

# brief report

## Circle Justice: A Creative Arts Approach to Conflict Resolution in the Classroom

Karen Gibbons, New York, NY

### Abstract

*This brief report describes a cooperative classroom art therapy intervention in a public elementary school that provided conflict resolution education, social learning, and group cohesion among sixth-grade students. The organizing framework of a "circle justice" group explored the roles of fictional characters in conflict, including group discussion, writing, art-based reflection, and problem solving. Results indicated a culture change in the group that is essential for incorporating conflict resolution in the classroom.*

### Introduction

Children who have been exposed to chronic violence outside of school are particularly at risk for bringing conflict and disruption to their classrooms. Mental health services typically help children integrate their experiences and build effective coping skills. In schools, mental health objectives can sometimes be integrated with the needs and goals of the classroom (Camilleri, 2007). Conflict resolution is one skill that can benefit all students.

This report presents the collaboration between an art therapy team and a sixth-grade teacher at a public elementary school in New York, NY, attended by children living in a nearby public housing development. Camilleri (2007) outlined several of the many challenges faced by children living in inner cities—including racism, poverty, and violence—that may cause them to function poorly in school and be at risk for conflict-prone behavior. The school-based art therapy program described in this report was created from collaborative relationships with administrators, teachers, and students. A classroom group protocol provided the structure and limit setting that are important components for success when working with children experiencing environmental stress in the neighborhood and the classroom (Camilleri, 2007). In

addition to planning activities that support group cohesion, such as role-play and brainstorming, we proposed that allowing students a voice within the group would be effective in developing mastery and creating identity. A conflict resolution lesson that is included in the curriculum, based in the creative arts, and learned experientially is most likely to produce effective outcomes (Hodges, 1995).

### Literature Review

Conflict is inevitable in human relationships. The same elements that affect global conflicts are present in elementary school (Bickmore, 1999). Conflicts are either interpersonal or intergroup and may involve bullying, anger, and violence in response to encounters with the opposing viewpoints, needs, and desires of different people. It is clear from the literature that conflict resolution is an important life skill that is often not acquired without explicit education. Conflict education usually includes understanding the causes of conflict, the role of conflict in relationships, and the inevitable choices that conflict presents. Finally, conflict education should strengthen a person's capacity to create alternative solutions in response to problems. By cooperatively identifying problems and their solutions, children can develop skills to succeed in the classroom and beyond (Hodges, 1995).

Lindt (2006) offered steps to conflict resolution that center on the desire to solve the conflict. Important accessories to that desire are honesty and the ability to imagine a different outcome for the future. Coping strategies are important because without learning to resolve conflict productively, children can be left feeling angry, confused, or depressed (Lindt, 2006). Karahan's (2009) conflict resolution training emphasizes self-expression, the use of "I language," listening skills, and the development of empathy. In the field of peace psychology, conflict management and peace building are now considered to be basic skills for human well-being and survival, given today's pervasive threats to security and violation of human rights (Christie, Tint, Wagner, & Winter, 2008).

The need for conflict resolution education is apparent in the amount of time teachers spend on disciplinary issues

---

**Editor's Note:** Karen Gibbons, MFA, MPS, ATR-BC, LCAT, is an art therapist for the Counseling in Schools National Network in New York City and private practice in Brooklyn NY. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to the author at [k.gibbons@earthlink.net](mailto:k.gibbons@earthlink.net)

in the classroom (Mayorga & Oliver, 2006). Stressful school settings often demand that students cope by suppressing anger and other emotions, which paradoxically can lead to violence. Violence and other stress-induced responses can negatively impact academic success. Brinson, Kottler, and Fisher (2004) found a correlation between poor conflict resolution skills and an increase in school violence. A number of programs have been developed with these findings in mind, such as Project REAL (Relationship, Education, Academics, and Leadership) and Project WIN (Working out Integrated Negotiations). Emphasizing stress management and effective communication, Project REAL uses art therapy and other modalities with middle school students who have been exposed to domestic violence (Foreman, 1994). Project WIN organizers reduced violence in a middle school attended by students from low-income families by teaching students to transform competitive behaviors into cooperative ones. Their results showed a decrease in teacher time spent dealing with disciplinary issues (Ferro-Almeida, Roberts, & Yeomans, 2007). Peer mediation methods for conflict resolution may reduce school suspensions and are considered important by mediators and participants alike (Cantrell-Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, & Rehffuss, 2007).

Despite these positive findings, many schools do not have resources for conflict resolution. The Association for Conflict Resolution concluded that integrating conflict resolution into the curriculum is the most effective strategy for infusing the concepts, skills, and values necessary to improve the quality of classroom culture (Compton, 1995). Prosocial behavior learned in the classroom, including skills for conflict resolution, affects school culture both in and out of the classroom. The Association for Conflict Resolution advocates linking conflict resolution education and the curriculum by (a) combining learning experiences for conflict resolution with academic subjects such as language arts, social studies, or health; and (b) modeling conflict resolution techniques throughout the school day through such strategies such as collaborative problem solving and active listening.

An interdisciplinary approach toward developing social skills in an educational environment also can be facilitated through literature. Bibliotherapy is useful in a classroom setting to safely illuminate and alleviate stressful situations that affect children's lives (Jackson, 2006). Literature can foster emotional growth and healing because stories contain memorable protagonists, engaging plots, and powerful thematic material. These elements can become catalysts for change, modeling fresh options for thought and feeling (Heath, Leavy, Money, Sheen, & Young, 2005).

In a school-wide anti-bullying program in an Illinois middle school, fictional characters and plots were related to actual events. Program leaders found that literature provided distance for students to understand the emotional impact of bullying and to seek alternatives (Hillsberg & Spak, 2006). Literature also lends itself to therapeutic role-playing. By acting out roles drawn from examples in literature, students take on another's perspective for reflection. The distance provided by the role frees the

student to empathize with another's thoughts and intentions. Drama therapy also helps children gain impulse control and a better understanding of the impact their actions have on others (Malchiodi, 2008).

Art therapy has been used in conflict resolution education (Wadeson & Wirtz, 2005). According to Bush (1997), students who are supported through art therapy interventions often have better understandings of their challenges and greater ability to resolve problems. Art therapists can develop methods of instruction and intervention that may not be feasible with traditional education models. Because art therapists are generally adjunct therapists in a school setting, they are freer to create interdisciplinary support than primary counselors who may need to provide mandated counseling and other school-related duties as their priority. Addressing conflict resolution through art-based interventions for the entire classroom helps to create an atmosphere of mutual respect, empathy, and security. These components are viewed as necessary for a curriculum to function therapeutically (Henley, 1997).

## Method

I approached the classroom teacher to propose an art-based group focused on conflict resolution that would be integrated into the language arts curriculum. The teacher, Mr. James (pseudonym), anticipated difficulty with his sixth-grade class because they had never before functioned well as a group. He felt that he was spending too much time trying to regain order and attempting to resolve disputes. Students were often distracted and easily incited to anger. Mr. James said that although he struggled to create and maintain order the students resisted working together and frequent conflicts thwarted the learning process. I began to design a group to address the difficulties these children had in respecting one another and working cooperatively. The principal was supportive of these efforts, particularly because the school counselors were unable to provide classroom interventions because their job duties required them to be elsewhere.

A full-class "push-in" group was proposed. To "push-in" means that the intervention is brought into the classroom rather than "pulling out" certain individuals from their classes as one might do for individual or small group learning. The teacher enthusiastically supported the idea and agreed to begin a literacy unit using the book *Touching Spirit Bear* by Mikaelson (2001). I recommended this wonderful age appropriate work of realistic fiction because of its application to conflict resolution and arts-based intervention. The students began reading the book and a weekly push-in group was scheduled.

The group became known as "Circle Justice" based on concepts introduced in Mikaelson's (2001) book. *Touching Spirit Bear* is a story of an adolescent boy who is repeating familial patterns of violence. At age 15, he has a history of fighting, stealing, and irresponsibility. After seriously injuring a classmate in a fight, the boy is offered an alternative to incarceration through a Native American process of settling disputes called circle justice. The practice of circle justice brings together a group of people

from the community that cares about the person and has a vested interest in the outcome of the dispute. The purpose is to heal rather than to punish. In circle justice one needs to “forgive to get over anger. . . . Healing requires taking responsibility for your actions” (Mikaelsen, 2001, p. 12). In the course of his journey, the boy expresses his newfound insights by carving a totem pole. He gradually learns the values that allow him to forgive his parents as he befriends and makes amends to the boy he had callously injured in the heat of anger. The possibility of reform and real change come from experientially learning the effects his behavior has on the entire circle of people in his life.

A structured 8-week program was designed in which two art therapists came into the classroom to facilitate a group for one class period each week. I invented a scenario that paralleled the story in the book and included elements from the students’ current circumstances. The backstory was set in a sixth-grade classroom similar to their own:

The boy, “Sam” was 12 years old. He was good at sports, poor in school, and a joker. Sam lived with his mother and grandmother. From preschool on, Sam was friends with a girl, “Kathy,” who was a good student and an avid cheerleader. Kathy had been working on an art portfolio for admission to a special middle school. Sam became angry because his mother always compared him unfavorably to Kathy. He was so jealous that when no one was looking, he threw water on Kathy’s art project. When Kathy came in and saw her ruined work, she ran over to it and slipped on the water. In the fall, she broke both an arm and a leg. Sam was immediately accused of causing the fall even though no one witnessed the water spill. He denied having done it and was initially pleased that Kathy and he were now in the same circumstance, destined to go to any middle school that would accept them.

After telling the story, I asked the students to form a circle of community, as in *Touching Spirit Bear*, to decide how to deal with the fictional situation. There were 18 students in the class. To form the community, I created 10 specific roles, each embodied by a different character. In order to ensure that each student had equal opportunity to participate in various ways, roles were selected at random each week. A pendant was made for each of the characters with its name on the front and a description of its role on the back (Figure 1). At the start of the weekly session, each student chose a pendant to wear so that everyone could identify the characters and roles for that day. Students who selected an observer role were asked to be reporters using worksheets with the words “I noticed that . . .” printed at the top, to record their observations. Adults always took the character roles of Sam (teacher) and Kathy (coleader) in order to allow consistency and development of the narrative. I was the “circle keeper” who facilitated opportunities for restating, refocusing, making parallels, modeling, and emphasizing strengths (Camilleri, 2007).

Each week followed a fixed format. A ritual was created where the students touched hands and observed a moment of silence to open the circle. The main obligations of the circle were honesty and respect. Agreements were discussed in relation to the book; for example, “talking too long tells

others that you don’t respect their right to speak” (Mikaelsen, 2001, p. 38). Participants spoke only when they were passed a feather (Figure 1), a structure that provided an important sense of safety when confronting potent ideas. Holding the feather signified who had the floor, either to answer the question posed to the group or to pass. Each response had to come from the point of view of the role that the student had selected. Roles included Sam’s mother, Kathy’s mother, the school principal, the vice principal, and four students with different backgrounds (two boys and two girls). The structure allowed for a new concept to be introduced each week: formation of agreements (Week 1), community (Week 2), friendship (Week 3), trust (Week 4), balance (Week 5), communication (Week 6), self-identity (Week 7), and integration (Week 8).

After about 20 minutes the circle closed in the same manner it began. The next portion of the group session was devoted to making art based on the theme of that week’s discussion. All art was created in the form of a mandala or circle, which provided containment in the same way as did the physical circle for the role-play. Each session ended with a brief period for observers to relate their observations and for group members to offer comments about their experience.

The mandalas were collected each week. During the art-making portion of the final session the students formed their circles into a “totem pole” that stacked the mandalas from bottom to top, beginning with community and ending with self-identity. These became expressions of self, similar in spirit to the totem pole carved by the character in the book. It was important for the students to see the culmination of their work over several months as a tangible record of their circle justice journey.

## Circle Justice Group Process and Results

*Week 1: Forming Agreements.* Students benefited from ritual and role-play from the start. Because the group members were young adolescents, I saw their resistant and defensive behaviors as developmentally typical. At the same time, they were hungry for role models and were grappling with the implications of gender-defined roles. The Circle Justice group answered these developmental needs through a structure that focused on strengths and offered projective identities while giving the students a measure of control (Riley, 2001). The first week all the students agreed to use circle justice and to play the necessary roles to help heal the conflict between “Sam” and “Kathy.” The group created agreements and reviewed them each subsequent week. Introduced to the mandala format, students colored the same designs in their own way (Figure 2). Beginning with premade designs helped the children to see that there are differences even in conformity.

*Week 2: Community.* Anxiety was evident in comments spoken aloud and in the students’ written observations, such as “I noticed that some students didn’t take their roles seriously” and “some people were laughing.” Although each session had some outbursts and

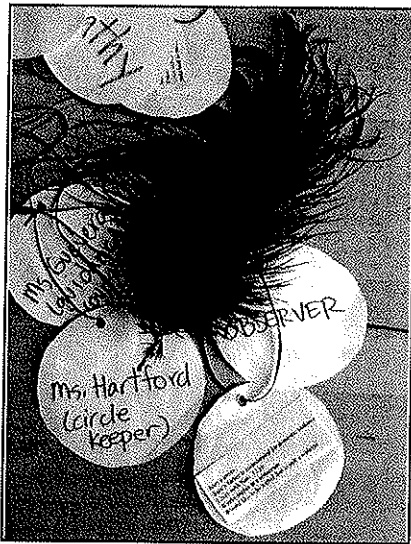


Figure 1

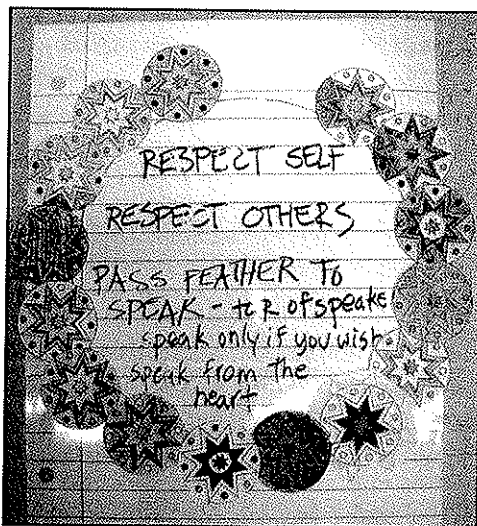


Figure 2

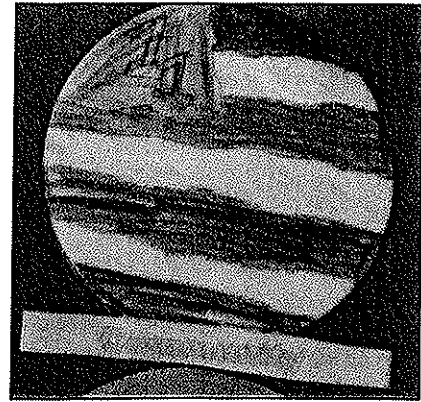


Figure 3

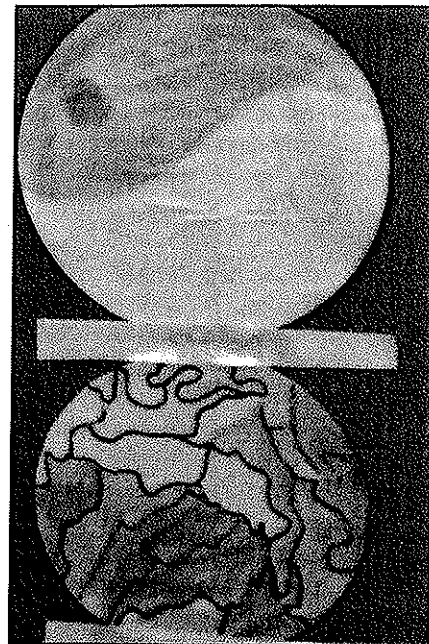


Figure 4

other indicators of anxiety, the holding quality of the circle and the ritual visibly calmed the group. When silence fell, the majority of the students remained in character and took Sam and Kathy's situation quite seriously. "I think Sam needs more attention from home" and "Sam needs help" were observations from the second week. Remaining in the role freed the students to understand the complexity of the conflict (Bickmore, 1999). A focus on the concept of community was a safe way to begin expressing themselves in the artwork as well (Figure 3). The group members at this point were very aware of what other students were doing and tended to use similar motifs.

*Week 3: Friendship.* As time went on the students made connections between Sam and Kathy and the characters from *Touching Spirit Bear* (Mikaelsen, 2001). They also began to empathize with their own Circle Justice characters, such as "Sam realized he didn't want to hurt anybody" and "Kathy must feel alone." The opportunity to write, comment on, and create their own artistic

expressions gave the students a sense of control. One student wrote, "I noticed that everyone was focused and really cared."

*Week 4: Trust.* Students used symbolic or pictorial space to express the concepts discussed each week. The teacher commented on the power of the mandalas to bring a sense of calm to the room. Having stable, consistent roles for Kathy, Sam, and the circle keeper provided an ongoing opportunity for identifying with role models. Trying on different roles or being an observer allowed students to think for themselves about the steps involved in resolving conflict (Cloke, 2007). Students took on different points of view and learned cooperative strategies for problem solving in the process. By Week 4, many students were making connections and using creative thinking. Students' artwork that had defensive symbols now took on more personal meaning (Figure 4). The students wrote that they noticed that "trust can be regained" and "trusting means that you could depend on" others.

*Week 5: Balance.* By Week 5 students were tracking feelings and offering suggestions in response to the story's narrative. They began to identify needs for themselves and they were no longer making comments suggesting punitive treatment for Sam. The group was now working more as a whole and began to agree on suggestions that were more constructive. Earlier the children said, "Sam should feel Kathy's pain." At this point it was suggested that Sam could spend his free time working for Kathy or could help other people in need.

*Week 6: Communication.* The students began to understand the importance of listening as well as speaking. By Week 6 they knew how to communicate their feelings about the day's discussion in their art making. They were listening to Kathy's point of view as well as Sam's. The person in the role of Sam (who, to be consistent, was always the teacher) said that he needed to be active so it was suggested he teach ball games to children confined to wheelchairs in an after school program. They also listened and responded to the person in the role of Kathy (who was always the coleader) when she said she was "still sad" because she needed to re-do her art portfolio that Sam had ruined.

*Week 7: Self-Identity.* The conflict was resolved this week when it was decided that Sam should continue to help out in the after school program for children with special needs and help Kathy recreate her portfolio. Kathy was to reciprocate by helping Sam apply for the middle school he wanted to attend. With the help of the circle, Kathy and Sam were ready to be friends again. Throughout the process some students related to Kathy and Sam as strongly as they would in their own classroom interactions. This tendency was clear when the "I noticed . . ." observation pages made references with equal passion to characters in the circle as to real-life classmates and their concerns. The merging of the book, the story portrayed through role-play, and the students' real-life dramas was a phenomenon that seemed to indicate assimilation of the material being learned. When the directive asked the students to use their mandalas to portray self-identity, the result was congruent with the manner of thinking encouraged in the circle. Students thought of themselves in relation to the story about Kathy and Sam. In the course of the Circle Justice group, the process of looking at all sides of a problem encouraged self-exploration and strengthened the participants' abilities to develop their own egos (Henley, 1997).

*Week 8: Integration.* Excitement and understanding were palpable in the classroom during the final week of the Circle Justice group. The art therapy intervention had provided positive modeling, a matrix of concepts, student-centered strategies, and visual reinforcement throughout the 8-week program. A new quality of connectivity in the classroom was a strong indication of the culture change described as essential by those who advocate for incorporating conflict resolution into classroom curriculum (Bickmore, 1999).

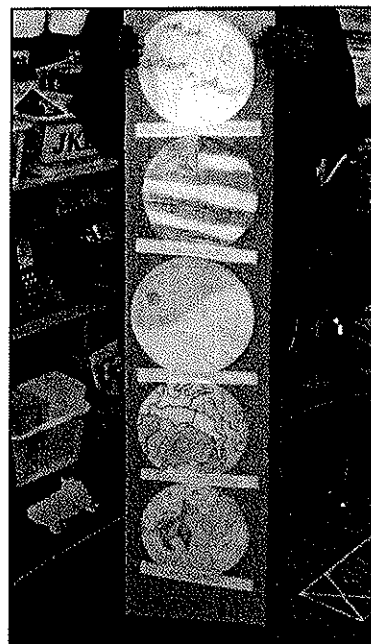


Figure 5

## Conclusion

We depend on schools to foster leadership and to produce responsible citizens. Students with stressful lives and inconsistent role modeling at home are particularly at risk for conflict prone behavior (Camilleri, 2007). Creativity is crucial to developing positive coping skills for these students because it empowers the individual, promotes new ways of thinking, bridges different learning styles, and heals the effects of cultural trauma (Bruce, 2001). The goal of the Circle Justice group was to offer a creative arts approach to conflict resolution that could be incorporated with classroom learning. In the process students gained an understanding of different points of view while strengthening their own unique responses. The evolution of their thinking and individuality was supported throughout by art making. The teacher and students alike arrived at a new appreciation of the rich range of their own personal expressions as well as a sense of bonding through common motifs. A classroom display of their totemic mandala arrangements (Figure 5) provided visual representation of their collective journey. The students' expanded knowledge of trust, forgiveness, and positive consequences continue to be reinforced in their ongoing study of *Touching Spirit Bear* (Mikaelsen, 2001). The participation and commitment of the classroom teacher has helped to support containment and strong group formation.

The entire conception and execution of this group intervention was dependent on the relationship made possible by a school-based art therapy program. Competence in conflict resolution is crucially important for the future of students everywhere as they become the citizens of tomorrow. Combining creative arts modalities with the school curriculum is an important consideration

for school-based art therapy practice. It is my hope that this successful group may point the way for future creative arts interventions related to conflict resolution in schools.

## References

- Bickmore, K. (1999). Elementary curriculum about conflict resolution: Can children handle global politics? *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 27(1), 45–69.
- Brinson, J., Kottler, J., & Fisher, T. (2004). Cross-cultural conflict resolution in the schools: Some practical intervention strategies for counselors. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 82(3), 294–301.
- Bruce, J. (2001). *Crisis and creativity in developing communities*. Retrieved from <http://www.arts-for-life.org/page11.html>
- Bush, J. (1997). The development of school art therapy in Dade county public schools: Implications for future change. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 14(1), 9–14.
- Camilleri, V. (Ed.). (2007). *Healing the inner city child: Creative arts therapies with at-risk youth*. London, England: Jessica Kingsley.
- Cantrell-Schellenberg, R., Parks-Savage, A., & Reh fuss, M. (2007). Reducing levels of elementary school violence. *Professional School Counseling*, 10(5), 475–481.
- Christie, D., Tint, B., Wagner, D., & Winter, D. (2008). Peace psychology for a peaceful world. *American Psychologist*, 63(6), 540–552.
- Cloke, K. (2007, March). Removing masks in mediation. *Association for Conflict Resolution of Greater New York Newsletter*. Retrieved from <http://www.acrgny.org/newsletter.cfm>
- Compton, R. (1995). Discovering the promise of curriculum integration: The national curriculum integration project. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 19(4), 447–464.
- Ferro-Almeida, S., Roberts, L., & Yeomans, P. (2007). Project WIN evaluation shows decreased violence and improved conflict resolution skills for middle school students. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 30(8), 1–14.
- Foreman, D. (1994). *Increasing the academic achievement of middle school children exposed to domestic violence through interpersonal-cognitive group counseling and parenting education (Project REAL)*. (Ed.D. Practicum report, Nova Southeastern University). Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED373865)
- Heath, M., Leavy, D., Money, K., Sheen, D., & Young, E. (2005). Bibliotherapy: A resource to facilitate emotional healing and growth. *Journal of School Psychology International*, 26(5), 563–580.
- Henley, D. (1997). Expressive arts therapy as alternative education: Devising a therapeutic curriculum. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 14(1), 15–22.
- Hillsberg, C., & Spak, H. (2006). Young adult literature as the centerpiece of an anti-bullying program in middle school. *Middle School Journal*, 38(2), 23–28.
- Hodges, J. (1995). *Conflict resolution for the young child*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED394624).
- Jackson, M. (2006). *Bibliotherapy revisited: Issues in classroom management; developing teachers' awareness and techniques to help children cope with stressful situations*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED 501535)
- Karahan, T. (2009). The effects of a communication and conflict resolution skills training program on sociotropy levels of university students. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 9(2), 787–797.
- Lindt, S. (2006). Six steps to conflict resolution. *National Middle School Association: Middle Ground*, 9(4), 33.
- Malchiodi, C. (Ed.). (2008). *Creative interventions with traumatized children*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Mayorga, M., & Oliver, M. (2006). Conflict resolution education: Component of peer programs. *Perspectives in Peer Programs*, 20(2), 32–39.
- Mikaelsen, B. (2001). *Touching spirit bear*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Riley, S. (2001). *Group process made visible*. Philadelphia, PA: Brunner-Routledge.
- Wadson, H., & Wirtz, G. (2005). The hockey/art alliance. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 22(3), 155–160.