

# Art-making for teachers: How can art therapy combat teacher burnout?

Christina Hagemeier, Candidate for Masters of Arts in Art Therapy

Art Therapy Program, Columbian College of Arts and Science, The George Washington University

ART THERAPY PROGRAM  
COLUMBIAN COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

## Introduction

Teachers have an extremely high rate of burnout. With class sizes constantly increasing and budget cuts, many teachers are struggling with exhaustion and burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981) originally defined burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. High rates of teacher burnout can lead to high teacher turnover and early retirement rates, as well as, lower levels of behavioral tolerance in the classroom.

Art therapy may be especially helpful in promoting teachers' sense of wellness and expressing the burdens of teaching because art making can help with the following:

- help relieve stress
- foster positive communication
- help people relate to each other in a more affective way
- increase awareness of oneself and others.

Since art making relies on a metaphoric language, art therapy can serve as a creative way to initiate conversations about workplace stress and discussing issues amongst co-workers (Huet and Holtman, 2016).

## Research Objective

This study provided an opportunity to investigate how art therapy based protocols can be used in a school to help combat the effects of teacher burnout, including feelings of isolation and stress and create space for teachers to experience empathy for others teachers with similar feelings.

## Methods

**Research Design** This study is a qualitative, one-time workshop, which allowed for a practical investigation of how art therapy based protocols could decrease burnout.

**Participants** This study was conducted with a group of teachers in a Christian school in the Midwest U.S.

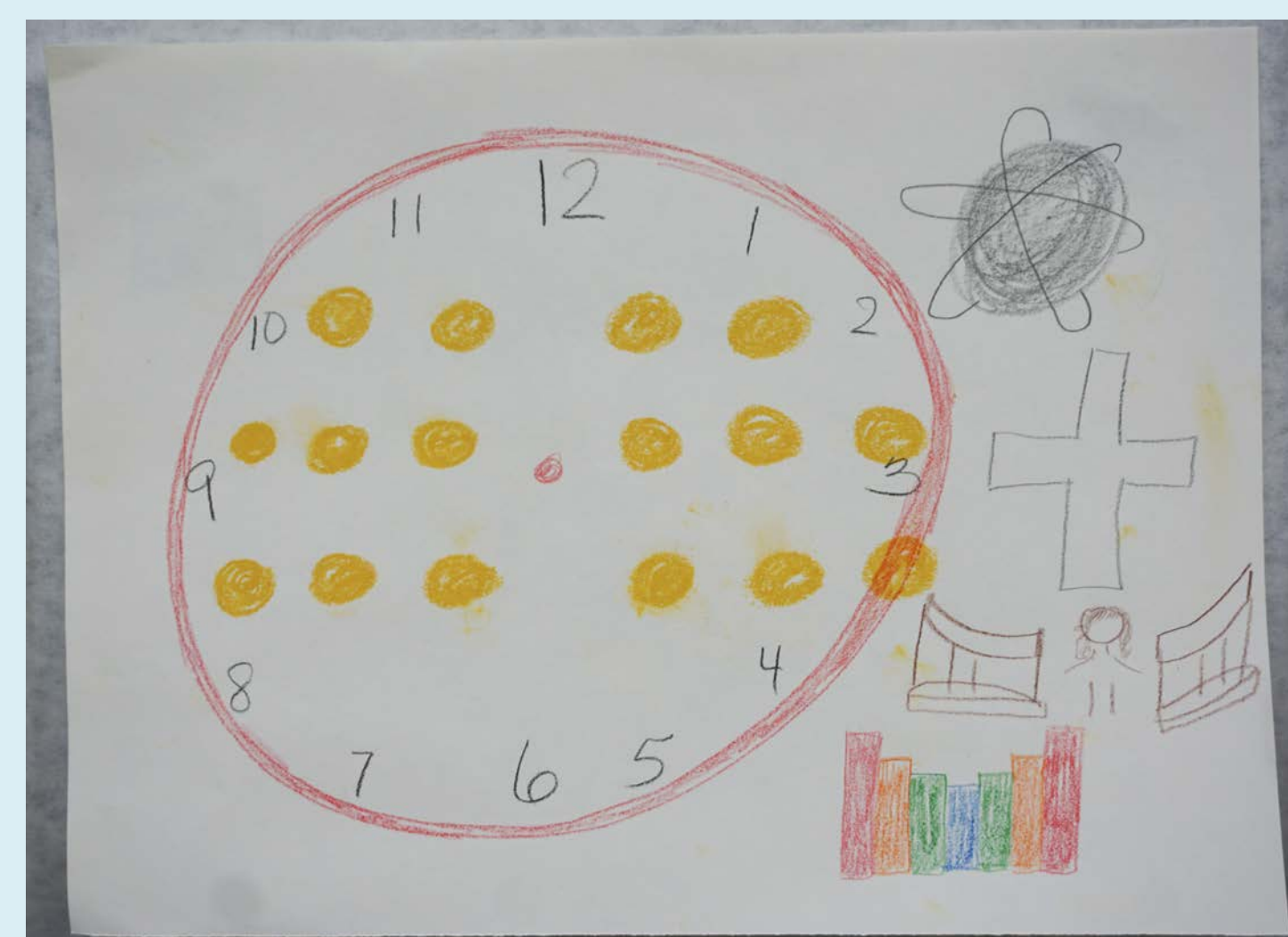
**Procedures** In a one-time workshop, teachers created two pieces of art 1) art about the upcoming school year and 2) response art to another participant's artwork. After the teachers completed the first piece of art, there was ten minutes to view the art silently. Teachers were asked to respond to the piece they felt most compelled by during the viewing. Participants completed a questionnaire about their process for creating each piece of artwork. After creating response art, both pieces of art were hung on the wall with the response pieces displayed beneath the first art piece. The teachers then joined in a discussion about the overall process.

## Findings

Thematic analysis revealed six major themes throughout the original and response artwork: stress, responsibility to educate, empathy, acknowledging differences, relying on God, and support.

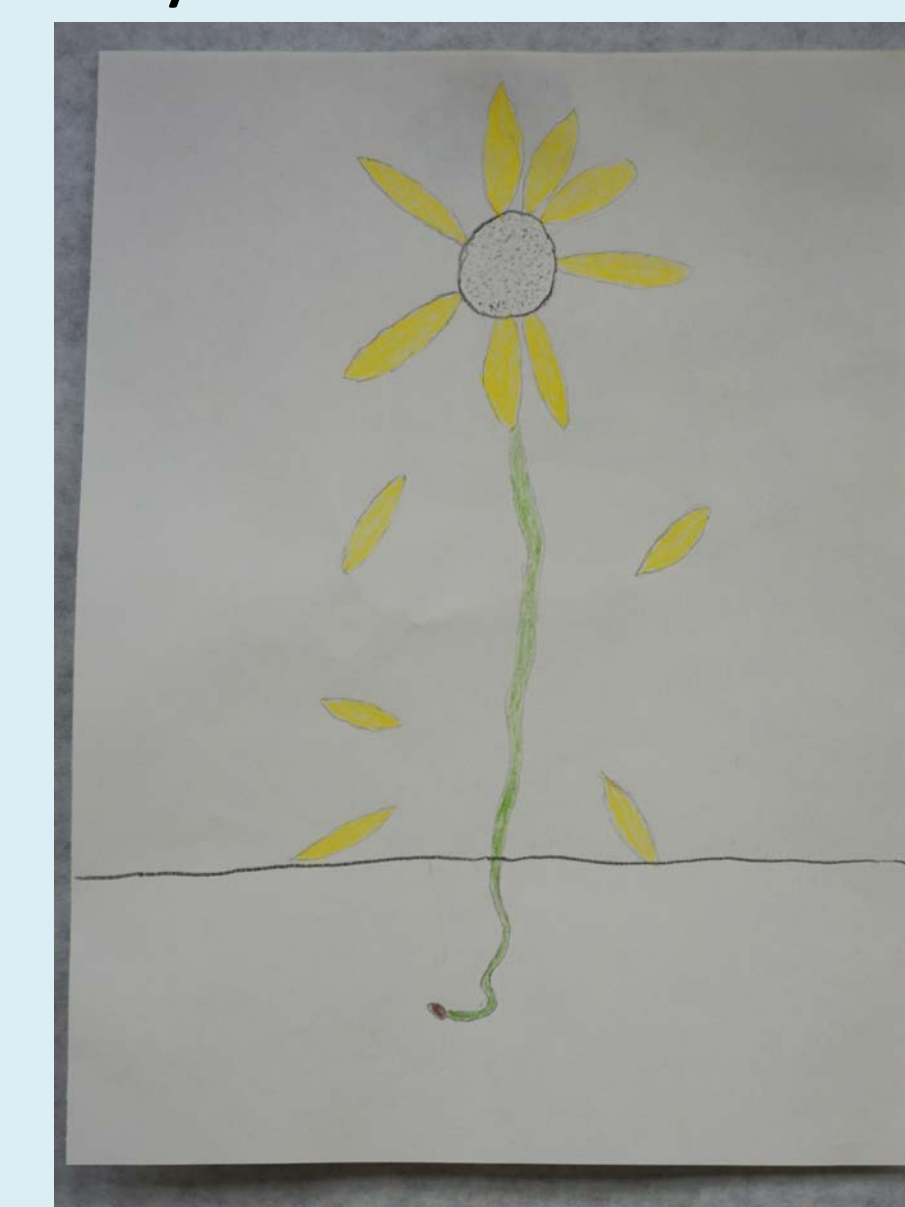
### Themes from Original Art

#### 1) Stress



"It is about juggling everything and finding a balance"

#### 2) Responsibility to Educate



"All of us care about every kid but it in the back of my mind I am always going "I should have done this or I should have done that."

### Themes from Response Art

#### 3) Empathy



In response to Figure 2.

"I think that is a perfect response to that piece . Because the petals are falling in the other one and in this one they are putting them back."

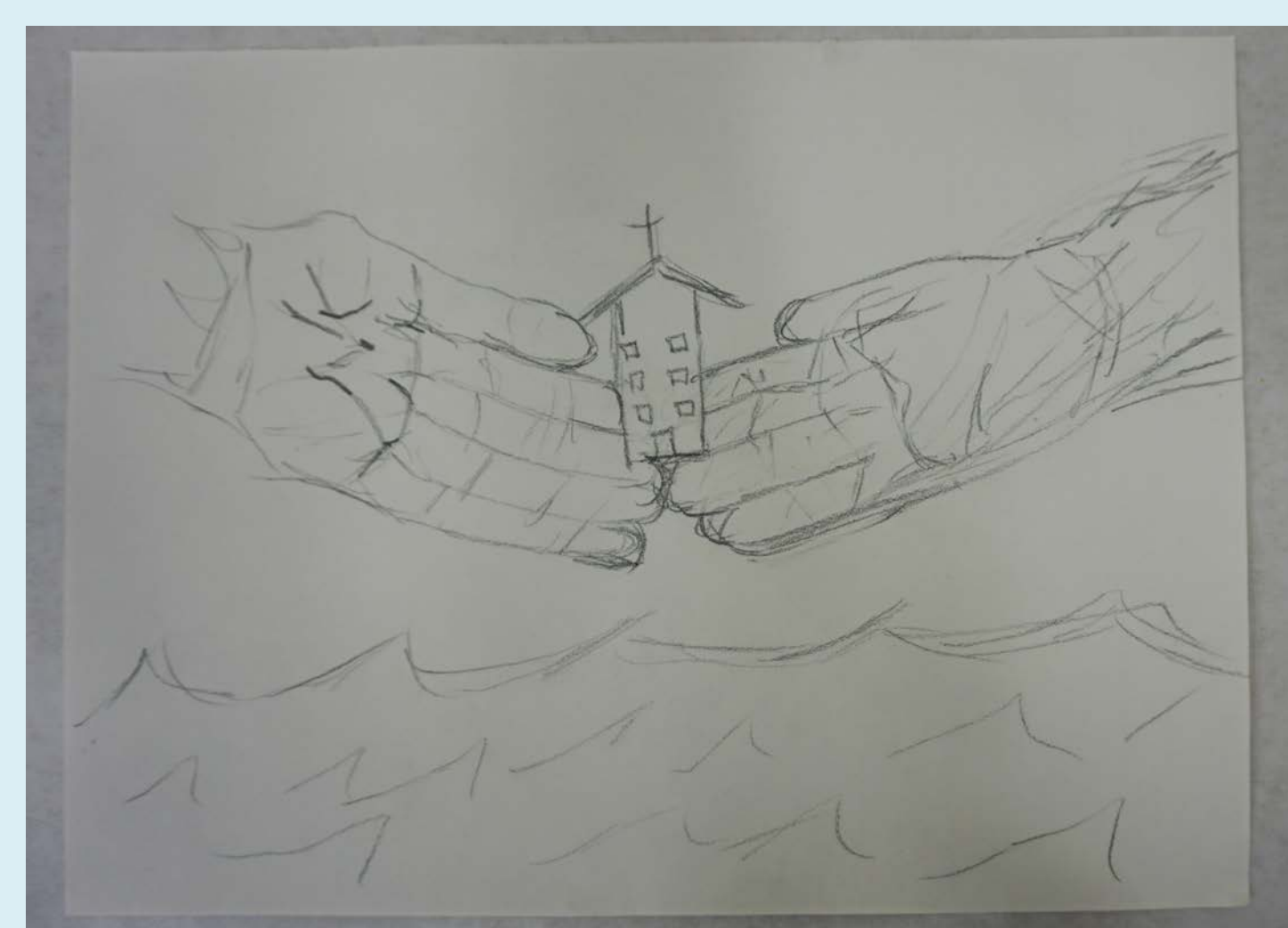
#### 4) Acknowledging differences



In response to Figure 2.

"The [flowers] are blooming in different areas in the back but the ones that are down here are different, they need different things."

#### 5) Relying on God for support



#### 6) Support



"It is not just up to us, there is a whole community here. . . so we are not alone in nurturing all of the different kids."

## Implications

This study has three major findings:

- the art allowed participants to express their concerns in a safe and supportive environment
- the art allowed for participants to portray and empower ideas of resiliency and hope
- the art making served as a way for the participants to connect in a new and empathic way.

In conclusion, the results of this workshop show that art making infused with art therapy protocols can be an effective tool for helping teachers express concerns and receive support as a way to help combat burnout.

## References

- Huet, V. & Holttum, S. (2016). Art therapy-based groups for work-related stress with staff in health and social care: An exploratory study. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 50, 46-58
- Maslach, C. & Jackson, S. (1981). The measurement of experience burnout. *Journal of Occupation Behavior*, 2, 99-113.

## Contact

**Christina Hagemeier**

Candidate for Master's in Art Therapy  
Columbian College of Arts and Sciences

[hagemeier\\_c95@gwu.edu](mailto:hagemeier_c95@gwu.edu)

## What is Art Therapy?

Art therapy is 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.

Art therapy, facilitated by a professional art therapist, effectively supports personal and relational treatment goals as well as community concerns. Art therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensorimotor functions, foster self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change.

Reference: American Art Therapy Association (2013). What is Art Therapy? <https://arttherapy.org/about-art-therapy/>

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, DC