” “markers,” “markers, pencils, and paper,” and “paper and crayons.” These responses were coded by hand and placed into similar categories as those in question three (Table 11). Categories included markers/crayons/colored pencils, paints, chalks, scissors/glue/tape, clay/slime/kinetic sand, and construction paper. Some responses were placed into multiple categories (Figure 11).

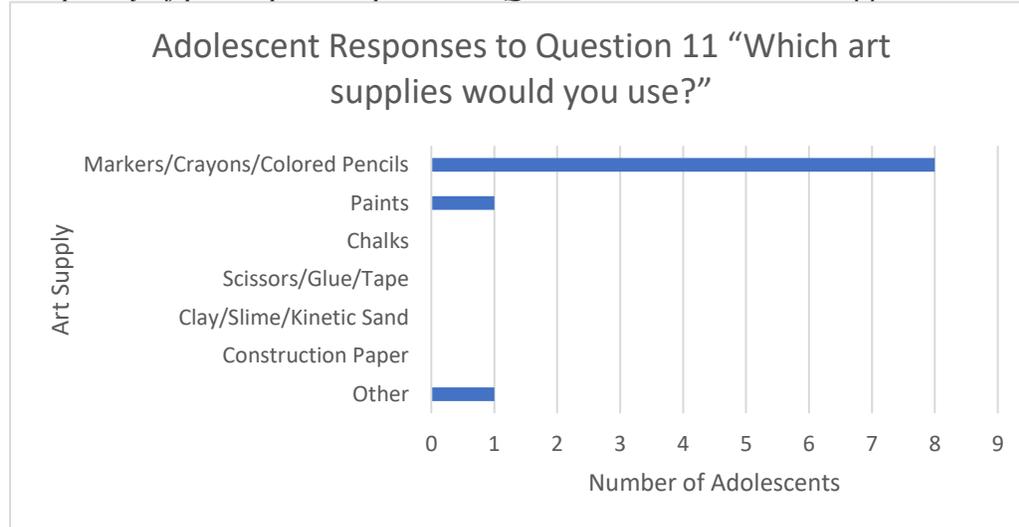
Among the respondents, 89% (n=8) said they would use such materials as markers/crayons/colored pencils, inserting comments such as “Paint! or crayons and markers,” “pencils crayons colored pencils,” “pencils and pro markers,” “a pencil,” “markers,” “markers, pencils, and paper,” and “paper and crayons.” The response “lots of colors” was coded into this category due to ambiguity. Among the respondents, 22% (n=2) were categorized as “paint.” One participant stated, “paint pens” while another stated “Paint! or crayons and markers.” No responses were categorized under chalks, scissors/glue/tape, or clay/slime/kinetic sand. One response was categorized as construction paper. The respondent wrote “paper and crayons” and specifically mentioned “paper.”

**Table 11***Participant responses to Question 11: "What art supplies would you use?"*

Participant Response		Therapeutic Art Supply Category					
Participant	Response	Markers/ Crayons/ Colored Pencils	Paints	Chalks	Scissors/ Glue/ Tape	Clay/ Slime/ Kinetic Sand	Construction paper
1	Paint! or crayons and markers	X					
2	Paint pens		X				
3	Pencils crayons colored pencils	X					
4	Pencils and pro markers	X					
5	Lots of colors	X					
6	A pencil.	X					
7	Markers	X					
8	Markers, pencils, and paper	X					
9	Paper and crayons	X					X
	Frequency of responses (in %)	89%	11%	0	0	0	11%

**Figure 11**

*Frequency of participant responses to Question 11: “Which art supplies would you use?”*



### ***Question 12***

Question twelve asked, “What would you title that artwork?” Open-ended responses included “Starting middle school,” “Passing 5th grade,” “Drawing my cat named twizzler” [sic], “Idk yet,” “New day new friends,” “Mixed emotions,” “Middlemadness,” “School supplies,” and “Going to school.” As with question ten, these responses were coded by hand and placed into four categories related to nouns: person, place/scene, thing, or undecided (Table 12). Respondents who referenced themselves, people, or figures were placed in the person category. Place/scenes included background and specific details. Things included tangible objects. Undecided responses did not fit as a person, place/scene, or thing.

The person category contained no responses coded, while 44% (n=4) of responses were coded into place/scene (Figure 12). These included the artwork titles “Starting middle school,” “Passing 5<sup>th</sup> grade,” “New day new friends,” and “Going to school.” A further 44% (n=4) included things in the title of their artwork, including “Mixed emotions,” “Middlemadness,”

“School supplies,” and “Drawing my cat named twizzler.” Finally, 11% (n=1) submitted the undecided response “Idk yet.”

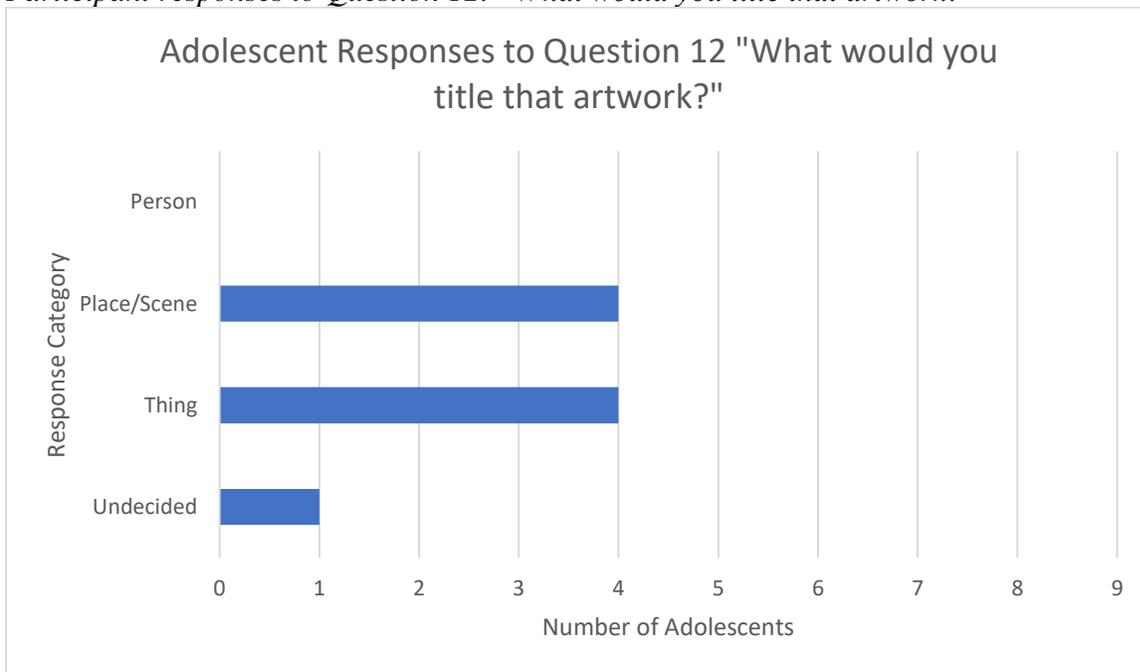
**Table 12**

*Participant responses to Question 12: "What would you title that artwork?"*

Participant Responses		Response Category			
Participant	Response	Person	Place/Scene	Thing	Undecided
1	Starting middle school		X		
2	Passing 5th grade		X		
3	Drawing my cat named twizzler			X	
4	Idk yet				X
5	New day new friends		X		
6	Mixed emotions			X	
7	Middlemadness			X	
8	School supplies			X	
9	Going to school		X		
	Frequency of responses in category (in %)	0%	44%	44%	11%

**Figure 12**

*Participant responses to Question 12: "What would you title that artwork?"*



## **Overarching Themes**

Two overall themes emerged from an analysis of the data. These were emotions-based responses and arts-based responses. Participants emotions-based responses related to how the adolescent felt or experienced the world around them (Malchiodi, 2012). Arts-based responses related to how they responded to use of art supplies, their thoughts on art therapy, or potential creations (Malchiodi, 2012). These two themes worked together to support or challenge the research question, “Can the therapeutic use of art supplies influence potential anxiety/depression in adolescents headed into middle school” and the hypothesis: The therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school.

### ***Emotions-Based Responses***

Emotions-based responses emerged from questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, as listed in Appendix C. Results from questions 5–8 were emotions-based because participants described several emotions, including happy/joyful, sad/unhappy, worried/scared, and mad/angry, as listed in Tables 5–8. Results from these questions alone do not support the research question or hypothesis because these questions did not investigate the therapeutic use of art supplies. However, they support the investigation of mental health in adolescence with regard to how students perceive emotions.

Results from question one (Table 1) show that students reported feeling “happy/joyful” and “worried/scared,” but did not report feeling “sad/unhappy” or “mad/angry.” This does not fully confirm the research question and hypothesis because fifth grade students potentially experience anxiety but not depression.

In relation to this, the results of question four (Table 4), reveal the emotions that students feel when using art supplies. Most of the respondents reported feeling “happy/joyful.” However,

some participants reported feeling “mad/angry” and some reported no change in emotion at all. These results support the research hypothesis. If students experience anxiety/depression regarding the transition to middle school then the therapeutic use of art supplies will influence those emotions.

### ***Arts-Based Responses***

Arts-based responses emerged from questions 2, 3, 10, 11, and 12. Results from question two reveal that the majority of fifth grade students believe that there are therapeutic benefits in using art supplies. This supports the research question, Can the therapeutic use of art supplies influence potential anxiety/depression in adolescents headed into middle school and confirm the hypothesis: The therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school.

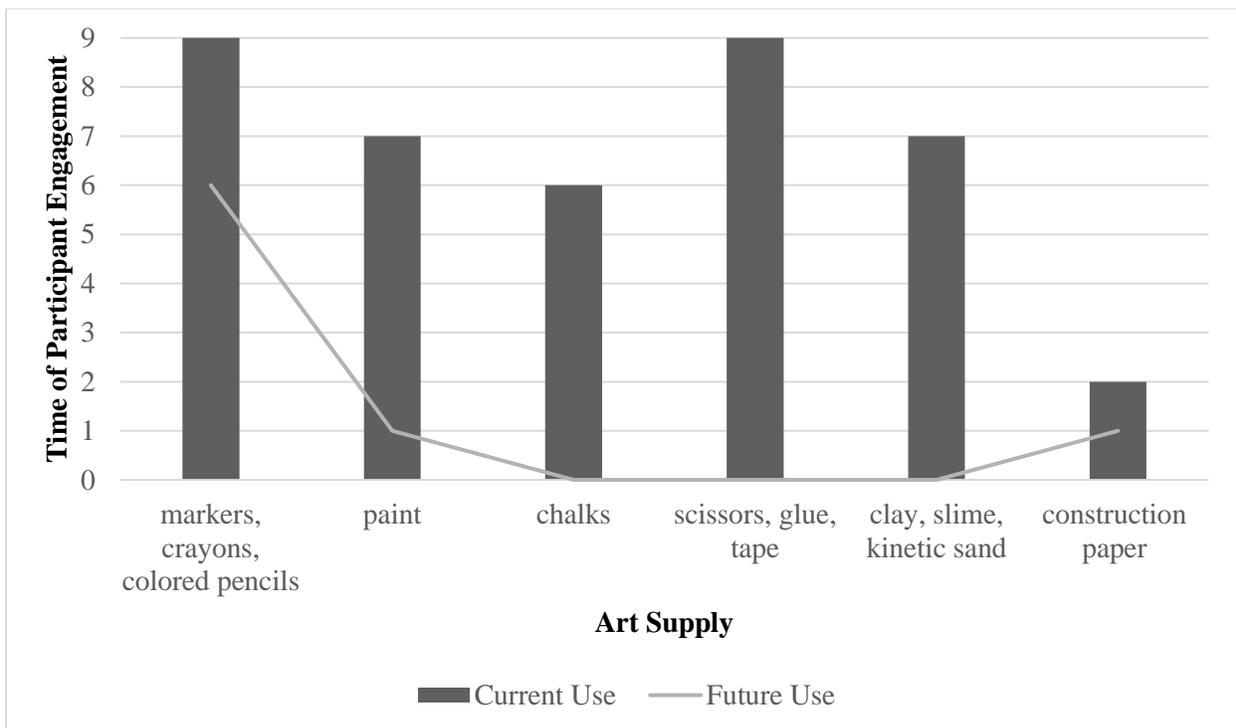
Arts-based responses from question three reveal that fifth grade students most commonly use markers/crayons/colored pencils, scissors/glue/tape, and construction paper. These results support the research question and hypothesis because students use those art supplies therapeutically to mitigate potential anxiety/depression arising from the transition to middle school. Figure 13 compares the art supplies adolescents used in the past and those they would choose to use in the future.

Results from questions 10–12 were arts-based because students responded to potential art therapy prompts. Question ten asked fifth graders what art image they would create about starting middle school. All of the participants (100%, n=9) submitted a response. In response to question eleven, 100% (n=9) of participants stated which art supplies they would use. Then, in response to question twelve both arts-based and emotions-based responses emerged. As 100% of participants suggested a title for their potential artwork the participant correlated art with

emotion. These results support the research question because students can use art supplies therapeutically to mitigate potential/anxiety and depression arising from the transition to middle school. However, more research is required to establish how the use of art therapy prompts can influence those emotions.

**Figure 13**

*Adolescent Current and Future Use of Art Supplies*



*Note.* This figure compares participants' past and desired experiences of using art supplies

### Conclusion

The results of this study show that 50% (n=6) of fifth-grade students perceived the elementary to middle school transition as “happy/joyful,” while the other 50% (n=6) were “worried/scared” about the transition. Overall, 100% (n=9) of participants believe that the therapeutic use of art supplies can help them express their emotions. In addition, 100% (n=9) of fifth graders reported feeling “happy/joyful” after the use of art supplies.

Together, these results reinforce but do not fully support the research question, “Can the therapeutic use of art supplies influence potential anxiety/depression in adolescents headed into middle school” and the hypothesis that the therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school. The research found that elementary students experience anxiety regarding the transition to middle school. It also found that these students believe the therapeutic use of art supplies will influence their emotions. The use of art therapy in the elementary to middle school transition has the potential to influence the emotions of adolescents. Additional research is required to determine how the therapeutic effects of art supplies influence depression or other emotions that arise from the transition to middle school.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

This study investigated the research question: “Can the therapeutic use of art supplies influence potential anxiety/depression in adolescents headed into middle school” and tested the hypothesis that the therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school. A mixed methods survey was used to collect open-ended responses from nine fifth grade students. The results from twelve survey questions were analyzed and openly discussed in relation to existing literature. This discussion included support of the hypothesis, comparison of similar results, interpretation of results, limitations and strengths, ethical implications, and recommendations for future research.

#### Support of the Hypothesis

Coelho et al.’s (2017) “school stress survey” found that students experience nervousness and anxiety as they transition into middle school. This supports the results from question one “Think about starting middle school, what emotions do you feel?” Fifth grade students reported feeling “worried/scared” and supported their answers in question seven, “What does being worried/scared look like?” (Table 7). Open-ended responses revealed that the students were at the concrete operational stage of Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development (Colombo & Cárnio, 2018; Piaget, 1971). These responses showed that participants were able to form their own logical responses to cognitive subjects. Responses to open-ended questions showed that fifth grade students applied logical thought to abstract concepts similar to Piaget (Bond, 2003). Specifically, one student responded “Drawing with my pencil really hard” to the question “What does being mad/angry look like?”, demonstrating the student’s understanding of the concept of reversibility. This response supported the hypothesis because the participant expressed the

therapeutic use of art supplies (Malchiodi, 2012; Spier, 2010). As the student feels anger, they respond with increased kinesthetic/sensory pressure (Hinz, 2019).

Previous research has reported that adolescents find the therapeutic use of art supplies helpful in the expression of their emotions during difficult periods of transition (Gonzales-Dolginko, 2020; Haprazi et al., 2020). This study did not utilize tangible art supplies, but 78% (n=7) of respondents believe that using art supplies can help express their emotions during the transition to middle school. Spier found that students responded to art prompts with subject matter that described their transition (Spier, 2010). Results from question ten of this research (“If you made an artwork of “starting middle school” what would you made?”) support the findings of previous research. Responses such as “school supplies,” “a backpack,” and “school bus” describe education-related items that could help the transition (Madjar et al., 2016).

### **Comparison of Similar Results**

The results of this study were similar to those of previous studies (Harpazi et al., 2020; Madjar et al., 2016; Spier, 2010; Park, 2017 etc.). The results of question one were similar to those of Madjar et al. (2016) who found that adolescent students report feeling worried about starting middle school. Harpazi et al. (2020) found that students use art therapy as a form of emotion management or leisure activity, similar to participants in this study. The use of art therapy provides adolescents with social support (Harpazi et al., 2020; Park, 2017).

Similar to question ten in this survey, Spier (2010) used the drawing prompt “me in ninth grade.” The subject matter of both sets of responses was similar as participants expressed people, places, and things related to their transition. Open-ended responses in this study were similar to those of other studies, revealing similar levels of cognitive development among elementary students (Malloy et al., 2019; Sarwanto et al., 2020).

Previous research has found that, regardless of cognitive development, the therapeutic use of art supplies supports students through difficult transitions (Braitto et al, 2021; Harpazi et al., 2020, Spier, 2010). Braitto et al. (2021) have found that art therapy helps students to reduce stress, similar to the participant in this study who responded, “Helps you calm down” when asked “What do you think ‘art therapy’ means?” Similarly, Harpazi et al. (2020) asked older adolescents the open-ended question “Tell me what art therapy in school means to you?” Participants gave similar responses describing how they would use art to express themselves to others (Harpazi et al., 2020; Spier, 2010).

### **Interpretation of Results**

Many topics were considered within the interpretation of this research but three prevailed. These topics were selected by the researcher and included population, the field of art therapy, and approach to research. First, this study surveyed the adolescent population and the external validity aimed to advocate for adolescents. Responses from fifth grade students only created a genuine collection of results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Next, the researcher interpreted all survey responses from the perspective of an art therapist to support and expand the field of art therapy (Steele & Malchiodi, 2015). Survey responses were then interpreted using a convergent parallel mixed methods approach to enhance research (Betts & Deaver, 2019).

The implications of the research are specific to fifth grade students transitioning to a new school for sixth grade. Such specific requirements resulted in a small sample size. Results collected from a smaller sample size which reduced external validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, most of the responses were open-ended and placed into categories which reduced internal validity (Betts & Deaver, 2019). The responses and categories they were placed into may have lessened the intensity of their importance.

Several researcher biases were considered in the interpretation of the data (Steele & Malchiodi, 2015). Confirmation bias was present as the researcher strongly believes in the therapeutic use of art supplies. The researcher approached this research from the perspective of an art therapist. Such a specific approach may have altered the interpretation of results as other adjacent fields were not as heavily incorporated into the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey also contained leading question bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Survey questions were presented on the theme of art therapy which may have influenced participants to answer in a certain way.

The mixed methods research approach strongly enhanced the interpretation of this study. The therapeutic use of art supplies is a complex process best described through mixed methods (Betts & Deaver, 2019; Spier, 2010). Mixed methods were used in the interpretation of this study because the individual use of art supplies integrates both hemispheres of the brain (Goldner & Sharf, 2011; Hinz, 2019). Strictly quantitative or qualitative results would have led to separate interpretations. The different approaches might have focused on alternative data points.

The results of this study would not be as strong without giving due consideration to the population, the field of art therapy, and the research approach. An interpretation of the sample size limits the generalizability of results and the ability to quantitatively accept or reject the null hypothesis. These results also heighten the need for future research. Researcher bias must be considered in the interpretation and categorization of results. An interpretation of the research approach contributed to the complexity and comparison of results. The inclusion of the interpretation of this study advances support for the research question and hypothesis.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

This study has several limitations and strengths. The COVID-19 pandemic and use of an electronic survey limited access to participants. Additionally, the results of the survey may be skewed due to participant interest. However, this study had strong ethical procedures and internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These strengths and weaknesses contributed significantly to the results of the study.

The COVID-19 pandemic limited the original research question and research approach. This study had originally intended to investigate how art therapy directives/informative videos affect potential anxiety or depression in adolescent students during middle school transition. Four face-to-face sessions were planned with two groups of students, in which a control group would watch art videos and discuss their anticipated transition to middle school, while the other group would be prompted to engage in the therapeutic use of art supplies, followed by a reflection period. Once these sessions were complete, the results from each group would be analyzed and compared. However, due to COVID-19 social restrictions, in-person sessions were prohibited and the research design had to be altered and in-person sessions were replaced by an online survey. This alteration was a major limitation because participants were unable to engage in the therapeutic use of art supplies.

The use of an electronic survey may have restricted the ability for students to participate. Students were required to have internet access and a device provided by their parent/guardian. As students relied on their parents/guardians to provide access, they may have assisted the participant in their responses. This limits the survey because there is no certain way to know the participants interpretation of the question or their initial responses.

This study surrounded the use of creativity and art supplies. This topic may have interested certain students more than other students. The results may be bias to include participants interested in art. There are possibilities that students did not participate solely because they are not interested in art.

Meanwhile, the strengths of this study included its ethical procedures and internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The ethical procedures included consent and assent protocols before commencement of the online survey. Consent procedures strengthened the quality of the research because they required parent/guardian involvement. Assent procedures strengthened the results because questions were answered directly by the adolescent participants (Sarwanto et al., 2021). The internal validity of the research also acted was a strength as it supported the mixed methods approach. The order and design of the research questions were the same for each participant and contributed to the importance of the subject matter. Correlations were found in responses between the prospective therapeutic use of art supplies and potential feelings of anxiety/depression. These correlations added to internal validity within this mixed methods research to support the adolescent population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Discussion of the limitations and strengths of this research were essential to ensure order and balance. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced both the investigation and access to participants. However, these weaknesses did not halt the research process. Transforming the research design into an online survey provided strength to support the population. Reconsidering the design strengthened the ethical procedures and internal validity throughout data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Ethical Implications**

The researcher followed ethical guidelines throughout this study. These included the ethical guidelines of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), the Art Therapy Credentials Board (ATCB), and the American Psychological Association (APA). The American Art Therapy Association has established the Ethical Principles for Art Therapists (AATA, 2013). This researcher promptly followed code 16.2 by obtaining consent and assent before carrying out the electronic survey (AATA, 2013 p.15). In addition, codes 1.1.11 and 2.9.3 were highlighted within the ATCB Code of Ethics (ATCB, 2021). These codes relate to the safety of adolescent participants and involved ensuring consent and assent before the research was conducted. Most importantly, the researcher followed the eighth section of the APA Code of Ethics (APA,2017). Research and publication guidelines were followed to protect the individuals involved and to allow their responses to be used for educational purposes. Together, these guidelines reinforce research within the fields of mental health and art therapy.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research include altering the population and recruitment process, changing the survey questions, and assessing the potential therapeutic use of art supplies. The recruitment of a different grade level or community of students would provide researchers with more tailored results (Fite et al., 2019; Madjar et al., 2016). The use of different survey questions would allow researchers to approach the sample population in a more specific manner (Singer et al., 2017). The potential therapeutic use of art supplies should also include the tangible use of materials (Spier, 2010). Together, these suggestions support future research.

Changing the population and recruitment process is recommended to increase the accuracy of the results and the sample size. The population of this survey included fifth grade

students in their final year of elementary school (Van Rens et al., 2018). Future versions of this research should consider sixth grade students in their first year of middle school (Fite et al., 2019). This would lead to more tailored results concerning the elementary to middle school transition. Future research could also include participants from multiple schools or districts. The inclusion of multiple sources would increase the number of participants (Madjar et al., 2016), thus strengthening the quantitative results.

Changing the survey questions might include different response options, fewer open-ended questions, and more hands-on interactions. The emotions-based responses in this study included happy/joyful, sad/unhappy, worried/scared, and mad/angry. Future research should include a different or wider variety of emotions and allow participants only one response. This would increase the accuracy of the quantitative results and allow researchers to more precisely understand how students feel during the transition to middle school. It is recommended that a future survey should have fewer open-ended questions because they require strenuous analysis. Alternative formats, such as checkbox or multiple-choice questions, are strongly recommended. In addition, open-ended questions concerning potential art images should be replaced by actual creative exercises. If possible, an online paint program or digital art box is highly recommended for future research.

Art supplies should be used in future studies to strengthen the research results. The tangible use of art supplies more accurately demonstrates their potential therapeutic benefit through students' use of visual expressions (Hinz, 2019). Without the use of therapeutic art supplies, the results of this study have had to rely on linguistic responses alone. Visual imagery would greatly improve the research and advocacy for the field of art therapy by demonstrating

creative responses. The nature of art therapy and its therapeutic process requires hands-on interaction and reflection (Moon, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This mixed methods study investigated the potential therapeutic effects of art supplies used by adolescents transitioning into middle school with the hope to advocate for the field of art therapy. The research also investigated the general mental health of fifth grade students in their educational transition. The survey items were designed to answer the research question, *Can the therapeutic use of art supplies impact potential anxiety/depression in elementary students going to middle school next year?* The results support the hypothesis that the therapeutic use of art supplies helps students who experience anxiety/depression in their transition into middle school. An online survey was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data which supported fifth grade students in their upcoming transition. Survey questions collected emotions-based and arts-based responses which reported the emotions that students experience and the potential influence of art therapy on those emotions. The results revealed that fifth grade students report feeling happy/joyful and/or worried/scared, rather than sad/unhappy or mad/angry, about their transition to middle school. The respondents provided descriptions of those emotions to support mental health and introduce psychoeducation. The results also revealed that the majority of those fifth-grade students think that the use of art supplies can influence emotions. They also reported which art materials they have previously used and which art materials they would use in future creativity. Finally, participants answered art therapy prompts resulting in the introduction and potential use of art therapy in the transition from elementary to middle school. These results contribute to the use of art therapy within the adolescent population. Future research should support other students experiencing difficulties in their education process. The potential

therapeutic use of art supplies is revealed to be beneficial in the expression of emotions among fifth grade students as they transition into middle school.

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## **LIST OF APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Parent Consent Form

Your child is being asked to participate in a research survey about their emotions starting middle school and if think using art supplies can help. Please carefully consider this key information and read this entire page to obtain details about this research study. Please feel free to ask questions about any of the information before deciding whether to participate in this research opportunity. Print or screenshot this survey page if necessary.

#### Key Information

- The purpose of this research is to answer the following questions: What emotions do adolescents have about starting middle school? How do they experience those emotions? What art supplies are they familiar with using? Do they think using art supplies can help them express their emotions?
- Risks and discomfort: Anxiety, depression, or other emotions may arise in adolescents as they experience the jump to middle school. Adolescents may experience heightened sensitivity while they work through the survey questions. Open-ended questions may fatigue the individual if they strain to answer.
- Potential benefit: Open-ended questions may improve communication and emotional responses toward the jump to middle school. This survey may act as an outlet for some participants and increase cognitive responses.
- Participation is completely voluntary, individuals who do not participate in the survey will not be affected in any way.

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this research survey is to measure the potential effects of using art supplies on potential anxiety and depression in elementary students starting middle school. Your child is being asked to participate because they are enrolled in the grade level required for this research study.

Procedures: Complete consent and assent sections in the beginning of the survey. Have your fifth grader complete the questions and submit the survey. Complementary art supplies available upon request.

Risks or Discomforts: The survey questions may heighten anxiety, depression, or other emotional responses in elementary students. This researcher minimizes the risk of these discomforts by allowing participants to leave the survey at any time without completion. If risks or discomforts occur, school faculty members such as the counselor or principal will be readily available.

Potential Benefits: Participation in this survey may improve your child's communication skills, raise their emotional awareness, and increase their emotional regulation. Your child may feel more prepared for their switch to middle school after answering open-ended survey questions. The suggested use of art supplies may develop a long-term hobby or coping skill.

**\* I (parent/guardian) give consent for my child's survey answers to be used in academic research.**

Yes

No

## Appendix B

### Assent Form/Child Consent Form

The jump from 5th to 6th grade can make me feel different emotions. These emotions might include happy, sad, scared, angry, or even other ones. Researchers and school workers think using art supplies can help me express those emotions. I have been chosen to answer some survey questions. I want to participate in this survey to see if using art supplies can help me express emotions about the jump to middle school.

I understand that if I participate in this study:

- I will complete several open-ended questions in an online survey
- I understand that my information may be used by people connected with the study

I decide whether I participate in this study or not, which means it is completely voluntary. If I am in this study, I can stop being in it at any time by telling my parent/guardian and closing the survey. Nobody will be upset with me if I don't want to answer the questions. Nothing will happen to me if I change my mind after I start the questions. The researcher and their helpers are here to guide me. If I have any questions or don't like the survey, I can/will talk to the researcher, my school principal, or my parent/guardian. My parent or guardian knows about the survey and what I will answer. I have had it explained to me and have been given a chance to ask questions. By selecting "yes" I am saying that I know what will happen to me in the study and that I want to answer the survey questions

**\* I (fifth grade student) give permission for my survey answers to be used for research.**

- Yes
- No

## Appendix C

### Research Survey Questions and Answer Choices

1. Think about starting middle school, what emotion(s) do you feel?
  - Happy/Joyful
  - Sad/Unhappy
  - Worried/Scared
  - Mad/Angry
  - Other (please name):
2. Do you think using art supplies can help you express those emotions? Why or why not?
  - Open-ended
3. Which art supplies have you used before?
  - markers
  - crayons
  - colored pencils
  - paints
  - chalks
  - scissors, glue, or tape
  - clay, slime, or kinetic sand
  - construction paper
  - Other (please name):
4. How did using those art supplies make you feel?
  - Happy/Joyful
  - Sad/Unhappy

- Worried/Scared
  - Mad/Angry
  - Other (please name):
5. What does being happy/joyful look like?
- Open-ended
6. What does being sad/unhappy look like?
- Open-ended
7. What does being worried/scared look like?
- Open-ended
8. What does being mad/angry look like?
- Open-ended
9. What do you think 'art therapy' means?
- Open-ended
10. If you made an artwork of 'starting middle school' what would you make?
- Open-ended
11. What art supplies would you use?
- Open-ended
12. What would you title that artwork?
- Open-ended