Using Art Therapy to Empower Young Kenyan Girls

By

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Abstract

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Stephanie Spisak

Maasai girls in Kenya are sent to boarding schools to escape unfair expectations, female circumcision and early marriage, or are rescued from broken homes and early traumatic experiences due to extreme abuse, poverty, or neglect. They have often lost parents to HIV/AIDS, addictions, or abandonment.

Once at school, their self-worth and esteem barely exist. They carry great shame and intense worry being separated from their families, have immense self-doubt concerning a positive future, carry fear from their sex in a gender-biased society, and feel lost having no sense of belonging. They steal from and mistreat each other, their teachers are strict and demeaning, and they come from backgrounds not safe enough to call home.

Through individual art therapy sessions, these girls were given a voice and opportunity to be appreciated, accepted, and nurtured. They were able to ventilate their feelings in a safe and age-appropriate way, cope with stress, and develop a positive self-image. Their art empowered them to be able to forgive their pasts, cherish the present, and strive to create meaningful futures.
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Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

A necessary component for the survival of the people living in developing countries like Kenya is providing education, specifically for women. The positive consequences of educating the country’s women include promoting the health and nutritional status of all family members, lengthening life expectancy, lowering fertility rates, delaying child bearing, and lowering infant mortality (Mungai, 2002).

For cultures like the Maasai, the obligations to family and tradition can make this notion quite challenging. This tribal group occupies most of the country of Kenya and is known for its nomadic pastoral lifestyle and “warrior-like” traits. Men feel superior to females as it is the woman’s role to sustain the temporary homes and look after the children. Poverty, child labor, early marriage, female circumcision, teenage pregnancies, and favoring boys are obstacles common for a Maasai girl to endure as she grows up (Eliezer, 1997).

Therefore, young girls living in Kenya, being mostly from the Maasai tribe, have little opportunity to receive an education or create a life of their own. They are not encouraged to seek an education because their culture expects their future roles to be as mothers and wives. Often a family has daughters as young as
eight years old circumcised as a rite of passage into womanhood and preparation for marriage. A female is supposed to learn at an early age what it means to be a “good” woman, defined as being hard-working in the home and on the farm, fetching water, cooking well, and bearing children (Mungai, 2002).

At a young age, girls are pressured to drop out of school to become housewives to men commonly over 40 years old, leaving little possibility for employment or future plans outside the home. Once married, they will not be allowed to return to school and their lives will become filled with managing a household and starting a family—just as their mothers and female ancestors have done. Research indicates household chores for these women average 20 or more hours a day, whereas the men herd cattle for 6 hours or less (Potocnik, 2006).

In Africa, forty percent of the children are not enrolled in primary school (Potocnik, 2006). Only 63% of school-aged girls in Kenya enroll each year, and only 34% of Kenyan girls complete the eighth grade, compared to 70% of male students. Due to farming activities, childcare, and housework, rural girls especially lack the opportunity to receive an education. As a boy studies, often with his father, a girl works in the kitchen to make dinner, wash dishes, and provide hot water for bathing (Kanika, 1997).

Additional barriers include the cost of schooling, pregnancy and sexual harassment, traditional beliefs, the domestic labor market, the school’s distance from home, classroom culture, and dropping out (Mungai, 2002). Girls are
sexually assaulted by their teachers and are at risk of being raped during their trips to and from school. If a boy is sent home due to a lack of uniform or books, efforts are often made to obtain whatever is needed. If a girl is sent home for the same reason, she is often found someone to marry (Eliezer, 1997).

Because of societal and familial pressures around gender discrimination, female circumcision, early marriage, and sexual exploitation, girls often need guidance and counseling at their schools. They are taught by family and society to fit a “role” during their childhood rather than discover who they are as unique individuals. However, it is often a struggle to have enough teachers to provide for their education, and the opportunity to provide for needs other than teaching is rare. At times teachers are requested to offer counseling if they are able, yet this is not seen as ideal or preferred (Muniu, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover how art therapy can be used with young Kenyan girls at the A.I.C. Girls’ Primary Boarding School in Kajaido, Kenya, to empower them and raise their self-esteem. These girls have escaped or been rescued by others and brought to the school. The school provides education, social services, and housing in dormitories for the girls.

It is hoped that individual therapy sessions using art interventions at the school will give them a voice, offer encouragement, help them cope with stress,
and elevate their self-image. This may motivate them to actively pursue their own goals and create a meaningful future.

Research Questions

This study aimed to discover what specific art therapy interventions and techniques would have the greatest impact on empowering the girls and offering them encouragement. The art tasks, materials, and media that received the greatest interaction and response are presented later in this report.

Additional questions that this study attempts to answer throughout the research include:

1) How does one from a vastly different culture implement art therapy and impact the self-concept and formation of this population who is unaware of the researcher and art therapy’s existence?

2) Will the girls be willing and able to engage despite to the time limitation and cultural differences? Will their present and past circumstances have an affect?

3) Will the girls hold back their authenticity and life circumstances if the researcher is not able to present herself as approachable and trustworthy?

Definition of Terms

Art therapy is a therapeutic approach that incorporates art interventions and nonverbal communication alongside verbal responses in order to provide a form of healing or treatment to fit the needs of individuals. It encourages both
inward and outward self-expression by allowing individuals to play an active role in the therapeutic process. An emphasis on personal creativity, symbolism, and degree of communication is essential to create an atmosphere of safety and trust. The media and approaches used may be adapted and reformed to best accommodate individuals at any time throughout therapy.

*Gender mutilation* and *female circumcision* are terms addressing the same procedure. In this study, female circumcision will be used to address this initiation practice into womanhood and consent for marriage. Although there are different types of circumcision based on the amount of genitalia removed and injury to the organs that vary according to family and cultural customs, this phrase will include all types of female circumcision for this study (World, 2000).

The *Maasai* tribe is a nomadic tribe that inhabits the Eastern coast of Africa, mainly Tanzania and Kenya. Individuals of this tribe have a reputation for being fierce and proud warriors and prefer to stay out of mainstream development in Kenya. They have had much of their land taken by the British beginning in the 1960’s with the Maasai Mara National Reserve, and many true members still scorn cultures that address agriculture and land ownership for survival (Webb, 2006).

Maasai women are famous for their plate-like bead necklaces which they bob during ceremonial dancing. Traditionally they wear shawls of blue on top of white and red underneath, but can be seen now wearing a mixture of colors in any
The men can typically be found wearing a blanket, or *shuka* most commonly red, the Maasai color, and carrying a wooden walking stick (Webb, 2006).

Once married, the man of the family builds a small livestock camp known as a *manyatta* and lives in the biggest house, sometimes made of cement or stone with a tin roof and having multiple rooms. His wives and children live in little mud houses surrounding the man’s house. The mud houses are typically only three feet high and about the same in diameter, enough room to store firewood for their light and heat, and animal skins fastened to wooden poles to serve as beds. Blood and milk are the mainstay of the Maasai diet, explaining their dependency on the livestock they produce (Nangurai, 2007).

*Primary education* is the first phase of formal education with a curriculum that spans eight years, beginning approximately at the age of six and catering to those wishing to go to secondary schools or vocational training schools. However, financial and family circumstances often cause the onset of schooling to be delayed. The important aims of primary education are to provide literacy, numeracy, and manipulative skills. The last two years have a more practical approach, providing the children with the necessary resources to modernize rural life (Mungai, 2002).

Students are required to pass the *National Terminal Examination* in order to continue their education. This examination tests history/civics/
geography/religious education, Kiswahili, science and agriculture, English, art/craft/music/home science, business education, and mathematics. If successful, students are awarded the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) (as cited in Ministry of Education, 1994).

**Secondary education** is available for students who have passed the national examination, begins at the age of 14 and typically spans four years. A greater emphasis is placed on job-oriented courses. Schools can be privately managed and established by individuals or organizations or administered by the government (Mungai, 2002).

**Delimitations and Limitations**

The time span of this study is limited to three weeks, the researcher’s length of stay in Kenya. It is important to note that this is a rather short duration to perform a thorough detailed study, and this explains why the study is predominantly reliant on observational measures. Therefore, the results will be considered “suggestive,” due to an assumption that it takes longer than the time allowed to identify a tangible change in self-esteem or empowerment without administering follow-up measures.

The researcher is from an extremely different culture and country than Kenya. Language, race, ethnicity, and cultural, familial, and socio-economical background are drastically distinct from Africa. These issues of difference were examined when appropriate, prior to and throughout the research, in order for data
to be as unbiased and non-judgmental as possible. The use of photography was even limited at times, due to skepticism of the Kenyans regarding outsiders selling the photographs to make money. Appearance was an immediate indicator of difference, followed by language and stereotyped assumptions. Language was not as great a problem as perceived, due to the students’ requirement to learn English in their classes in order to get a better job after school. Therefore, language seemed only to have a slight disadvantageous effect to therapy in sessions with younger girls. Despite these cultural differences and time limitations however, the goals for this specific study were still able to be successfully fulfilled.
Chapter II

Procedures

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

The characteristics that define this study represent qualitative research. This research approach often occurs in a natural setting, so this study is located in the environment where the girls live, the boarding school. The study will be carried out by going to their location instead of having them come to a therapeutic facility. This will allow the researcher to be more involved in the actual experience of the girls being studied.

Qualitative research is an emerging process. The research evolves as the study progresses instead of being prefigured or hypothesized. The research questions may change or be refined throughout the study, rather than being defined prior to its beginning. The majority of data collection involves open-ended observation, which examines elements such as the quantity and characteristics of participation and the students’ reactions toward the art and the therapist in the sessions. The data will be analyzed through interpretation and subjective viewing, not through experimental design. Data collected includes not only verbal and textual material, but visual, auditory, and artistic material as well. Generally, a pattern of understanding develops into broad topics or may become a general theory or interpretation by the end of the study.
Qualitative Research Strategy

This qualitative study will utilize a phenomenological approach, designed to develop patterns and relationships of meaning from human experiences. The subjects’ responses toward art therapy will be explored, specifically identifying perceived changes in view of self, ability to communicate difficult memories and feelings, and desire to succeed. Through engagement and direct contact in therapy sessions, relationships and themes will likely emerge into meaningful conclusions by the end of the study. Patterns that seem to evolve will receive heightened awareness throughout the study to see how they affect the focus of the research. Personal reactions and the background of the researcher will be distanced as much as possible in order to keep the focus on the realities of the participants. However, personal reflections made outside of sessions that may be important to the research will be included.

Role of the Researcher

The amount of interaction the girls have had with Americans and Western culture was explored to anticipate how they would respond to someone from this vastly different cultural background. It was found that they are visited throughout the school year by volunteers from international non-profit organizations, counselors, and other professionals who speak to them about such issues as the HIV/AIDS virus and teen pregnancy or volunteer in the classrooms. Many of the
boarding schools in Kenya today have adapted Western approaches and teaching methods and also require English language studies.

The educational, religious, and social dynamics of the girls were investigated prior to the study in order to be prepared as much as possible. Their native language is Kiswahili, known as Swahili in Western cultures. Familiarity with the girls’ native language would likely benefit interaction and communication with them, even though English would be used primarily in the therapy sessions. In this way, the therapist might show the girls her interest to learn and embrace their culture instead of forcing them to accept Western traditions and beliefs.

Establishing a good rapport and credibility with the participants, without causing any disturbance to their current living situation, was essential to this study. It was important to be mindful not to influence the girls to change their views or beliefs, but rather to support and validate the values they already had or desired. At the initial session with every girl, confidentiality and respect were the first topics addressed, accompanied by an explanation and filling out of the informed consent form. It was mandatory that they understood the serious dedication of the researcher to the art therapy process as well as their rights as participants.

Giving them the time and opportunity to express whatever they desired was also crucial. Doing this in a supportive, non-judgmental, and caring way
proved to be very valuable. It became almost immediately evident that most of these girls have never had an opportunity to tell their stories, be a child, or receive one-on-one attention. Providing a space for this unfolding to occur became a significant aspect of this study.

Guiding the art process was also an important part of the researcher’s responsibilities. Some of the girls had never painted before or had the opportunity to use color when creating. Demonstrations of how to use some of the media available, including the creation of beadwork and dolls, were also required of the therapist.

Data Collection Procedures

Setting. Kajaido, Kenya exists in a wide, flat region of sub-Saharan Africa with blue skies and dry land. It is primarily inhabited by the Maasai tribe, a culture that has kept most of its warrior-like customs and nomadic ways intact. Even though environmental and economic concerns have caused many Maasai families to adjust their lifestyle and accept staying in one area for longer periods at a time, they still dress in their traditional attire and act according to their traditional upbringing.

A girls’ primary boarding school was selected as the institution for this study. It serves as a “refuge, haven, and home” for girls who have escaped early forced marriages and female circumcision or other unfortunate circumstances. The shelter aims to educate the girls, develop their self-esteem and self-
sufficiency, and reunite them with their families. “Boarding schools have so far been favored as the best option for the girls in order to protect them…” said Lex Merlijn, the Programme Advisor of ASAL, a Dutch funded lobby group that helps pay the school fees for many of the girls who escaped early marriage. Many of the girls agreed, admitting their fear of going back home during holidays and being married off by their “dowry-hungry fathers” (Eliezer, 1997).

The school was established by missionaries in 1959 at the request of Maasai men who desired to marry educated girls. Due to the nomadic style of this tribal group, there was a need for a boarding school where the girls could remain while the families moved in search of pasture and water. After Kenya gained independence in the 1970’s the school was taken over by the government and transformed from a mission to a public school. The government is currently in charge of its operation while the church remains its sponsor.

The vision statement, mission, and motto are all painted on various building walls on the campus of the school. The vision statement reads, “To establish a centre of Excellence for the Girl child, incorporating high standards of academic achievement, discipline, responsibility, integrity, and Gender responsiveness.” The school’s mission is “To encourage the holistic development of the Girl Child,” and its motto is “Determination and Dedication to Excellence.”

**Participants.** Some of the girls have run away to the school as a result of dropping out of another school, becoming pregnant, refusing female circumcision
or prearranged marriage, being forced from their homes, or because of other cultural or financial difficulties. They may hear of the school by word of mouth from a tribal chief, or their own or a friend’s mother.

Others have been rescued by community, family, or church members and brought to the school because of unfortunate circumstances. These include early forced marriages, female circumcision, orphaned status due to HIV/AIDS or drug or alcohol addictions. The girls often come from broken families where parents have abandoned them or undergone divorce and suffered extreme poverty. These students often have international sponsors to help pay their school fees and provide their supplies and uniforms. In addition, many of the students have been sexually, emotionally, physically, or socially abused. Some have also been rescued from child labor.

The 640 girls who currently attend the school range in age from 8 to 17 years and are in first through eighth grades. Specific to this study, 29 girls attended individual art therapy sessions and ranged in age from 9 to 14 years, enrolled in grades three to seven. Some of these girls were seen at the request of the staff at the school, and others came voluntarily because of conflicts and struggles they were facing.

Methods of Gathering Data

Data was obtained from the end of May, 2007 until the end of June, 2007. The methods of data collection included but were not limited to:
**Open-ended interviewing.** These interviews were very loosely-structured and naturally evolved during the research. The girls’ answers were recorded on paper, respecting confidentiality and remaining as non-judgmental as possible. Talking with the girls and allowing them to verbally describe their painful life stories and struggles seemed to be really empowering for them. It seemed they wanted to be recognized, fully accepted, and validated by a listener. The researcher’s questions were open and varied to allow the girls to disclose whatever personal stories they chose to share as well as take the sessions in a direction they felt was safe. Some girls preferred talking about their families and their pasts, while others wanted to talk about their lives at the school and with the other girls. However, talk about the future was very ambivalent, and indicated that many were never invited to explore where they wanted their lives to go or saw their lives going. Sadly, many of them doubted that much of a future was even possible, so they never allowed such thoughts to occur until the time of this study.

**Art interventions.** The girls’ powerful stories rarely remained only verbal descriptions. They often depicted their anguished pasts and timid hopes for the future in their artwork. Additionally, the art served as a way for them to simply just be, to have fun without being scrutinized, and to create and use their imagination. It became a beautiful invitation toward independence and free will which allowed the girls to go where they wanted and make whatever they chose.
It was the first time for many when mistakes did not matter, and they did not have to try to impress anyone or behave according to someone else’s restrictions. If they preferred to draw in response to a directive given by the researcher, a feeling or image of familiarity was usually suggested.

In addition to drawing and painting, the Maasai culture is known for its elaborate and detailed beadwork. By incorporating this into their art tasks through necklaces, bracelets, and anything else the girls wished to create, the art was associated with their culture. Another benefit of the jewelry was that it could serve as a daily reminder of their healing process or the insight they received in the session. They could share with others their experience and how it affected them when they were questioned about their jewelry, which attributed to their empowerment even more.

Another task offered was the creation of “intuition dolls.” This task was first used successfully by the researcher with disadvantaged African-American girls of this age at a Rape Crisis Center in the United States, and it seemed to have a similar impact on the girls in this study. Intuition dolls are dolls who can speak for the minds of the girls when they are too frightened, or to whom the girls can ask for guidance or direction when they feel they have no one to turn to in the outside world.

In addition to the extra guidance and support the dolls offered, for some of the girls the doll seemed to become even more. Many of the girls suffered
extreme loneliness or had no friends at the school. The dolls became safe and comforting ‘friends’ who would not make fun of them or punish them for whatever they chose to tell the dolls. One doll was even identified as “God’s little angel” by a girl who felt that the doll helped her cope with difficult stress.

Session Notes. Much of the data collection was obtained through observing and recording the subjects’ interactions and communication with the art tasks and the researcher. These observations were recorded and documented on a regular basis in session notes.

The necessity to stay focused on the purpose of the study and not be distracted by personal motives or societal pressures was a natural challenge that needed constant attention and reflection. It was hard for the researcher not to over-sympathize with the girls’ tragedies and difficult pasts or have the desire to “fix” the problems in their gender-biased society. Therefore, in addition to data collection and observation when in contact with the subjects, the researcher’s personal reflection and processing was crucial for this study.

Session notes were written immediately after every session to record what happened in the session and how the session went. The art task, the participant, and content discussed were described as accurately as possible. Aspects included in the session notes were the participant’s: emotional affect, reactions toward the therapist and toward the art, willingness to share verbally and nonverbally, and depth of content discussed. An attempt was made to be mindful of not only the
visual and verbal contributions of the participant but also contributing factors such as body language, disruptions or distractions, and pace and intensity of the entire session.

Observational data. A great deal of the data was collected from observations and was carefully recorded after each session. How the girls participated offered a great deal of information: whether they chose to take an active or passive role, participated silently or verbally, and interacted with the researcher or preferred to stay distant. Some of them approached the art tasks willingly and enthusiastically, others were obedient and indifferent, and a few were annoyed or confused. Sometimes the art preceded verbal communication, and other times it followed. Some sessions were mostly filled with art and others mostly with words. The participants’ levels of body movement, energy, and nonverbal communication were also noted.

Narrative Structure

Much of this report will consist of detailed descriptions of the data collected for this study, including observations, artwork, photography, interview information, and direct quotes of the participants. The actual art images are incorporated as well to enhance the text.

General information on the topics being examined will be intertwined throughout the body of the text; however the majority of background information and related research will be located in the literature review. In addition, the
informed consent and release form will also be found at the end of this report in the Appendix.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interview data. The information obtained from the girls’ verbalizations was examined to try to identify similar experiences, frustrations, and feelings among them to attribute to patterns or emerging themes. Examining how the experiences and backgrounds of the girls were similar or different helped explain the how and why of their experiences. If and when they directed their focus on their painful pasts, their current situation, or their future desires was also noted. Also examined was the girls’ initiation of topics discussed and their contribution to the session compared to the degree of the researcher’s invitation to participate and direct the session. This provided information about their willingness, attention, and personal involvement in the process.

Processing the artwork. Similar to the data collected in the interviews, patterns were also looked for in the artwork produced. Recognizing the themes around color, shapes, symbols, and content (such as the house commonly drawn) offered very useful information. Comparing the time spent on making the art versus sharing or talking about the art was also valuable. It was interesting to see who could draw freely with no direction or image to relate to, and who needed to have a picture in front of them in order to draw. Also, some girls had to outline
their artwork in pencil before they could use color. Noting whether they liked to title, make changes, or label their creations was also helpful information.

*Processing observational notes.* Patterns were sought in a variety of ways, depending on the amount and significance of the data collected in observing and interacting with the participants. This information was recognized, compared, recorded, and categorized with other data methods and between participants throughout the entire duration of the study and after it had concluded. This included but was not limited to: (a) the amount and characteristics of participation from the beginning to the end of the study; (b) reactions and communication, both verbal and non-verbal with the researcher and whether this changed over time; (c) changes in behavior, affect, and communication throughout the study, and most importantly; (d) whether mood and willingness appeared to have been affected over time. When general mood and enthusiasm appeared to have increased throughout the study, then the goal of this study to empower the girls was achieved.

*Strategies forValidating Findings*

The girls were involved in the major aspects of this study, which therefore decreased the chances of assumptions and misinterpretations being made by the researcher. Their actual experience supports the majority of the findings, instead of conclusions being based solely on predictions or approximations.
Validation of the results and data collected from this study by additional professionals in the mental health field supported the conclusions at the end of the study. An art therapist who has experience working with young children specifically suffering the impact of trauma agreed to review the data collected when the study was completed. This ensured the final conclusions would be as unbiased and non-judgmental as possible.

During the research, there was also constant contact with the headmaster of the school, the former headmistress, and the teachers employed by the school. All were eager to assist in any way with the girls and provide support and understanding whenever needed.

Anticipated Ethical Issues

The researcher had to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants in this study. The girls were informed of the objectives and purpose of the research beforehand, since sensitive information was likely to evolve during the sessions. Before sessions took place, the researcher visited each class to introduce herself and explain her reason for being at the school.

Receiving permission from the girls to be able to incorporate their artwork and interview responses in the research was also necessary. This was done immediately at the beginning of the first session with each of them through an informed consent and release form (see Appendix). Without their consent, this information could not be used in this report.
Confidentiality was essential for this study. In order to receive such permission from the girls, they were notified that nothing would be included in this report that may lead to disclosure of any identifiable information regarding the sessions. In addition, nothing was shared outside of the sessions by the researcher with anyone else or other participants unless they were in danger to themselves or others, or if they requested information to be shared.

In order for this study to be carried out, the research had been approved by the masters program and Human Subjects Board at the researcher’s graduate school. This established that this study was not corrupt or dishonest in any way, and appeared to comply with ethical standards.

Significance of the Study

Research has shown that education in Kenya brings social and economic benefits to both individuals and the nation (Mungai, 2002). However, young girls living in Kenya need more than this. They often feel that their lives are not meant to be lived the way they would like, but rather that they are to serve their families and later their husband and new family. Because of the pressures and unfortunate circumstances of their families and society, young girls often have low self-esteem and little motivation to pursue the lives they desire. They are forced to choose between aptitude and femininity, and they must compete with the preferential treatment toward boys from teachers, parents, and siblings. The female role is that of mother, wife, and cultivator; this role does not leave much
room for an education, which is considered a waste of money to many Maasai fathers.

Therefore, not only may this study motivate the girls to continue their education instead of falling victim to early marriage and gender discrimination, but their pattern of feeling victimized may be replaced by feeling important, valued, and worthy of respect. This included not only in the way they view themselves, but to feel they deserved this reaction from their social environment as well.

For many of the girls, their painful memories were given a voice and means of expression for the first time in their lives. The girls also learned way of coping with difficult histories in healthy ways. They discovered how to remember the past without letting it hinder their present reality and creating the lives they desire to live.

*Expected Outcomes*

The researcher expected that the use of art therapy would empower the girls, possibly giving them willpower to succeed. Although this study could not change the beliefs or aspirations of the girls, it hoped to encourage them to feel that they mattered and could pursue the lives that they wished for. The researcher wanted art therapy to inspire them to feel proud of themselves instead of merely existing for the benefit of someone else. It was desired for them to feel that they deserved the education they were pursuing instead of placing their families at a
disadvantage for doing so. Whether they desired to pursue further education or get a job of their own, art therapy may have had an effect on allowing them to feel confident and motivated to live their lives according to their dreams.
Chapter III

Literature Review

Impact of Trauma

Children are largely impacted by their home environments while they are growing up. Unfortunately, those who witness domestic violence suffer damaging psychological effects (Reynolds, Wallace, Hill, Weist, & Nabors, 2001). Traumatic stress theory claims that any symptomology that develops in children is a creative adaptation to their highly negative circumstances rather than an expression of psychopathology (Wells, Glickauf-Hughes, & Beaudoin, 1995). Trauma in itself is a situation of feeling extreme helplessness and paralysis in the ability to affect a situation (Naparstek, 2004).

After witnessing disturbances in the home, children may no longer see the world as a safe place, adults as trustworthy protectors, or events as predictable or controllable (Reynolds et al., 2001). Carl Jung, the founder of Jungian psychology, says, “Children are so deeply involved in the psychological attitude of their parents that it is no wonder that most of the nervous disturbances in childhood can be traced back to a disturbed psychic atmosphere in the home” (Malchiodi, 1990).

Across cultures and generations worldwide, women are far more vulnerable to traumatic stress than men, and children are more affected than adults. Both women and children tend to have broader and quicker access to the
right side of their brains, where the processing of images, emotions, body
awarenesses, intuitions, and sensory perceptions occur. These capabilities are
profoundly affected by trauma, but also provide a means toward speedier recovery
(Naparstek, 2004).

Furthermore, the limits in society also increase the occurrence of violence
toward children in the home. Gil (1979) believes that family violence is a result
of societal conflict, and cannot be viewed separately. He describes “structural
violence” as conditions that exist in society that limit development and obstruct
human potential. Structural violence might include poverty, discrimination, and
unemployment. These societal issues cause violence in the home in response to
the stress and frustration they create (Malchiodi, 1990).

Often times, children that end up in therapeutic contexts come from
families where boundaries were often unclear, causing confusion and doubt in
their perception of reality. The family rule of silence is common and children are
taught that they must be in control of their feelings, or trained to routinely
disregard their own wishes and needs in order to “be good.” The violence and
abuse within a familial setting becomes so common that it often gets repeated
through generations as it is seen to be what marriage and child-raising are
supposed to be about (Malchiodi, 1990).

Children who are psychologically maltreated by their parents or siblings
tend to feel unloved, unwanted, inferior, and not a part of their family system.
They experience intense feelings of loss, sadness, anger, and guilt when reflecting on the past (Martinez, 2006). They may develop low self-esteem and see themselves as failures and unworthy of respect from others. Issues like trust, boundaries, and connections with others take on extreme characteristics and cause them to be dissatisfied with themselves and others (Martinez, 2006).

Children from broken homes often have tremendous need for love and acceptance, and may experience a temporary feeling of isolation from their mother, both physically and emotionally, as their mother is preoccupied with providing for the family’s survival. Therefore, there is often a lack of nurturance in the children due to situational factors created by leaving their home environments and going to the school as refuge (Malchiodi, 1990).

Denial, emotional numbing, and repression become these children’s most common defense mechanisms (Pifalo, 2002). In order to decrease their feelings of helplessness and restore control, they often blame themselves, resulting in feelings of shame, guilt, lack of trust, lowered self-esteem, and depression (Reynolds et al., 2001). Children may internalize their feelings to the point of self-destruction, suicide, and withdrawal. Externalization may cause over-activity, lack of impulse control, and violence. Aggressive children are often those who desperately want attention and love, and can also be exaggerations of the interactional patterns that occur at home (Malchiodi, 1990).
More specifically, girls all over the world begin to understand at an early age that being female means being less and having less freedom, with less protection from physical abuse and a lack of economic parity. Their unfolding of self seems to occur in cycles determined by others’ priorities, rather than a movement forward in a single direction as with males (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997).

For adolescents from unhealthy backgrounds or traumatic pasts, major struggles involve self-expression and peer interaction. They carry fear, rage, anger, repression and denial. They inhibit poor social skills, have an inability to trust, and may display immaturity. When they experience stigmatization by peers in addition to that of their siblings and other family members, it contributes to their sense of isolation, feelings of betrayal, somatic problems, depression, and low self-esteem. They experience blurred boundaries, role confusion, and often feel over-responsible. Many are emotionally-constricted, unable to express true feelings, and have internalized guilt and shame (Pifalo, 2002). These characteristics, not surprisingly, were found to be similar to the girls at the boarding school in Kenya.

Therapy and Trauma

Research suggests that realistic and positive identifications with a therapist and other support systems ought to be established before pursuing these negative feelings and past experiences (Wells et al., 1995). First and foremost is the
development of trust and rapport with the therapist (Cohen-Liebman, 1999). Children asked to communicate with someone they do not know may feel intimidated to speak about things they may have never told anyone (like concerns, issues, fears), or discuss personal information that is embarrassing or difficult to express (Cohen-Liebman, 1999; Eaton et al., 2007).

Therapeutic interventions with children who have experienced trauma are often crisis interventions or short-term treatment; there is not enough time to establish a substantial relationship. Fortunately however, therapy does not need to provide a structure for new material to be reintegrated, because the ability to acquire new ways of responding is inherent in the child already. When environments were constantly in crisis while the child was growing up, this way of adapting became a daily affair. Therapists need to provide nurturance and encouragement instead (Martinez, 2006).

Rapport needs to be established quickly; and a feeling of authenticity must be conveyed to establish trust, comfort, and safety. The therapist needs to appear non-threatening and supportive and provide a child-friendly atmosphere of fluidity and flexibility (Waller, 2006). A natural, soothing approach that conveys concern and respect is also beneficial (Malchiodi, 1990).

Studies indicate that it is permissive to show affection or even to become a “healthy parent” for a short period to show children they deserve to be accepted, cared about, and receive good things from others (Martinez, 2006). A girl scolded
by her mother for not living up to her mother’s expectations can receive the opposite reaction in therapy—cheers and congratulations for personal achievements (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997). Children in art therapy can safely regress and understand that the expected reaction of rejection, learned from their past experiences with family and other relationships, is not the response of the therapist (Waller, 2006).

Positive, appropriate touch, such as hand-holding or hugs, can be extremely beneficial for the development of self-esteem and self-worth. For children who have lacked support and parental attention throughout their lives, such touch can instill feelings of security, nurturance, and warmth. It also demonstrates that touch is not only associated with negative, more violent forms of physical contact. The art process is a good means for this because it often involves close instruction and physical guidance to bring creativity and life to the process (Martinez, 2006).

The therapist also encourages the healing benefits of therapy when it occurs in an environment of safety and trust (Pifalo, 2002). Validation, transparency, verbal and non-verbal support, and an atmosphere of welcome are all essential elements (Martinez, 2006). The therapist needs to listen, believe, and understand the children in light of what they have gone through (Martinez, 2006). Empathy, patience, understanding, encouragement, and caring support are
invaluable (Peery, 2002) in the contexts of safety and consistency (Wells et al., 1995)

However, if the personality of the therapist intrudes so that the therapist’s needs are being met rather than the client’s, the child will quickly disengage and meet the therapist with an adapted False Self (Martinez, 2006). Children, particularly those who have been traumatized, are often acutely sensitive to adult clues and will shift quickly and subtly into taking care of the therapist. They will verbalize the things that the therapist wants to hear, and their troubling symptoms will likely reappear after termination (Martinez, 2006).

Instead, the therapist can act as a role model and help to create a positive, meaningful experience and relationship different than those a traumatized child has had in the past. The therapist can identify relational deficits the child faces and provide the necessary corrective emotional experience (Martinez, 2006). The therapist can also be an example of a successful competent woman who has pursued her own goals and overcome some of the limits of her socialization. In these instances, therapist self-disclosure can be a powerful ingredient (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997).

Resistance and transference are minimal when allowing children to go at their own pace, create their own goals, and discuss material of their choice (Martinez, 2006; Wells et al., 1995). It is important that the therapist does not “infantilize” clients with interventions that undermine the children’s competency
and independence (Wells et al., 1995). They must be given time and safety to define their own problems, speak their own feelings, make their own decisions, and find their own voice (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997).

Children ought to receive the help needed to regain control in situations where they previously felt helpless. If they have been taken away from their families or abandoned, they do not know if they will see their families again (Malchiodi, 1990). The therapist helps the child stabilize current life circumstances, build a support network, develop self-soothing skills and better self-esteem regulation before uncovering repressed material (Wells et al., 1995).

Sessions ought to validate the children’s history of unfairness and feelings of helplessness, minimize their guilt, and correct other distortions and self-blaming. Remaining in the present when working with traumatized children is also critical for their healing. Unresolved feelings ought to be brought into the immediate experience; connections are to be made between past experiences and current self-concept and behavior (Martinez, 2006). The therapist ought to reinforce the ability to accept and tolerate the past as part of the total self and decide what actions might be taken toward resolution (Martinez, 2006).

Children ought to be encouraged to share feelings and experiences, ask questions, and—as in the case of the children in this study—express how they are coping with boarding school life and their current situation. Major goals in therapy are to reduce anxiety, fear, depression, and other hindrances to healthy
living (Malchiodi, 1990). Children need to realize the past will always be a part of them, and sad remembrances will come and go. Their feelings need to be given a time and a place for expression but they need to be reminded that the painful memories cannot destroy the self (Martinez, 2006). Therapists ought to avoid allowing the child to re-experience the intensely painful emotions associated with their memories. Their protective defenses need to be respected (Waller, 2006).

It is beneficial to identify the child’s ego strengths and deficits, his or her character development, and interpersonal relationships (Wells et al., 1995). Focus ought to be on strengthening the ego and providing a safe environment to support the child in overcoming guilt and isolation. The therapist can also help the child become more assertive and self-protective (Pifalo, 2002).

M. Brewster Smith, who has worked with children from broken homes, defines the ultimate goal in working with children from difficult pasts is to engage in recreating a “competent self.” He defines the competent self as containing three elements: 1) viewing life as an opportunity and developing a feeling of hopefulness about the future; 2) achieving respect from others, which is necessary for self-respect; and 3) feeling powerful, which is what provides insurance for opportunity and respect. Lack of opportunity is hopelessness, lack of respect is self-hatred, and lack of power is vulnerability and dependence (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997)
Children in therapy are encouraged to develop new, healthy, adaptive behaviors. They relearn to trust others and attempt to regain confidence in their own abilities to make reliable judgments concerning others. Their sense of self can only be rebuilt in meaningful connections with others (Pifalo, 2002).

They learn to get past the idea that they are worthless and begin to nurture and develop themselves. They learn to accept and not be afraid to express feelings, to identify personal wishes and dreams and to be assertive in expressing them autonomously. They become happy with whom they are, hopeful for the future, and “wiser” than before (Martinez, 2006). They begin to acknowledge self-esteem, clarified as being able “to identify and acknowledge that one has effectively coped with a problem or crisis in a positive and creative way” (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997, p. 85). Children can find ways to soothe their pain instead of getting immersed in misery or guilt. They create and stick to goals, express creativity, and are able to manage being alone without feeling abandoned. They establish a continuity of self that remains the same even as they grow and develop (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997).

Young girls can free themselves from constrictive sex-role “shoulds” and behaviors in order to define and accomplish their own goals. They can confidently say, “I can do as much as I want to do, even if I receive rejection from others” (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997, p. 89). They learn to express and retain positive self-messages, strengths, skills, and accomplishments to combat and
release negative self-talk and self-denying behaviors (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997). Helpful questions to encourage them may include, “What am I passionate about?” or “What do I like to try?” (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997). In previous studies, besides the child’s self-reflections, fewer sleep disturbances, more compliant behavior, and verbal assertiveness have also been reported as successful indicators of change (Pifalo, 2002).

*Art Therapy with Traumatized Children*

Art therapy is used internationally as a treatment method for children who are experiencing negative psychosocial consequences from early life traumas as were the girls who participated in this study (Eaton, Doherty, & Widrick, 2007). Research has found that creativity is connected to healing from trauma (Malchiodi, 1990). Art can become a metaphor for the overwhelming stimuli in child’s life (Malchiodi, 1990) and can become a ‘container’ for powerful emotions, rage, and tears (Waller, 2006; Pifalo, 2002). Art allows children to “find a voice” and process emotions in an acceptable way (Waller, 2006), feeling less isolated in the company of their art and a trustworthy therapist (Malchiodi, 1990).

Four major benefits that art therapy provides in working with children with traumatic histories include providing an avenue to communicate feelings, the opportunity to be a child instead of an adult, a way to cope with stress, and an invitation to address self-image (Malchiodi, 1990). When the art is unstructured
and promotes choice, and when the therapist provides a safe, trusting, and supportive environment, art therapy positively impacts the life of a child. Children often express inner turmoil, experience catharsis, and work toward empowerment and healing by engaging in the art process (Pifalo, 2002).

**Communicating feelings.** Studies have shown that reliance on verbal forms of thought and communication may actually be counterproductive to the process of accessing traumatic memories (Pifalo, 2002). One important benefit of using art therapy with children is that the art provides a means to communicate feelings. Talk therapy has its limitations, but creative processes are soothing and non-threatening and allow individuals to communicate visually what is too painful to put into words (Pifalo, 2002). Art facilitates mental and emotional shifts in children and their anger and frustrations can be replaced with creativity (Malchiodi, 1990). Naturally, what a child may be thinking and feeling unfolds and is discovered through engagement with the art (Eaton et al., 2007)

Because the art concretizes the behavior, feelings, and thoughts of a person at a particular time, it provides an opportunity for a child to realign and rediscover him or herself in the present moment (Cohen-Liebman, 1999). Children become able to recognize, integrate, and give free expression to previously dissociated parts of themselves (Pifalo, 2002). When they verbally describe sensory motor experiences, these verbal accounts are only approximations of their real experience due to their attempt to put into words a
nonverbal form of expression (Pifalo, 2002). However, the tactile, physical, and symbolic nature that art provides relates directly to a child’s sensations and emotions (Pifalo, 2002). This helps the child get in touch with primary processes through which feelings, wishes, fears, and fantasies can be expressed (Waller, 2006).

In addition, for children who have been lied to, threatened, or misled by adults whom they trusted, words have often become mistrusted and misleading, making these children resistant toward verbal therapeutic approaches (Pifalo, 2002). Children also learn to suppress or conceal feelings about their difficult pasts, but begin to realize in art therapy that they can safely communicate these emotions through visual images. They realize that internalized or repressed conflicts and aggressive feelings can be expressed in ways that will not hurt themselves or others (Malchiodi, 1990; Waller, 2006).

Furthermore, it is often easier or safer for children to show a traumatic event through the use of two-dimensional media. They will often say, “I can draw it but I cannot say it;” or they will ask to illustrate an experience (Waller, 2006). They realize their hidden or masked symbols can be used in complete safety because they are unknown to others (Pifalo, 2002).

In particular, girls like the ones in this study, are often skilled at masking their feelings as a result of having to assume an adult role in the family system, taking responsibility for the care of siblings and helping with household chores.
They try not to complain or seem upset even though their lives are extremely troublesome and overwhelming. Denying depression often becomes a daily defense mechanism that they have grown up with. Fortunately, art can open up a window to allow them to reveal what is really going on inside of them (Malchiodi, 1990).

**Age-appropriate expression.** A second benefit of using art therapy with traumatized children is that it gives those children permission to be children, especially since many of them have been surrogate parents in the past and missed out on play. Since art is nonverbal expression that does not always involve sophisticated language, it offers an age-appropriate way of ventilating underlying thoughts and feelings (Waller, 2006). Art is a great opportunity for experimentation, make-believe, and regression—experiences intrinsic to childhood and normal development (Malchiodi, 1990). In addition, the art is strictly what the child says it is, protecting the vulnerability of the child sensitive to being judged as being right or wrong or good or bad (Waller, 2006). Art therapy with children can also be playful, so it can be easier for them to engage in art, thus making their healing journey possible (Pifalo, 2002).

**Coping with stress.** A third benefit of art therapy for children is that it allows them to cope with stress. Children from difficult pasts often have many defense mechanisms that help them cope with their difficult lives. Therefore, they often become highly defensive in their art-making as well, producing
stereotypical images and trying to pretend that everything is fine in order to limit their own anxiety. Inhibiting spontaneity and reducing expressive content enables them to deny painful realities and pasts (Malchiodi, 1990).

However, in art therapy, children have control over the amount of exposure they are able to cope with at a particular time, and through the art they can create a safe place outside the self in which internalized stress can be placed (Waller, 2006). With art they can control the stressful elements in their lives that they once thought were controlling them (Malchiodi, 1990). They are free to occupy themselves with art, feeling less exposed and more comfortable with their surroundings (Waller, 2006). The art that they create bears witness and contains painful memories, anger, rage, guilt, fear, pain, loss, and confusion (Pifalo, 2002). Their art may resemble their wish to have a healthy home environment, or serve as a way to seek nurturance from individuals outside their home, often directed towards the therapist (Malchiodi, 1990). Children are also able to direct their pain, rage, shame, and other difficult feelings into art which can then be shared and resolved with the art therapist as well (Waller, 2006; Pifalo, 2002). The child learns that it is possible to have angry feelings but to express them safely using art, knowing that the therapist and the art will not retaliate against them (Waller, 2006).

Feeling little love and support from home may also cause children to hoard materials or need an excessive amount in order to replace what they have
longed for. Sometimes children have had to flee their homes because of unsafe circumstances and were unable to take much with them, like the girls in this study. They may feel the need to accumulate materials to symbolically replace what was left behind. Such material things may provide a sense of security when there was none at home (Malchiodi, 1990). In these instances, the therapist must be firm about establishing limits and boundaries in order to counter a child’s neediness for supplies and attention, having the underlying goal of discouraging dependency. Consistent and firm limits provide structure, safety, and trust in the relationship and therapy sessions (Malchiodi, 1990).

Gradually, children will experience control over people and events and obtain relief from tension (Waller, 2006). They will experience less confusion, helplessness, and psychic pain (Malchiodi, 1990) and their anxiety and stress will be minimized (Cohen-Liebman, 1999).

**Self-image.** A final benefit of art therapy for children is that it addresses self-image. Children from broken homes often need encouragement to be individuals and to develop positive self-images. The previously mentioned benefits of art therapy—safely communicating feelings, being a child, and coping with stress—all attribute to and strengthen this final concept (Malchiodi, 1990). The art they create exists as a metaphor for a successful rewarding accomplishment, and can instill feelings of competence and independence in them (Malchiodi, 1990). Art also provides immediate gratification, enhances their self-
esteem (Cohen-Liebman, 1999), and fulfills their wishes vicariously (Waller, 2006).

Often, the art process is unstructured and unconstrained to allow temporal freedom for the client to self-actualize and grow both emotionally and spiritually (Eaton et al., 2007). Identifying their own, or correcting the therapist’s misperceptions, misunderstandings, or miscommunications, along with asking questions, also contributes to heightened self-concepts (Waller, 2006). By empowering them to become active participants in the direction of their therapy, art therapy increases their self-esteem and confidence. They can also be empowered by learning to look inward for their own strengths and coping skills (Pifalo, 2002). All of these contributions to their self-concept can be highly significant for children who have not had similar uplifting opportunities with adult figures in the past (Malchiodi, 1990).

The art process. The manner in which the art is permitted to unfold is also important for it to be beneficial for a child. Choice is a particularly significant experience for children from violent homes because these children may feel that their present life experiences offer little choice and control (Malchiodi, 1990). Children ought to be allowed to choose the art materials (according to the child’s age and developmental level) and help format the sessions to add to their sense of personal involvement, control, and empowerment. They are encouraged to make
a drawing of their choice to further empowerment and gain mastery. The subject matter that they choose often reveals what they need to express (Waller, 2006).

Allowing a child to create freely without any restrictions also best reveals the psychological status of the child. Unstructured and unprompted drawings provide an understanding of the level of functioning, coping skills, level of trauma, and emotional reactions of a child (Waller, 2006; Malchiodi, 1990). Spontaneous drawings are also regularly more meaningful to a child than specific topics, and allow disclosure to occur more often as well (Waller, 2006). However, it is important to notice if children are feeling frustrated and anxious, because they may need more direction and encouragement in these instances (Malchiodi, 1990).

“Mess making” in particular has shown to be beneficial for traumatized children from the loosening of control that happens when a child becomes deeply immersed in the physical process of art-making. Making a mess also brings life and imagination to children who have been flattened emotionally (Waller, 2006).

The therapist’s role. Besides the art alone, the therapist also plays a crucial role in the success of art therapy. Short-term therapy is challenging because how or when the children change, if at all, depends on their capacity to engage not only in the art process, but also in the therapeutic relationship. As mentioned previously, this may take time, and also patience from the therapist, because the child will need confidence in the relationship before allowing
beneficial engagement to occur (Waller, 2006). The therapist needs to be aware that time is necessary for underlying thoughts and feelings to emerge (Cohen-Liebman, 1999).

A good art therapist stimulates conversation, promotes trust, establishes rapport, invites engagement, contributes to empowerment, and promotes comfort in sessions (Cohen-Liebman, 1999). However, it is also ideal if the therapist is able to fade into the background to allow the symbols that are necessary for healing to emerge in the art (Peery, 2002). The art also assists the therapist in other ways as well. Cognitive, psychosocial, social, emotional, and artistic levels can be identified through careful observation. How a child approaches and interacts with the art indicates to the therapist what her role ought to be—facilitator, auxiliary ego, or passive/active respondent—and helps to structure the session (Cohen-Liebman, 1999). The therapist needs to communicate in a developmentally congruent manner and present art tasks that are in accord with the child’s level of functioning (Waller, 2006).

The therapist familiarizes the child with the setting, materials, any expectations, the function of the session and therapist, confidentiality and documentation. The therapist acknowledges the child’s participation and efforts and models positive interaction and communication patterns (Malchiodi, 1990). It is important to conclude on a positive note with emotional and mental stability,
and to establish a context and interest for future sessions (Waller, 2006; Malchiodi, 1990).

Art therapy can do many things for a child suffering trauma that many other modalities might never accomplish. By helping children communicate their feelings in a safe way, experience what it is like to be a child, learn how to cope with difficult feelings, memories, and stress, and develop a positive self-image, art therapy is able to prove its worthiness and effectiveness. This study is yet another example of how effective and healing art therapy can be in working with children, specifically girls, who have come from broken homes and difficult pasts.

*Multicultural Sensitivity*

Clients and therapists bring their values, beliefs, and attitudes learned from their past experiences into therapy and perceive each other on these terms. People also view and value themselves similarly to how they are viewed by others (Wolfe & Russianoff, 1997). Therapists need to be mindful and able to communicate their own personal views before, during, and after working with a client of a different culture. A self-assessment prior to therapy, open dialogue about differences during sessions, and unbiased reflection afterwards will all benefit the therapeutic process (Coseo, 1997).

If therapists are unaware of how personal perceptions, views, and beliefs enter into their decisions, inappropriate interventions could result. They may superimpose their beliefs onto their clients. Their personal stereotypes and
prejudices, whether or not they are aware of them, may enter into treatment and have a negative impact (Coseo 1997).

To develop such awareness, therapists need to do a self-assessment which entails looking at their own feelings, attitudes, and level of experience in working with a specific population before entering a session (Coseo, 1997). Therapists need to identify their own therapeutic purpose to guide them in knowing what in their theoretical background, personal vision, private ethic, and political standpoint is possible and appropriate for the individuals they will be working with (Luepnitz, 1997). There must be an understanding of the impact of their own cultural background, including cultural values, attitudes, and assumptions held, on the therapeutic relationship. By doing this, they define their social identity, along with the ability to verbalize the impact of this social identity on others (Coseo, 1997).

Therapists also need to be aware of the impact of their interpersonal style on others, and be able to identify and verbalize their personal values. It is also beneficial to recognize areas in need of growth (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999). If a therapist does not take the time to formulate such an awareness and therapeutic purpose, there is a risk of passing on ideology or personal convictions as “common sense” or psychological fact to the client (Luepnitz, 1997).

When this work on self-awareness is accomplished prior to any sessions taking place, the therapist comes to therapy knowing her personal background and
beliefs. Equally important is acquiring a theoretical understanding of the family style, culture, tradition, and gender roles of the client. The therapist ought to have knowledge of the client’s history and way of life in her environment in addition to any history of oppression (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999). Therapists ought to learn about clients’ backgrounds and acknowledge differences between their own and their clients’ (Coseo, 1997). However, in order to keep from relying too much on generalizations of the client’s cultural background, the therapist still needs to believe the client’s reality over these generalizations (Winek & Carlin-Finch, 1997).

Once in session, the therapist ought to be honest, accepting, and understanding—realizing that ignoring the cultural component or significance of the client’s culture in therapy is partially ignoring the client’s reality (Coseo, 1997). A therapist can incorporate qualities such as faith, creativity, patience, humor, flexibility, and ability to detach or let go of one’s own point of view to assist their attempt at multicultural competency (Winek & Carlin-Finch, 1997).

There also needs to be open dialogue about differences. If differences are viewed as having no impact on the relationship, the therapist may introduce interventions that are not resonant with the clients’ interests and risks, imposing foreign values on them. But, to make differences a central focus will not allow for any individual variation in therapy and will also ignore any similarities between the therapist and client. This also risks stereotyping or conceptualizing
the client into an ideal type, by calling attention to important traits by over-emphasizing or exaggerating them (Winek & Carlin-Finch, 1997).

For example, when therapists ignore the impact of gender socialization and inequality, attempts to remain neutral or objective in sessions become nothing more than support for the status quo (Lewis, 1993). On the other hand, perceiving African people as victims instead of unique individuals is not only distorted but disempowering for them; confronting this belief and being aware of its presence is essential (Coseo, 1997). Therefore, a bridge is needed to allow for differences not to be ignored but not to receive all the attention. This can be achieved by allowing clients to identify aspects of their broad culture and also unique characteristics of self. They learn to discover their own culture and evaluate how it reflects broader cultural patterns as well as its own peculiarities (Winek & Carlin-Finch, 1997).

In addition to addressing similarities and differences, the therapist also needs to accept what the client brings into the session and simply attend to presenting problem and individual without judging whether it is right or wrong, dysfunctional or functional, or relevant because of one’s own assumptions and values. Sadly, a client’s construction of the problem is often overlooked in eagerness to get to what the therapist regards as the “true” problem (Winek & Carlin-Finch, 1997).
Therapists need to be aware of when and how to appropriately communicate compassion and empathy and express feelings of anger, fear, love, excitement, guilt, sorrow, and other significant emotions. Therapists ought to have an ability to encourage and support with a deep reason for caring about the individual (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999). They ought to be able to make clients feel comfortable through empathetically listening to stories, establishing trust, and engaging the client in the therapeutic process (Winek & Carlin-Finch, 1997). In recognizing and accentuating a client’s strengths, cultural heritage can be used to positively highlight and heighten individuality. This can be a source of freedom and power, as these strengths are unique to them (Coseo, 1997).

Raising cultural awareness is a lifelong process. It is important to realize that stereotypes and prejudices are learned and reinforced over a lifetime (Coseo, 1997). When therapists confront their values, beliefs, and attitudes before entering a session, they are benefiting both themselves and their clients. Allowing open dialogue of differences and providing a supportive, non-judgmental environment also enhance the therapeutic process. In the end, feeling love and compassion for humanity, along with interconnectedness to all beings (characteristic of African culture) may increase the chances of success when working with different cultures (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999).

_African Culture_
An overview of the African culture is provided because of its relevance to this study and the girls at the boarding school. The philosophy of the African people incorporates two major themes: a close connection with nature and the survival of one’s people (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999). They emphasize collective unity and connection with all living beings; spirituality and life are seen as inseparable. They define existence in relation to God, the environment, and rhythms and cycles of life. Africans regard interdependence among extended family, community bonding, and spirituality as significant, and they seek support from them. This counteracts with America’s emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency (Coseo, 1997).

Africans suffer and rejoice together and share in collective responsibility and destiny; a sense of community and survival is achieved through sharing a collective strength. African churches provide social support and therapeutic response through prayer, music, worship, catharsis over suffering, and the validation of life experiences. Other important African values are interdependence, oral tradition, creativity, and fluid time perception (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999).

The Maasai

To further understand the upbringings of the girls at the boarding school, background and structural information on ethnicity specific to the Maasai culture has been included. Particularly, the role of Maasai females is discussed at the
end—divided among child, mother, and grandmother—to help give a sense of what the lives of these girls were like before they came to the boarding school.

Ethnic groups in much of the continent of Africa are defined according to their economic specialization—consisting mostly of farmers, hunters, or pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa where Kenya is located. A group’s identity relies more on the resources available to them and their social practices than on their cultural backgrounds. Thomas Spear calls this “ethnic exclusion by inclusion,” which refers to the ease of assimilating into a new group that causes changes in ethnicity to appear less as transformations and more like new orientations, redefinitions in social networks, and shifts in the relevance and priorities of issues and values (Spear & Waller, 1993).

The Maasai themselves came from southern Sudan during 1000 AD and were considered pastoralists—a way of life appropriate for the plains in Kenya. They raise sorghum and millet along with cattle and stock, and migrate according to the land resources and climate. Yet they have a brutal history to attach to their name; from losing land due to farming, wildlife, and population growth, reservations for national parks, and British treaties (usually the best grazing land in times of drought). Due to their continuous struggle from the unpredictable physical environment and recurrent droughts and diseases, overgrazing and soil erosion resulted (Spear & Waller, 1993).
Their survival consequently depended on the other ethnic groups’ resources and people. Honey and ritual experts were needed for their own rituals, grain was crucial to their diet, and stock was needed to rebuild their herds, especially during harsh times of drought. Therefore, marriages were often arranged between the farming, hunting, and pastoralist groups to maintain ties and people working together (Spear & Waller, 1993).

The sense of community and connectedness among Kenya’s people was extended because their land was communally owned as well. The distinction in ownership was achieved through sustaining sufficient livestock rather than the acquisition of land. However, and only because of excessive and lingering pressure from the government, land began to be individually owned in the late 1950s (Spear & Waller, 1993).

Although the Maasai have always depended on other ethnic groups for survival, they view non-pastoral lifestyles as polluting, morally deficient, and inferior. Hunters who lived in the untamed wilderness and consumed wild animals rather than conserving domestic livestock were viewed as greedy, unrestrained, and uncultured; they were only suitable for slaughtering cattle, circumcising youth, gathering honey, and performing other “polluting” tasks. Meanwhile, farmers were viewed as destroyers of grazing land and were regarded useful only for providing food, beer, and wives (Spear & Waller, 1993).
In addition to viewing their pastoral way of life as superior to others, the Maasai also embrace their cultural identity with pride, regardless of the ethnic group they originated from. This can be done easily, often visually displayed through a decorative appearance in jewelry and garments. Color preference and design are highly recognizable resources for advertising ethnic difference among the different cultures. Both can mark distinctions in ethnic group, sex, age grade (i.e. boy, *murran*, and elder), age-set (based usually on ten-year span), region, ceremonial status, social status, and progress through life cycle (Spear & Waller, 1993).

The composition of ornaments and body placement is based on the symmetrical alteration of black and white. The basic principle of the Maasai is to “catch the eye” of the viewer—to have the most visual impact by use of contrast and compliment. For example, the sequence red-white-black equals *narok*, and stands for the black aspect of God. This is a basic ornament design and is commonly seen throughout Kenya still today (Spear & Waller, 1993).

Women are able to claim an active role in their ethnicity through their beadwork and ornamentation, adding a personal and creative side to their pride. Beadwork to a woman is like cattle to a man. It allows them to achieve respect and display their status and individuality among their community. They view the human body as “the primary medium of concrete aesthetic expression” (Spear & Waller, 1993, p. 203).
From the emphasis on their pastoral way of life and ethnic decoration, it is easy to see how the Maasai life contains two strands of living. One involves building a herd, surviving droughts, and establishing a family; the other is directed towards displaying culture and a sense of identity. In addition, “becoming Maasai” is a stereotyped affair, where one must fit into a mold in order to spiral up the different age-sets (within the age grades) to make it into elderhood. There are different age grades and age sets that attribute to the status of an individual. Failing to fit this mold means existing outside the image and is unfitting for a Maasai. This is not tolerated, but considered as a threat to the richness of their society (Spear & Waller, 1993).

There are also divisions between genders among the Maasai. For men, the distinction in a dual lifestyle of practical needs and cultural importance can be viewed as differentiating between work and play. For younger boys and as they mature and prepare to fight to be worthy to be a murran (the warrior-image of the Maasai), they learn that life is not only about expressing their warrior-like pride but also requires discipline and exertion. Through initiation of becoming a murran, whose initiation is highly competitive demanding power and bravery that must be proven in return for respect, young men become worthy of adulthood and marriage. Economic responsibilities for boys involve herding and protecting the livestock and family. Males go up in age grades from being boys, to murrans, and then elders—the guardians of their culture. Elders acquire an enhanced
political and moral seniority with the potent power to either bless or curse a
*murraran* (Spear & Waller, 1993).

Females, on the other hand, only advance in age grade status through
marriage. Economic responsibilities for girls include milking, household chores,
and child-rearing. Daughters are brought up almost from infancy to be eligible as
wives. They are immediately primed to be a future gift from their fathers to their
husbands since their main purpose is to bear future generations. Besides their
daily load of responsibilities and chores, the female pattern of living is
circumcision, an arranged marriage, wife-beating, and subservience to men at all
times. In the Maasai idiom, all women, even widows, are “children” and need
always to be under the protection of a man (Spear & Waller, 1993).

At a young age, girls have a multiple role in contributing to the
functioning of a household. A typical day for a female child would include
lighting the fire upon waking (still no electricity in much of the region), going to
school (which could be a two-hour walk by barefoot), and then going for water
and fetching firewood far from home. After the long walk home, she washes
utensils for dinner, looks after younger siblings and feeds the baby, eats dinner,
does schoolwork if it is not too dark or plays, and then goes to bed. Most children
admit they provide most of the daily care given to infants other than nursing and
washing when they are not at school (Swadener, Kabira, & Njenga, 2000).
A girl’s education is usually brought to an end regardless of her age through marriage, which is often arranged and mandated at a young age by the father for the dowry he will receive in return. Then she becomes a mother, and her life is no less demanding. Each day typically begins with milking, preparing tea, and nursing. Then she boils the milk and works in the garden, stopping only to nurse if she is able. Depending on how old her children may be, they may come home at lunch time or later if they are older. Therefore, she may have to prepare a meal for the children, and then fetch more water and firewood if she does not have children to do this as well. Then she returns to cleaning, sweeping, washing, and possibly more milking. After this it is time to feed her family and go to bed (Swadener et al., 2000).

By the time a woman becomes a grandmother, her main responsibility is caring for the younger children in the area. She gets up early to prepare breakfast and then gathers the babies from the neighbors, as the children and mothers leave for water, firewood, and then school or the market. She has the babies for the remainder of the day until evening when the children return from school and mothers return from their gardens or sheds from milking. The husband may or not come home. She then has her evening meal and goes to bed (Swadener et al., 2000).

It is apparent how important the lifestyle of the Maasai is for the survival of the entire Maasai culture, regardless of one’s age or gender. Perhaps it is no
coincidence that *murran* means “warrior,” since maintaining this reputation is a priority and young men fight for it all their lives. They have had to fight and struggle to survive much of their past against meandering wildlife and farmers, against harsh climates and drought seasons, and against the government and its unfair treaties. Status through age grades is highly regarded within the Maasai; boys strive to display their cultural power as *murrans* and then protect this identity as elders. Women emphasize their individuality by more creative means, through beadwork and ornamentation. However, being a woman in this culture not only requires dedication, but also strength and discipline for their own and their community’s existence.
Chapter IV

*Barriers to Education*

“Educate a man and you educate a person; educate a woman and you educate the nation” (Mungai, 2002, p. xiii).

Because of the demanding lifestyle of the Maasai, help is needed for girls seeking an education in Kenya. Young females to this day have a lot to overcome to achieve this goal. Although their situation continues to improve as awareness grows in their communities, this struggle is nothing new. Family complications, disease, poverty, tribal customs, child labor, and early marriage continue to make education a difficult entity for a female child to obtain. Additional notable barriers include the direct cost of schooling, poor health, pregnancy and sexual harassment, cultural beliefs and expectations, female circumcision, distance between schools and home, the classroom culture, and dropping out of school (Eliezer, 1997; Mungai, 2002).

It has been shown that when the women in an African society are educated, it brings social and economic benefits for all its members. Each year of schooling a mother has leads to a 5 to 10 percent decrease in the mortality rate in Kenya. This is due to improved physical and intellectual development of the mother and her children; also, children are better able to make future aspirations if they experience scholastic achievement while growing up (Mungai, 2002). Parents’ education has shown to have a more significant effect on students’
achievements than the family’s socioeconomic status. In addition, the more educated the parents, the fewer chores their daughters had. When a mother is educated, she is more knowledgeable and able to care for her family’s healthcare and nutrition, and child and infant mortality rates decline (Mungai, 2002). Their life expectancy lengthens and delays child bearing, which also brings about lower fertility rates (Eliezer, 1997). Teenage pregnancies and marriages also decline (Shaw, 2007). Unfortunately, many communities are still figuring this out. The majority of Maasai mothers have only four years or less of a formal education (Mungai, 2002).

Background

Formal education was first introduced by Christian missionaries in Kenya in the mid-nineteenth century, although their real intention was to spread Christianity. This education had a British bias and was misused towards the African people. It was not envisioned that Africans would be able to work in an office or hold administrative jobs, and the schools reflected this bias. By having separate schools and curricula, education was directed toward the white settlers to train them in skilled labor. Asians and Arabs came second in the educational system and Africans fell last. Schooling disrupted the delicate balance of the indigenous economy for the African people; its quality being based solely on ethnic background, often separating out the Africans.
Being forced to conform to traditional beliefs by family members that education was unnecessary, many aspiring to Western education were simultaneously in the classroom, making learning quite difficult for the African female (Mungai, 2002).

However, the nation at large realized the importance of education. When Kenya gained independence in 1963, President Jomo Kenyatta’s *Harambee* campaign, which called for community participation for accelerated education development, had the greatest expansion in early childhood programs (Swadener et al., 2000). By this time, like many sub-Saharan African countries, education had come to be viewed without doubt the “most crucial agent for rapid economic growth” (Mungai, 2002).

**Impact of Maasai Culture**

*Early marriage.* Much of the Maasai culture and traditional beliefs do not fit with the goal of female education. Becoming wives and mothers takes precedence over career advancement for women in Kenya. Some Maasai families even view education as interference in their way of life (Webb, 2006). The woman’s purpose is to bear future generations of Maasai (Spear & Waller, 1993), and women only need enough education to show them how to be a good wife (Mungai, 2002). Statistics prove that for every ten boys enrolled in school, there are only two girls (Eliezer, 1997).
The woman’s role of bearing children is influenced by a Maasai man’s wealth being determined by the number of cattle and children he has (Shaw, 2007). Therefore, the female role is to further future generations and to provide fathers with a good dowry in exchange for marriage (Mungai, 2002). She will be one of her husband’s many wives to provide many children regardless of her health and ability to care for them.

Having children not only determines a man’s wealth, but is also the typical measure of a good and successful marriage (Mungai, 2002). In fact, as one mother put it, “Being barren is a great burden!” Couples who do not have children are not fully accepted in the Maasai community (Swadener et al., 2000).

**Female circumcision.** Another expectation of a Maasai girl is female circumcision. This initiation into adulthood and to become accepted as a woman may be performed on a girl as young as six years of age. After this, girls can expect an arranged marriage at as early as ten years old, and then spend their remaining lives serving and being beaten (Swadener et al., 2000).

These initiation ceremonies also conflict with the school calendar and the family’s and girl’s desire for an education. Girls are forced to miss school during this process, which involves rituals of preparation, procedure, and celebration that typically last one month, but can vary from several weeks to lasting several months. The ceremony is usually conducted between February and May, after the harvest and prior to the onset of the rainy season (Leonard, 1996). Because the
Purpose of the initiation ceremony is to prepare for marriage and womanhood, it also leads some girls to become more interested in getting a husband than in schooling. They find it harder to concentrate in school, feeling they are now prepared for their next stage of life (Mungai, 2002).

A girl often allows the circumcision procedure despite the risks involved (including HIV/AIDS and infertility) because she will be seen as unclean and in need of purification until the operation takes place (Eliezer, 1997). Only recently from community support, such as women’s groups, church youth groups, and non-profit organizations like the American Red Cross, are girls beginning to realize they can have a voice and refuse to get circumcised. It was not until January, 2001, that a Kenya court ruled against the forced circumcision of girls (Baleta, 2001).

*Household chores.* In addition to early marriage and female circumcision, household chores consume much of a girl’s daily lifestyle. A mother often rejoices when she bears a girl, someone to help her with the work around the house. Daughters are also used for childcare starting when they are only three or four years old. Primary school-aged girls spend an average of 6.3 hours a day doing chores, compared to 1.7 hours for boys. However, this jumps to 11 hours compared to a boy’s 1.4 hours when they are both 15 to 18 years old. It is taboo for boys to work in the kitchen. If they are seen cooking or washing
dishes, they are laughed at (Mungai, 2002). Therefore, the labor lost from sending a girl to school is a much greater loss than that of a boy (Mungai, 2002).

It has been shown that the more chores a girl has at home, the lower her achievement in school. There is frequent absenteeism and chronic fatigue when chores become too overbearing, which may lead to poor performance and dropping out. Eighty-one percent of female students surveyed in a study reported that they would do better in school if they did not have to do so many chores (Mungai, 2002). Even when they still have the desire and energy to study after they are finished with their responsibilities at home, it is often too dark for any studying since there is no electricity in most of the country (Shaw, 2007).

Usually a woman abides by these cultural standards out of her own fear. This fear also explains why women do not turn to authorities when their young daughters are married off instead of being sent to school (Eliezer, 1997). For Maasai women, it is not about defending their equality, but affirming their vital role in domestic affairs and legitimizing the various roles adopted by men: a son only has a right to the cattle allocated to his mother; a murran (of eligible status to be married and considered adult) can only belong to the manyatta (livestock camp) of his mother; and the status of an elder depends on the fertility of his wives (Spear & Waller, 1993).
Societal Pressures

Loss of family and living environment also plays a role in affecting a girl’s education. The HIV/AIDS crisis and persistent warfare and refugee situations have left many African children orphaned, disabled, and malnourished, with burdens placed on mothers and grandparents. Of the 9 million children who have lost their mothers to AIDS, 90% live in sub-Saharan Africa, and many have lost both parents. It is thought that up to one-third of African children will become orphans in the next ten years (Swadener et al., 2000).

The population of Kenya grew from 16 million to 24 million between 1980 and 1992 (Mungai, 2002). This rapid growth expanded already heavy pressures on limited land and housing. Cost of living had gone up, and husbands only had money when animals were sold. The rising cost of school fees also forced families to have to choose which children they wished to send to school, casually favoring the boys who would stay in the family after marriage and could help support the family (Swadener et al., 2000). Financial constraints were the single crucial factor in the non-completion of school in the slum areas of Nairobi in a study performed in 1995. Of the 64% of respondents who dropped out, 61% were females unable to pay tuition (Mungai, 2002).

There are also fewer jobs for females than males, and overwhelming pressures for survival lead to many divorces and separations as parents abandon their families to seek better lives on their own. Many women often feel like the
only parent, due to their husbands seeking occupations far from home to help sustain their families, but are then kept away for long periods at a time (Swadener et al., 2000). While their husbands are absent, women are burdened with ensuring family and household survival. Economic necessities, and not just cultural biases, complicate the education system and employment opportunities for young women. Mothers require their daughters to help them at home with daily responsibilities, but not their sons. They feel it is a waste of time and money to send their daughters to school when they can be of assistance at home (Mungai, 2002).

Sadly, because of these hardships, parents often take frustrations out on their children by abusing or neglecting them. Communities are often unaware and uneducated concerning child abuse and how it harms children. Children often become homeless due to running away from the violence and abuse in their home environments (Savenstedt & Haggstrom, 2005).

Droughts also force families to deal with fewer animals which also means less milk. For a culture dependent on meat and milk, this means they now have to buy food or come up with other means. Many are without enough money to depend solely on purchasing food, and crops begin to be planted. Water shortages and wild animals ruin crops. Survival only becomes more difficult (Swadener et al., 2000). With less money to send children to school and more help needed for the family’s survival, a girl’s chances for an education are limited even more.
Sexual Risks

The long distance girls have to walk to school puts them at risk of rape and sexual harassment on the way (Eliezer, 1997). About 10,000 unmarried schoolgirls become pregnant each year (Mungai, 2002). Females are not only assessed through male standards, but are also expected to take responsibility for their own and men’s sexuality. The male is “invisible and free” while the female is controlled through labeling and rumors (Ahlberg, Jylkas, & Krantz, 2001). Therefore, pregnancy is still largely seen as the responsibility of the female, and a girl cannot return to school while pregnant or reenter after the baby has been born. Some families have even disowned their daughters if they become pregnant before marriage; they are seen as outcasts. This risk underlies parents’ fears of sending their daughters to school (Mungai, 2002). Sexual education is still in debate as well, because it is believed that education in this area would only encourage sexual experimentation even though emerging evidence proves otherwise (Ahlberg et al., 2001).

Unfair treatment in schools

Pressures from the schools themselves also make it hard for a girl not to quit. Schools tend to operate according to the beliefs of society, and when the cultural expectation is that a woman belongs in the kitchen, teachers often favor male students, expecting them to achieve better. The myth that boys are more
intelligent than females still exists in many communities in Africa (Mungai, 2002).

Girls in Kenya have reported that the manner in which they are taught makes learning difficult. Instead of being encouraged to ask questions or understand why things happen, they are only instructed to memorize. Girls are not encouraged to be assertive, and teachers prefer calling on male students to give answers. In fact, basic textbooks depict men in high-profile work and business, while women are displayed performing domestic chores (Mungai, 2002).

The stigma and emotional stress of being sent home for lacking school fees, a proper uniform, or books and supplies falls heavily on female students (Swadener et al., 2000). If a boy is sent home due to a lack of fees, the money is typically provided by the families so the child can return promptly. However, if a girl is sent home for the same reason, she is usually married off instead (Eliezer, 1997).

Latecomers are also harshly dealt with by teachers even though arriving on time is often a challenge in rural areas since the walk to school can be in bare feet and take two to five hours (Shaw, 2007). Children often have books to carry and are without water. A girl may also be expected to fetch water or deliver milk to neighbors before heading for school. Then when they arrive to school, they are dehydrated and fatigued, which only makes efforts to concentrate and learn even
more difficult. During the rainy season, illness complicates matters even more (Mungai, 2002).

Students can be caned in front of the class for lack of fees and for arriving late, and this is very humiliating for any student. If a child is held back for low performance, they are also mocked by other students. Socially they do not fit in with younger classes, and are stigmatized for the classes they have to repeat (Mungai, 2002).

In addition, when women reach collegiate level, they often study what are considered ‘soft’ disciplines like languages and cultures that do not lead to high-paying professions. Throughout the whole world, the proportion of men studying engineering and medicine is twice that of women. It is no wonder that girls are unable to aspire to be what their teachers and textbooks never expose to them (Mungai, 2002).

Success and achievement is also largely based on how well a child does on national exams, the gate to secondary school in Kenya. Children are not permitted to continue on past eighth grade if they do not score high enough on these tests. These tests also make learning difficult by discouraging creative teaching (Mungai, 2002).

The Need for Help

Many female students absorb the low expectations of their teachers, families, and classmates and develop a low opinion of who they are.
Achievement in school is seen to affect their future goals, and if they do not have high expectations, they begin to see themselves as failures. Their low self-esteem, in turn, encourages them to fall behind or drop out. The drop-out rate for girls in primary school compared to boys is almost three times greater. Girls also find it difficult to make friends, and frequently reach a point of learned helplessness (Mungai, 2002).

Therapy and counseling in the past has empowered females to speak out and be able to express their frustrations. In voicing their concerns, they encourage each other (Mungai, 2002). In a study between 1997 and 1998, counseling for girls seeking an education served to convey visions for a possible redirection of their life stories. The professionals offered motherly care and protection, something many of the girls rarely experienced, in order to create trustful relationships with the girls. They found that sensitivity was a crucial element in order not to endanger the girls’ or their own lives. Their frustrations and feelings of powerlessness were explored and compared to feelings of satisfaction and hope. Empowerment and visions for a better future were also targeted areas (Savenstedt & Haggstrom, 2005). Dealing with society’s ignorance and its rejection of girls meant convincing the girls that there was an alternative way of living in a male dominated society. The gender discrimination in their society had to be carefully dealt with; even though the researchers felt they lacked
relevant knowledge and support, the gender issues were critical to the care needed (Savenstedt & Haggstrom, 2005).

A Maasai girl at a young age has to decide to stick to the traditions and beliefs of her culture to be a house girl and then wife, or attend school in an attempt to break the cycle to create a life of her own desires. Either way, the complications of society, disease, and poverty will make her life challenging. More support is needed for these children, to empower them and give them hope. Therapy and counseling are rare and often unheard of phenomenon in much of Kenya; however, the little that has occurred has shown to have a positive impact on African girls. This study hopes to expand this effort even more.
The boarding school where the study took place was located in open land on a paved road, a rarity in the rural areas of Kenya. A dispensary and preschool was located next to it on one side, and there was nothing in walking distance on the other side. Many of the dwellings in Kenya like this school, whether public or private, have long driveways with an iron gate at the entrance. There are often hired workers who open the gate for guests.

Figure 1. View of the school

The school was laid out much like a college campus (see Figure 1) with the first building occupying the Headmaster’s office, the counseling office, the
secretary’s office, and the staffroom. Exiting out the back was a huge green field with classrooms and cafeteria bordering it. Behind this were the dormitories where the students stayed, and on the outskirts were houses where some of the teachers, including the Headmaster and his wife, my host family (teachers as well) and myself, lived.

Figure 2. One of the classroom buildings.

The buildings (see Figure 2) had painted walls and floors of concrete, and the roofs were typically iron-thatched. The name and motto of the school, “Determination and Dedication to Excellence,” were painted on a sign at the gate. The vision statement, “To establish a centre of Excellence for the Girl child, incorporating high standards of academic achievement, discipline, responsibility, integrity, and Gender responsiveness,” and mission, “To encourage the holistic
development of the Girl Child” were painted on the walls of the administration building in the hallway leading to the open field.

There was not much color in the classrooms besides gray and brown. The walls rarely had any pictures or maps on them. The windows were only big enough to let in enough light in order to see the blackboard and textbooks if there were any. Their wooden desks or tables with similarly rugged chairs or wooden benches looked like they could be antiques; they were falling apart. Being comfortable in an aesthetically appealing environment did not appear to be a concern at the school. But this simplicity and the connection to the earth coincided with many aspects of their way of living.

Figure 3. The administration building and counseling office.

The counseling office (located in the administration building in Figure 3) was similarly bare and colorless with white walls and a gray concrete floor.
There was florescent lighting and a small window to the side of my wooden desk that had a large surface to work on. The chairs (which were cushioned!) were positioned around a corner of the desk. Supplies were kept on a table behind the desk and in the desk drawers. There was also a television in one corner, which may have never been used.

Immediately feeling the urge to add some “color” to help stimulate creativity and liven up my space, I cut out stars, hearts, and girl banners out of construction paper, made a sign with the school name and another that said “Counseling,” and decorated the walls and bulletin boards. The other teachers who saw the added colorful contributions wanted the same for their rooms! I made colorful vocabulary charts (see Figure 4) for the classrooms while the girls were in class during the daytime. The teachers and students were very appreciative.

**Figure 4.** Girls holding the vocabulary charts.
My first contact at the school was with the Headmaster himself, who inquired about what I expected to accomplish and how I would contribute to his facility. I was immediately calmed by his welcoming presence, as well as his obvious dedication to the girls at the school. After explaining this study and my desire to reach out to these girls in need, I was introduced to his wife, who was the school’s former counselor and then the teacher for the visually handicapped students.

Together we went to each and every classroom, a total of 12, where I introduced myself and explained what my role would be for the following weeks. I identified myself as an art therapist whose role was to help support girls who were feeling like they needed someone to talk to or were struggling with a specific problem or emotion they didn’t like feeling or was causing them trouble. I was more specific as I went to higher grades. However, in each class, after I spoke, my words were translated into Kiswahili and then the students were asked if they understood or had any questions. With the younger grades, the Headmaster’s wife had the girls repeat back who they thought I was to make sure it was clearly understood.

I was greeted with welcomes and “wows” in unison as they stood in my presence. Then there was giggling and wide-eyes as they stared curiously at this young white girl. I attempted to explain who I was and why I was there to the best of my ability to individuals who had most likely never known what therapy
was. I needed translation into Kiswahili for the younger classes, but the older students understood.

![Figure 5. Exchanging classes.](image)

**The Girls**

A total of 28 girls came for individual art therapy sessions during the three weeks of the study. Unfortunately, only 13 of these attended more than one session. Of the 28 girls I saw, 17 were either 12 or 13 years old. The majority were in 7th grade, followed by 6th grade.

Most of the girls came to my office voluntarily after their classes in the afternoon (see Figure 5). More serious cases, such as orphaned, raped, or aggressive deviant children, were sent to me upon the request by a teacher. Several times, a girl would benefit from the time she spent in my office and would
recommend a friend who was also dealing with a personal struggle to come for a session.

The girls’ primary complaints fell into three main areas: 1) their past dealing with conflicts in their family and home environments, 2) difficulties getting along with the other girls at the school, and 3) academic pressures in the classroom and from their families.

Family backgrounds. The girls often worried about their pasts and difficult family situations over which they had no control, but felt guilty and responsible. Examples were their parents’ separation or lack of employment, abuse and neglect, and extreme poverty. Many felt they were at the school because they were too much of a burden, or their parents blamed them for their struggles. Some felt they were at the school because they did not think they belonged in their family.

Several girls had family members struggling with terminal illness, like HIV/AIDS, or family members who were deceased. This was a painful reality for many, because it had been a while since many last saw their families; therefore, closure was rare. A few girls who were seen in therapy were orphans, who had lost their parents while at school. The girls were rarely given an outlet for grieving or understood the importance of grieving their losses. They carried this pain with them everyday not knowing what else to do. It was not uncommon for girls to admit crying themselves to sleep every night thinking about and missing
someone they loved and lost. However, they would claim that they preferred their sadness in solitude over the risk of sharing their pain with anyone else. Their fear of rejection and betrayal was great.

They also felt intense longing and shame for being away from their families and their home environments. Many felt responsible for their household responsibilities and felt guilty for not being able to attend to them. In addition, maintaining their role in the home was often the only way they would feel wanted and worthy in their families. Being away led the view that their parents never loved them even more tangible.

The majority of the girls were abused by their parents, grandparents, and often other relatives as well (mostly dependent on where they were residing), and not only carried the shame, but also worried about the safety of their siblings who were now likely getting the same harsh treatment. They would rarely go into detail about the abuse, but would tell of broken limbs and show scars where they had been physically harmed by their family members.

They often had brothers and sisters who were left abandoned at home unable to provide for themselves while their parents were away for days at a time working. The girls carried immense guilt and blamed themselves for not being able to care for their siblings or to protect them from the violence in the home.

Social issues. Many of these issues dealt with the problems of getting along with the other girls at the school. Feelings of distrust, fear, and an inability
to make friends were discussed. Many of the girls felt incredible loneliness ever since they left their families. Because they had to abandon all of their close family relationships in coming to the school, they were often unwilling and afraid to set themselves up again for the same separation and loss.

Some had such low self-image that they felt no other girl would want to be friends with them. Many girls felt their backgrounds determined who they were and so no one would be able to understand them. For these reasons, many did not feel it was worth the effort to try to see if they could connect with anyone. In addition, some did not have the social skills to make the first step in initiating a friendly connection.

Other girls were afraid or distrusting of their classmates because they knew what it was like to be hurt either physically or emotionally from their pasts and still carried this pain. They feared being hurt in similar ways by the other girls. It didn’t help that the girls were frequently stealing from each other and making fun of one another’s difficult family situations. If a girl was not visited on a visiting day, which was only two times a year, they were mocked for “not being loved” by their families. If their families were too poor to be able to afford the school fees, the proper uniform, or school supplies, they were harassed for their poverty.

Academic pressure. The third main problem area was the intense academic pressure the girls faced daily. This pressure included passing the
National Examination, being accepted by their teachers, and ranking high in the classroom. The girls would give their artwork both grades and checkmarks in the therapy sessions, similar to those they got for their assignments in class. They complained about how they wished they ranked higher in their class; for the higher they were ranked, the more attention, respect, and encouragement they got from their teachers, aspects they all craved dearly.

In addition, when they did get the rare opportunity to be with their families, they were often questioned only about their school performance. Furthermore, in order to make it to secondary school (what Americans consider high school), they had to score well on the National Examination. It was explained to them by their teachers and parents that if they did not succeed at this test, not only were they not passing a test critical to their academic future, but they themselves were failures. It was evident in many sessions how hard it was for them to see themselves as individuals and not merely students.

Therefore, it was plain to see that each girl who came to therapy with a specific problem involved issues that often overlapped with other girls. They were a heterogeneous group, and each had her own diverse needs, yet they all had experienced conflict and hardship in some way. Some conflicts were from the past, some in the present, and some had been ongoing for most of their lives.
The Sessions

A total of fifty-five sessions took place over three weeks, ranging from 20 minutes to over an hour. There were tears, artistic endeavors, confessions, prayers, and pleas for help. Hugs were frequently given when initiated or requested, and gratitude was frequently exchanged.

The students were informed that they could come to the counseling office after classes ended between 3:30 pm and 7:30 pm, in order to end around 8:00 pm. They could come if they were struggling with any personal issues, emotions, or any other troubling matters. However, almost every night I had to send girls home who were waiting to see me past 8:00 pm. I always encouraged them to return the next day or later in the week. Most of the time, they did.

Due to the number of students at the school, I rarely ever got a break. There would be around 6 sessions a day, going one after another from 3:00 pm until roughly 8:00 pm, Monday through Friday. Some days were shorter due to out-of-town travels, facilitating support groups at other locations, or visiting other schools to talk to entire classrooms. Much was different from what I was used to; I had no break between sessions to write notes and reflections, no planned appointments, and no assessment or background knowledge of the specific girl prior to seeing her.

All of the sessions were individual-based. If there had been more time, group sessions would have been organized since many of the girls’ issues and
struggles overlapped, but this was not feasible in the three weeks of the study.

Sessions varied in length according to: the art task involved, the number of sessions with that individual, and the content and intensity of their disclosure, which determined the amount of support needed. There were only three instances in which language became an issue. Because they were taught English as one of their core subjects in class, most of the girls spoke fluent English. Only the lower grades 1 to 3 were still developing their English skills; because the girls I saw ranged from grades 3 to 8, with only two in grade 3, language was rarely an issue.

Every first session began with introductions, including a handshake as was their custom, and then discussion about the informed consent and release form (see Appendix). At this time, confidentiality as well as my role was explained to them, and their grade and age was obtained on the form. It was immediately apparent how crucial this beginning was. I knew I had to appear friendly, supportive, and accepting from the very beginning because our time would be very limited. Aware of the significance of body language to their culture, I tried to use nonverbal cues, like smiling, with attentiveness and warmth in my facial expression to guide me in this. I was also mindful to appear composed and in control of myself and the surroundings. Immediately and thankfully, it appeared they felt they could trust me and that I would accept them regardless of what they told me. It was this way of creating a meaningful bond with each and every girl within an atmosphere of safety that allowed the “magic” of therapy to happen.
The Art Interventions

After completing the informed consent and release form, the girls were asked if they preferred to talk or create first. Frequently, they would respond immediately, explaining they were not artists or “good” at art. Yet, this did not prevent them from making an attempt. After starting to create, the verbal communication would naturally emerge.

Drawings and Paintings. For the first session, and unfortunately the only session for many, drawing and/or painting was the art task offered because of the one-time limit that had to be placed on the beads and dolls. They were given a choice of colored construction paper or white drawing paper, and chalks, crayons, markers, and watercolors. There was no limit placed on the number of sheets of paper or drawing/painting media. Allowing them to choose their media helped to empower them by giving them some of the control in the session. It also helped them feel more comfortable to be able to choose and use materials that were not completely foreign to them. Having many materials in front of them also appeared to provide an extra sense of security, since many of them came from situations where they had to leave many, if not all, of their personal belongings behind when coming to the school.

The girls selected both types of paper without any noticeable pattern, but the most common choices of media were markers and crayons. Many had never done any art with anything other than a pencil or crayons before these sessions.
Some girls were able to take a risk and chose to work with a new art medium, but many preferred sticking to what they felt was “safe.” However, only one of the girls who chose to paint with the watercolors had ever used them prior to her session.

After choosing their materials, they would look to me and wait for instruction. However, it was apparent that they had little opportunity to make their own choices and express themselves in much of their lives, so they were invited to draw whatever they felt like. Many times a pencil was requested before they could add color. A good “rubber,” or eraser, was almost always requested as well.

Many of them were quite careful and reserved, even though I informed them that there were no “mistakes” in art; there was no such thing as a “good artist” and it was okay to make a mess and have fun. However, this behavior was not much of a surprise since they came from lives having strict rules and punishment and knew little about being a child. Also, since this was a first encounter for many, it is understandable that they were still a little unsure of the whole realm of art therapy, the session, and me. Although I tried to establish safety, trust, and rapport as much as possible, a child can only accept as much as she is able to. Because of the trauma and mistrust in much of their pasts, being completely comfortable in new surroundings was likely going to be difficult for them.
It became quite apparent as more sessions passed that providing as much choice and decision-making as possible allowed them to feel the most at ease and least reserved. Being able to choose what to draw along with what materials to use gave them the opportunity to express what they most felt the need to express.

When I initially began at the school, I was unsure of how much involvement I should have when I was confronted with a girl who hesitated at making art and looked at me with a blank stare, waiting for my instruction. I tried to see how a directive would be responded to and offered the task of drawing “something that made you happy” on one side of the paper, and “something that made you sad” on the other. However, I received quite resistant or stereotypical responses when they would draw stuffed animals or favorite activities on the happy side and a toy or food they did not like on the other. Additionally, they did not have much to say after this. Their art did not relate to any of the painful emotions they were holding inside of them; instead it appeared to be a safe way to avoid, deny, or distract them from any pain they may have been feeling inside.

Fortunately, I quickly got the hint that besides their role in choosing their art media, being able to select their subject matter was crucial to their therapy. Giving them the freedom and permission to be active participants in the direction of their healing process was the encouragement they needed to be fully involved with the least resistance.
Even though the majority of their art was spontaneous and undirected, their art typically had a generalized form overall (see Figure 6). Houses were the most common subject they chose to draw, and then came flowers, portraits of me, themselves, or family members, and textbook images. Most of them drew houses in a similar fashion (see Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 6. ‘Stereotypical’ objects.

It was not until after working with them for more than one session that they were able to express their “own house” or make their artwork unique.
Figure 7. Typical house A.

Figure 8. Typical house B.
Sometimes they would attach labels to their stereotypic-looking items as seen in Figure 9. Besides labeling, they also gave their artwork grades or checkmarks, re-emphasizing the pressure they felt from class (see Figure 10).

Figure 9. Labeling  Figure 10. Grades and checkmarks.

I was aware that in many instances, stereotypical images were used as a defense to stay away from painful issues. Because of the limited time, I did not force any child to express more than she was able or comfortable with. I did not want to force any girl to go somewhere inside herself or open up sensitive, painful material without being able to fully deal with it.

Because creating their own art was something a lot of the girls had little exposure to, several girls would bring in drawing books and copy images (see
Figure 11), or draw something of my selection if they asked for a suggestion.

There was little spontaneity, but disciplined creations in the drawings and paintings.

![Figure 11. Copied images from a drawing book.](image)

Since houses were the most common item chosen to be drawn, they were explored very carefully. Their houses were typically drawn as rectangles with a square window on either side of the door in the center. However, more elaborate drawings included table and chairs and beds. Some of the girls drew both a Maasai hut and a modern house (see Figures 12 and 13).
Figures 12. A more elaborate house

Figure 13. A Maasai camp (manyatta)
The house may have been an image commonly chosen since it appeared that many of the girls did not feel like they had a “home” or sense of belonging at the school. Many would discuss their family environments as unsafe and unwelcoming. They were often abused or neglected instead of loved and nurtured. They blamed themselves and were blamed by their parents for their difficult lives.

However, the houses that they drew were announced with pride and a sense of accomplishment. When they described the houses they drew instead of their real homes from the past, they were happy and smiling. It was almost as if they were “fixing” their broken homes by creating welcoming houses in the sessions (see Figures 14 and 15). This appeared to instill hope in them for their families and their futures instead of drowning in the pain from their pasts.

*Figure 14.* House with interior included A.
Some girls, however, chose to express specific emotions through their art. One girl drew a volcano as her “anger coming out” (see Figure 16). Another drew a white bunny, saying it represented the pain that scratched her heart (see Figure 17).

Drawing and painting accomplished several things in the sessions. It seemed to ease the tension and give them a chance to feel safe and comfortable. Because they were given the opportunity to make their own choices, go at their own pace, and approach things however they wished, it also invited them to open up, let go, do what they wanted without any rules, and express their own
individuality. They were able to have fun and be the child they were. These were first opportunities for the majority of the girls since these essentials are left out of growing up in Kenya (Spear & Waller, 1993; Swadener et al., 2000).

Figure 16. Volcano of anger.

Figure 17. White bunny.
Being able to choose their paper and drawing materials also helped to raise their self-esteem and confidence by allowing them to become active participants in the direction of their own therapy, especially being in the presence of an adult figure. Many felt an even greater sense of mastery and self-worth being able to choose the content of their drawing or painting. They could express what they needed or desired most through choosing the subject matter. Disclosure often seemed easier for them also when it could be spontaneous and freely given, instead of being requested of them. Many of the girls had rough relationships with adults, from both their family backgrounds and from the harsh disciplining teachers. Their present circumstances allowed little opportunity for them to have a sense of control and choice in their lives. Having the freedom to make their own decisions in the presence of an older individual seemed quite empowering for many of them.

The girls were also given the freedom to be themselves and not just another schoolgirl. For the first time they were given permission to be the children they were. They quickly realized that it was okay to make mistakes and there was not a “correct” way to draw. They could create without rejection, which was a common fear. Their art was praised regardless of aesthetics, and they were all made to feel like they were good artists regardless of talent. They would smile broadly after creating, expressing a great sense of accomplishment for having created a beautiful image all on their own.
Not only was I able to model positive interaction for them, but they were also able to do this with the art. They could freely engage in the art without ridicule or punishment. They would end up with a positive result that they were proud of, instead of feeling guilt and regret for messing up or feeling unworthy.

Because words often seemed threatening or too distant to be able to describe their feelings and experiences, their art became an essential resource to reveal painful memories and emotions. It was “safe” to communicate with the art, knowing that they only had to verbalize what they chose to say about it; the rest they could keep to themselves. No other girl could mock them for what their art revealed, because only the artist would know its true meaning.

The girls were often able to replace their anger with creativity and ventilate their overbearing stresses. They could allow the art to control their overwhelming pasts, instead of feeling like they had to control and come up with the answers themselves. They often allowed the art to heal and comfort their painful emotions. Many times, they would describe a painful experience, and then draw a pleasant image to be able to replace the sadness they had just shared. I admired them for allowing the art and art process to heal their wounding memories.

At times it was evident that they also used the art as a way to further connect with and appeal to me. Many appeared to be starving for acceptance and appreciation, which they naturally received in sessions through praise,
encouragement, and admiration. They easily began to crave this response, so in addition to wanting to copy images in sessions to minimize their fear of messing up or doing a “bad job,” they would drop off thank-you letters and drawings that they did on their own time to show their gratitude and impress me. Occasionally, they would get their image design from the same card that a teacher may have had on her desk as well (see Figures 18 and 19).

Figure 18. Thank-you letter A.     Figure 19. Thank-you letter B.

Beadwork. The use of beads was intended to bring in a part of the Maasai culture to the therapy context, as beadwork is the women’s’ way of expressing and maintaining their culture in their tribes (Spear & Waller, 1993). Making
bracelets and necklaces proved to be a great way to empower children. Their jewelry became something they not only created on their own, but later worn as an outward sign of support. Pifalo (2002) introduced the intervention in his therapy sessions as a “string of strengths,” describing the jewelry as a positive transitional object that would remind the children of their healing process (Pifalo, 2002).

The jewelry-making, like the drawings, also became a way for the girls to create without having to abide by a pattern or strict structure. They could choose whatever shape and color of beads they wanted, and could make a necklace, bracelet, anklet, or anything else they desired. There were traditional round pony beads, heart-shaped, and other miscellaneous beads provided, all in assorted colors.

Some of the girls were able to start their jewelry on their own by tying a bead to one end so the others would not fall off. However, many needed assistance in doing this. The girls typically selected their beads with no color pattern; however, some were able to pick only one shape or style of bead. Many of the girls worked very quickly, adding their beads on the string and perhaps explaining why a pattern never developed. I let them work as they wished though; I would not disturb their creativity and fun. I was amazed how they would patiently struggle to fit the string through a bead with a small hole if they wanted that particular bead. Sometimes I would help by looking through the bag
or container for the ones they were using if they requested, or if they were following some sort of selection scheme as they strung their beads. Other times, they would talk while they worked and I supported and listened to them. If beads ever fell on the floor, many would blush in embarrassment and look ashamed, and then hurry to pick them up. I would act like it was not a problem at all, reminding them that we all make mistakes. They would be encouraged to continue and not to bother about the fallen beads. This response surprised many of them, since they expected the opposite reaction from an adult figure.

A new bracelet or necklace that they made seemed to have a great effect on the opinions they had of themselves. It made them feel special to have something so colorful belong to them; the fact that they made it themselves, to their own liking, without an authority’s rules or limitations, appeared to make them feel quite proud. Their jewelry became a symbol of their attention to healing and support in this process, not only to them but to others as well. They could show off their creations and receive praise and admiration, thus strengthening their self-image. Also, in a world where they were used to everyone having everything the same, with little room for individuality and self-expression, this was a clear contradiction and great way of empowerment. Therefore, upon leaving the session with their newly prized addition to their attire, they would feel like a unique individual in comparison to their classmates, which also heightened their view of themselves.
**Dolls.** The dolls were mostly used in instances where loneliness was a main theme. The dolls could be used to replace this overshadowing void. Many of the girls felt their pain or pasts were so depressing or horrible that no one would be able to understand them or would judge them for their traumatic histories. Many of them felt they could talk to no one about the pain they carried each day, the pain that kept them up at night praying endlessly to God. They would claim they felt safe and comfortable sharing their pain and struggles in therapy, but did not know what to do when not in session. In addition, their low self-esteem caused many to expect other girls to make fun of them if they tried to make friends. Their dolls became an attempt to take what they received in therapy and spread it into the rest of their lives.

The girls responded affectionately towards their dolls immediately after making them (see Figures 20 through 23). They felt encouraged and relieved that they could give their dolls the “power” of companionship. If they were able to return for another session, often times they claimed they were comforted at night by having “someone else” to talk to when they could not come see me or talk to anyone else.

The amount of instruction and assistance needed in making the dolls varied, regardless of their age or grade. It was clear how varied the level of competency, ability to follow instructions, and capacity to understand new
Figure 20. A girl with her doll A.

Figure 21. A girl with her doll B.
Figure 22. A girl with her doll C.

Figures 23. A girl with her doll D.
concepts must have been in the classrooms after seeing these variations in the therapy sessions. I later questioned a teacher about this and she agreed absolutely. Their placement in a grade was determined based on when they entered the school, their parents’ request, and their performance on their last National Examination. Their functioning and progress in the classroom were not seen to be as important. Some girls needed my assistance with each new part, or even asked me to do some of the steps for them. On the contrary, others completed the doll completely on their own with only my verbal instruction. The girls were able to choose the color of pipe cleaner for the arms and legs, the color of yarn for the hair, and the fabric for the dress. Once completed, they could also choose to add beads to the arms as bracelets.

It was inspiring to see how they smiled lovingly and in admiration at their dolls, waving them about once they were finished. They made them and handled them very delicately and carefully, and it was clear that this task was a great means of empowerment. The doll was often given a name when finished, if not while it was being made. Some of the biggest smiles I saw in the three weeks I was there occurred after the completion of a doll, as the girls caressed their doll’s hair or admired her dress.

The girls were informed that the dolls could contribute to the companionship they greatly desired and deserved. Their doll could be with them at all times, listen to them, and provide them safe company. They could disclose
whatever they desired without the fear of being judged, punished, or mocked. They were informed that their doll could help them with tough decisions; they could ask their dolls to make their tough decisions for them instead of feeling like they have to take on the pressure solely by themselves. Girls were also encouraged to practice role-playing with their dolls, including skits involving making new friends and talking to their teachers and families, so they could feel more confident and comfortable when in a real situation.

Sadly, some of the girls became quite cautious when leaving with their doll, fearing that if others saw it, it would be stolen. I tried to comfort them, yet knew their worry was valid. I would try to have them come up with a safe place to hide their doll in their dormitory before they left. However, I was afraid this might take away some of the benefit of being able to talk to it whenever they felt the urge. They may not have felt safe interacting with their doll in front of others in fear that the doll would be stolen or taken away.

Disclosure and Therapeutic Response

As mentioned earlier, being aware that I would only have a few sessions with any girl, it was essential to establish trust, rapport, and a safe friendly environment in the very first session. If I was not able to create an atmosphere for them to feel comfortable, accepted, and supported almost immediately, they would likely receive little benefit from our limited time together.
At times, they were asked to indicate how their disclosure affected them, but they frequently revealed this in their dialogue and artwork naturally. Sometimes, questions were directed to invite further insight or different perspectives, which also greatly intrigued and inspired them. The girls often admitted that therapy was the first time they had felt listened to and embraced the experience full-heartedly.

The art became the stepping stone to verbal communication and disclosure in many instances. The girls were always given a choice to talk or create first, yet even those who felt safer talking at first, discussed safe or surface things until art was incorporated.

The depth of information they were able to share with me even though we had just met was remarkable. They felt immediately safe and comfortable in sharing their difficult stories and situations. The majority of the girls were desperate to tell of their pasts and family hardships to someone they felt could support and listen to them. They wanted a presence that would not judge, criticize, or punish them for what they were so desperate to reveal. It seemed they wanted someone to talk to who would respond, “It is going to be okay. You will make it. You have a future.”

Many times, after they described their family backgrounds and struggles, they would sit in silence and wait for my response. Other times they would start crying before finishing and fight their tears to complete their story. For many of
the girls, this was the first time that they were able to share their difficult realities, and they appeared to need more than just verbal support. I held their hands as they shared if they seemed willing and craving a more personal connection and a lot of hugs were given at the end. Many of the girls lacked love and acceptance in their past, as their parents were often preoccupied with survival needs, and my ability to be a temporary nurturing presence was important. They came to realize that physical touch from an adult did not always have to be punishing or aggressive, but could provide a sense of security and warmth.

Much of this sharing kept the girls in the past and they talked a great deal about what was. They often blamed themselves for their horrible circumstances, instead of realizing they had no control over the unfortunate catastrophes that clouded their lives. Because of this, they carried intense unresolved feelings of loss, guilt, sadness, and anger when remembering painful experiences, particularly those that involved deaths and illnesses in their families.

They were supported during disclosure as much as possible, while being reminded as gently as possible that the past will always be a part of them and sadness will never completely disappear from anyone’s life. They were comforted to know that they did not have to get lost in their sorrow or keep their attention on painful memories. They could choose to focus on their current situation and where they wanted to go with their lives.
They were redirected as much as possible towards their art and how they were coping at the school. I tried with much care and compassion to help them realize that they could not allow their traumatic histories to destroy who they were. They were encouraged to ask themselves questions like, “Is what I am doing right now making me happy or getting me to where I want to be?”

It was also inspiring to many of them to imagine what they would like to be when they grew up. Some of them reacted as if no one had ever asked them this question before. Developing hopefulness for their futures, and viewing their lives as full of opportunity contributed greatly to their self-images. I tried using myself as an example, appearing as someone motivated and hard-working. I tried to appear as a successful, competent woman going after my dreams and not letting others’ discouragement and harassments or the limits of society get in the way. This was when I realized how my self-disclosure could contribute to their healing process by being a concrete example that it is possible to make dreams come true.

Besides needing ears to listen and a presence to support and understand their emotions, some girls also wanted answers or a solution. Many would look to me with a face that read, “So what am I supposed to do now?” Being wary of giving advice or taking too much control of their own personal growth and healing, my first attempt to answer their questions was to try to come up with an answer together or through the art. Other times, I would answer their questions
with questions of my own, redirecting their focus on themselves and the aspects of their lives that they did have control over.

Because faith in God was such an enormous and powerful significance in all of their lives, many times a reference to spirituality and prayer was a common response. Many were comforted hearing that it was permissible to pray and talk to God whenever and however they wished. Many issues that they had no control over but worried excessively about, such as siblings being left home alone or their parent’s alcoholism or abandoning the family, were directed toward faith and prayer. They felt relieved when they found out they could let God take care of these things instead of worrying themselves while not being able to do anything.

When the majority of their disclosure was dealt what they did not have, like money or friends or the ability to see their families, they were encouraged to redirect their focus on what they did have. It was remarkable to see their tremendous gratitude for their families, school, and their own lives despite their daily struggles and tragic pasts. Many were also quite motivated to do well in school, and strengths like these were highlighted. By focusing on the things they were proud of and thankful for, sessions helped them to feel quite full rather than miserably empty.

Contributing to their emptiness was the persistent loneliness that many of the girls experienced at the school. As mentioned earlier, many complained that they were very lonely and without friends. They carried feelings of inferiority,
isolation, and betrayal from their past relationships into their present lives. They did not feel that any of the other girls would be able to understand them, so there was no use making the effort. They did not trust to make friends with anyone, thinking it was only a matter of time before they would be betrayed or their things would be stolen or stories would be made up about them to hurt them. Others felt they did not know how to initiate friendships.

Once again, they turned to me for answers. I tried to model positive ways of interacting as much as possible. If they could create meaningful relationships with me, hopefully they would feel like it was possible to do the same with others at the school. This was also a way to illustrate that bad object relationships could remain in the past through establishing a corrective emotional experience together in the present.

If they appeared emotionally constricted or socially inhibited because of their past relationships, I tried to help them realize that they deserved the respect of others by displaying my own respect for them. I also attempted to make them feel powerful, by exaggerating the strength and power in their words and in their art. I wanted to strengthen their confidence, as confidence can be quite powerful in creating opportunity and respect from others.

I comforted them in knowing they were not the only ones feeling lonely and wishing to have friends at the school (this was when I wished to be able to have group sessions the most!). I let them know that there were others who were
struggling with similar issues and would love someone to talk to as well. This was a surprise to many of them; most felt that they were alone in their battle to survive. Many felt they were the only ones with a depressing past, which was understandable since many of the girls would put on a façade so that no one would be able to decipher their true realities. This also explained why their holding onto and pretending to feel the opposite every day made them practically explode with this information during their first exposure of therapy.

Other girls were struggling with their self-image because they really took their academic performance as a sign of self-worth. They would tell me they were “bad” because they did not do as well as they wanted to and were not one of the top five students in their class. Most of their teachers would remind them everyday who was at the top in their class, and would praise and acknowledge these select few while reprimanding those that fell underneath.

The classroom atmosphere also greatly affected their view of themselves in other ways, whether in or out of class. It was difficult for the girls to accept that misunderstanding a concept or making a mistake did not make them worthless. Also, they felt there was something wrong with them if they were ever confused, tired, or hungry, because in class they would be yelled at by the teacher for these things. They were not encouraged to ask questions if they were confused, but only to speak up when they knew an answer to a question asked. Furthermore, if they never spoke up or raised their hand because they were never
called on, if they did not feel safe talking in front of the class, or simply if they
never knew the correct answer, they were reprimanded for not paying attention.

Trying to help them focus on the strengths they did have in school and
other areas was a great way to empower them. Many did well in one particular
subject in school and benefited from realizing this. They were comforted to learn
that life was not all-or-nothing like they had assumed. Their art greatly
contributed to this process because they were all informed they had remarkable
artistic talent despite how it looked or what they drew.

The Girls’ Responses to Therapy

Quite often after a session, a girl would return later that day or the
following day with some art she did on her own time or with a thank-you letter
(see Figures 24 and 25). Their level of appreciation and gratitude toward me was
very touching. Many times they would say “I love you” to me. It was evident
how desperate they were for someone who really cared about them. They were
also greatly affected by personal attention due to their lack of parental support for
much, if not all, of their lives. It was easy to see how they had little opportunity
to talk about themselves or express their uniqueness in their pasts.
Challenges to Therapy

Setting limits and boundaries on the beadwork and doll-making was immediately seen to be essential after these tasks were first initiated. Girls started to come knocking with nothing to talk about, and only wanting to have a session with me in order to make jewelry. Or friends of the girls I had seen would ask these girls to return for another session so that they could make them a bracelet too. Given that there were 640 students at the school, it was obvious there were not enough beads or time to be able to meet all these requests!
Therefore, to prevent unfairness, it was immediately established that the beads would only be offered after the first session had already occurred, and would only be available once. This also ended up serving as a great way to encourage the girls to come for more than one session.

After the first doll was created, the same wave of response occurred, so naturally the same rules applied. However, this then created another difficult conflict because girls that wanted a necklace or doll of their own, but did not have reason to come to therapy (or so they thought), would try to steal necklaces or dolls from those who made them.
The girls' loitering around the office while waiting for a session was a difficult issue that I had to address constantly. Girls eager for a session with me were constantly outside my door, hoping to be the next one invited into my office. Unfortunately, the door did not prevent any noise from leaking in or out. I was constantly wary of confidentiality and others listening in on the conversations taking place. Knowing that other girls might be able to hear what was being said, some girls were hesitant to share. I tried to limit the loitering as much as possible.

Interruptions were also frequent, like knocking on my door, or even opening it. After the first day, I realized I had to make a sign that read “In session” on one side and “Please come in!” on the other. However, it was commonly overlooked and ignored. Even staff members interrupted sessions on a few occasions!

As soon as I heard someone outside my door while I was in session, I would apologize to the girl in session, walk out and remind the girls waiting that if they waited outside my office instead of returning at a later time, I would refuse to see them that day. Unfortunately, there were times I had to say this on several occasions for the message to be fully understood and taken seriously. I did have to refuse girls in more than one instance. A part of me wished I had more time to be at the school in order to avoid this craze to “see me now or miss out.” But I knew I had to organize the time I had in the best way I could.
The time constraint brought many more challenges. Having to treat each initial session like it may be the only session was a great challenge. Many girls wanted to have more sessions with me, but were simply unable due to the time limitation. This was especially difficult because of the trauma and intense disclosure which was commonly exposed. Girls were constantly asking for my stay in Kenya to be longer, since many first-timers appeared during my final days. It became essential for me to be a caring and supportive listener if nothing else, so that the time we did have could be as valuable and beneficial as possible.

During my last week, I was only able to meet with each girl one time. If I did not stick to my limit of only one session that week, I would not have been able to be fair to everyone who wished to see me that week. This made it evident how “termination” was not appropriate in most instances, so the session focused on a meaningful good-bye as often as possible.

It took a while for many girls to understand my role at their school, since counseling and therapy was very new and unheard of in the area where the school was located. I felt weary some girls did not come to see me because they did not fully comprehend my function. Therefore, not being able to see all the girls who could have benefited was a hard truth that had to be accepted.

Also, because of the traumatic experiences and conflicts many of the girls brought to their sessions, art therapy provided a means to ventilate their stories and receive support, but to help them fully heal or recover from this pain was
practically impossible in such short time. Both the girls and I were grateful for their belief in God; to be able to hand over some of these feelings of incompleteness to Him was a never-ending grace.
Because of the number of sessions that took place, it would be impossible to highlight every aspect of every session with each girl. Therefore, an overview of the sessions with two of the girls has been included to illustrate a more specific and in-depth sense of what therapy was like. Please note that their names have been changed to respect their confidentiality.

*First Case Example: Ruth*

*Ruth (see Figure 26) was in grade 6 and was 13 years old. She was referred to me by the Headmaster and other teachers upon having much difficulty in class and with the other girls. She had been raped by another teacher at a*
nearby school, and was then sent to this school to continue her studies. Much of the staff felt she was having difficulty coping and behaving from never having the proper opportunity to deal with her traumatic experience. They were relieved when I came to the school in hopes that I would be able to help her deal with her trauma and hopefully help start her on a journey toward a healthier, happier life.

Ruth was taller than most of the girls her age, with her hair cut short to her scalp. She often bowed her head, and appeared to be careful when and with whom she made eye contact. At first she would appear simply shy of other people, but after hearing her story, it appeared her quiet shielding presence had more to do with caution and distrust of people she was unfamiliar with. In session, she was abrupt in her responses, yet soft-spoken—likely due to feeling shy and intimidated, but also due to not knowing much of the English language. She bowed her head frequently, but made eye contact with me whenever she spoke.

I was forewarned that her English skills were limited, but that she was open to see me and interested in art. The language barrier was a definite challenge throughout our sessions because it was difficult for her to understand questions if they required more than a “yes” or “no.” I ended up talking a lot with my hands and pointing to words in my Kiswahili dictionary to help guide our limited verbal dialogue.
First session. I focused the first session on our relationship and trust, so did not expect to get much out of the art or to find out much about her story. After realizing that the girls’ drawings often elicited more response, and also due to our limited verbal communication, I motioned to her that she could draw whatever she wished. I did not want her to misunderstand a directive if I chose to give her one. She chose to draw on brown paper with crayons, and illustrated a house, a girl, and a hut (see Figure 27). Curious about how she would draw a tree, I asked her to draw one. She did not understand the notion of talking about what she created, saying it was just art, not her.

Figure 27. Ruth’s first drawing.
Deciding to move in a different direction, I then asked her about a time she felt sad and a time she felt happy. She began to talk about being yelled at in class when leaning her head on her hand, which made her sad. She expected me to reprimand her as well it seemed. However, seeing that I supported her sadness without judging her actions, she appeared more comfortable and at ease. She began telling me she was happy because she had a court date tomorrow morning where she was hoping that the teacher who abused her would be sentenced. She portrayed this upcoming event in Figure 28. She drew herself in all yellow but with black ears and the teacher, whom she also labeled, was drawn in black. Because her figure could barely be seen on the page, she may have been emphasizing her need to be heard or feeling unseen in spite of the teacher. In the art, she depicted how the abuser fastened her hands above her head on the left, and in my office mimicked this position in front of me with her own hands. I was amazed by her boldness. To the right of this image is her happy self. The lack of verbal language was evidenced in processing the art.

I asked if she would like to get rid of the teacher for what he had done to her. She took a red crayon and drew an “x” over the teacher’s figure. Immediately after, she smiled, proud of what she had done. I complimented her actions.
Figure 28. Revealing herself and her teacher.

Since she disclosed her rape in this first session, it appeared that the incident was something she was willing to share. Upon questioning her emotions and how she felt about herself, and with as much as I was able to comprehend, she did not seem to blame herself for the incident, but felt a lot of pain and sadness from it. I encouraged her to come back for another session if she was willing. She said she would and then thanked me.

Session two. She came again the very next day with letters. She explained that she had been asked to write them by her chief and the court,
describing what had happened to her. Unfortunately, it was written in her native
language, but she wanted me to get them translated so I could understand them.

I was surprised at how quickly she was opening up to me. But, it was also
clear how much she desired me to understand her and felt the difficulty of our
language barrier. This would likely explain why she brought me the letters. She
also started using her hands a lot to help relate what she was trying to tell me.
She described for me how she hated having her hands tied above her head and
being helpless when she was being abused. She revealed that the teacher had told
her he would kill her if she said anything, but she decided to tell anyway. For this
I congratulated her. She was also angry that she was doubted by the Headmaster
at the teacher’s school and by her chief, because the teacher had denied
everything. She was told by the chief and her pastor that she was making this up
for attention and was advised to continue on quietly with her education.

She wanted to make jewelry in this session, and chose the beads based on
no particular color sequence, but with similar shapes. She was able to start the
jewelry by herself, and kept the beads she wanted to use in the lid of the jar. She
enjoyed doing this a great deal and worked very quickly. She ended up making a
bracelet and anklet for each wrist, and a necklace as well. I put them all on her
when she finished and we both smiled at them afterward. I applauded all that she
had accomplished, and she appeared quite proud. She expressed her sincere
gratitude when leaving, for my listening and for the beads.
Session three. I saw Ruth in the morning with a group of friends, and she remained silent with her head down. It was unclear whether she was embarrassed seeing me while with her friends, or she did not want the other girls to know she had a relationship with me.

She stopped by later that afternoon to report that the court date had been postponed until the following week because the teacher had not shown up. She felt angry for having to wait longer. I asked if she wanted to make a doll to help her make it through another week. She eagerly accepted my offer, but also wanted to make more jewelry. I had to decline because of the limitations I had placed on the beads, and questioned to myself how much they had affected her motive for returning. However, with each encounter, she appeared more lively and relaxed in her face and actions. She bowed her head less as well. This session was quick, as I allowed the girls to decide when they felt the session was over.

Session four. Again she came with the news that the court date was postponed because of the teacher’s absence. I was a little skeptical of whether she was confused or was telling me accurate information, but I was careful not to reveal this. She wanted to draw once more (see Figure 29). I was intrigued that she chose bright red paper this time instead of the dull brown paper like before. She also used more color, even though still drawing in rather small proportions. She drew a house with a rainbow roof! She also drew herself and her teacher, but
this time she was portrayed bigger than him. I asked if she felt bigger than the teacher, and she said yes, because she was not letting him ruin or control her life. I praised her for her confidence and strength. She also drew a ball, pencil, and cup. This was the first time she was able to focus on things other than the rape. It did not appear to be a distraction, but evidence of a shift that she was starting to heal from the trauma, even though it seemed a rather quick shift toward healing for such a traumatic experience. She was able to identify other positive activities she liked—she revealed that she likes to play ball with others her age, draw, and write.

Figure 29. Ruth’s final image.
Toward the end of this session, Ruth claimed that she was not going to be able to eat dinner that night. In asking her why, she reported that someone had stolen her plate. (At the school, they were each given a plate that they had to have with them in order to get served. They were not allowed to use anything else. They can purchase a replacement plate, but rarely did they have any money to do so). I told her that I would look into this for her. This also seemed evidence that she felt safe and supported to bring up a matter like this. Again, she thanked me for my time and efforts before leaving.

I went and got her a plate and had another girl deliver it to her at dinnertime. I hoped that this would not become a pattern, but felt like it was a minor yet acceptable step to take in order to remedy the situation.

Because this session occurred during my last week at the school, I was not able to have another session with Ruth. Yet I was grateful that she came by one last time to say farewell. She thanked me again, not only for the plate but for our time together. I thanked her as well for all that she had shared with me. We hugged and I took her photograph (which Kenyans see as a compliment if they know you are not taking the photograph to sell it).

Second Case Example: Mary

Mary was a big-boned, short-haired girl with wide-eyes and a curious look on her face. She was 13 years old and in grade 6. She was quite fluent in
English, and I knew right away there would be no language barrier in our sessions.

Session one. Mary was one of the first girls to come see me of her own free will, and quickly let me know why. Immediately after filling out the consent form, she began telling me how she could concentrate on nothing else but her father’s and favorite cousin’s deaths. She claimed their faces would stare at her from the chalkboard in class; their voices would call to her at night when she would try to sleep unsuccessfully. She said she received no support from her mother, who was only interested in beating her. Along with not being able to talk to her mother, Mary felt no one else would believe her if she tried to tell them of her struggle.

Not having anyone to talk to, she was always feeling lonely at school. This also made it hard for her to stay motivated and want to finish school. However, her dream had been to go to Boston where her sister lived. She and her father used to talk of taking a trip together someday.

She did not want to do any art, but wanted to know if there was anything she could do to help her make it through her days. I asked what she was good at, and she admitted that she liked to write. I had asked if she had things that she wished she could have told her father and cousin but never got a chance. She quickly responded in agreement, and so I suggested that she write letters to each of them, telling them the things she wanted to tell them and anything else that
came up. I asked her if she felt safe doing this, and she said it was a good idea.
She asked me for a piece of paper to write on, and I gave her several sheets. From her quick yet elated goodbye, it appeared she was excited to approach this suggestion to help her in her with her grief.

Session two. Mary returned the very next day with a letter to her father. She claimed it helped her a lot in expressing her feelings. She wrote how she wished she was able to open up to him more when they were together so she could tell him her problems.

She asked if she could make a necklace, and feeling that it might help to comfort her and lighten her mood, I thought it was a good idea. She strung the beads randomly and sporadically and needed my assistance starting it and tying it together when finished. She was proud of it when she finished, and appreciative of me for providing the opportunity.

Mary definitely tested my boundaries. At times her refusal to act according to my boundaries confused me and other times she made it quite hard for me to stick to them. She returned four times later that same day, interrupting a session each time. The first time was to bring to me another letter she had written. Although I was grateful that the letters appeared to be helping her, I had to stick to the rules that I had established. I explained to her each time that I only had the time and opportunity to see each girl one time a day. I did not understand why she did not comprehend this. However, I told her if I did not have any girls
come see me after supper, that I would allow her to read her letter to me then.

Things turned out in her favor, and she was able to do this. I re-explained why I could not see her more than once a day, but that I was giving her this chance because she had been so persistent and I did not want to discourage her from writing the letters.

She then returned again as I was writing my session notes, but just to ask for paper. She told me that what I had given her yesterday had been stolen and she forgot to ask me earlier. It was clear that Mary would likely be the tickle in my ribs throughout my time in Kenya.

**Session three.** She brought me a letter again; this one written to her cousin. I read it out loud, but she did not want to discuss it. Instead, she wanted to make a doll and named it Tracy. She needed my assistance throughout, but accomplished most of it on her own.

Mary also asked if I had seen one of her friends who had a session with me earlier, and I became immediately skeptical of confidentiality. I told her if they chose to talk about their art therapy sessions with each other, that was okay, but I could not do the same.

It had been visiting weekend at the school, and none of her relatives came to see her. She claimed this made her angry at God because when she asked for things, He did not always do what she wanted. Normally, I would be hesitant about how to respond to such a spiritual message, but faith and conversation about
God at this school were regular occurrences. So, I reassured her to keep praying because God knows what is best for her.

She then wanted to know if she could make more jewelry. I had to remind her of my limit on the beads. This was another instance when she wanted to see how far she could go with me, and if I would stick to my initial position. I was curious about what she was hoping to accomplish by doing this. I was also wary that she was very focused on what she wanted, particularly attention, although not abnormal for her age and circumstances. She wanted to be visited, she wanted many sessions, she wanted more beads, and she even asked for money or soda. I redirected her toward what she claimed was helping her—the letters. She said she appreciated writing them very much because she heard their voices less and saw their images less everywhere she went. So I gave her more paper to write more letters.

Session four. Mary did not bring me a letter this time. Instead, she was willing to do art in this session. She painted a church and a figure of herself, and wrote, “I love you,” across the bottom of the painting (see Figure 30). Watercolors were unfamiliar to her, but she enjoyed learning how to use them and experimenting with them. The more sessions I had with her, the more apparent it seemed that she was starving for attention, especially one-on-one attention. Her background suggested that she had little of this type of attention for much of her life. It also appeared that she was becoming quite comfortable with our time
together as well, since she was willing to do art this time, despite claiming she was “not good at art.”

Figure 30. Mary’s church and self-portrait

Session five. I was wary how this session would begin, because Mary had interrupted me two times earlier that day. I asked her if she thought about why she felt this was okay. For the first time, she was able to think about how it affected me instead of focusing on just what she wanted. Therefore she did not respond to me right away, but simply sat in front of me ignoring the issue. Then she said she understood why I had the rule and that she would follow it from now on. I was thankful that she was able to receive this awareness in a calm manner instead of in a harsh or punishing way.
However, I immediately felt regret about this exchange, not only because this would be our last session together, but also because right after this conversation, she blurted out that her mother had passed that Saturday! She stated this so matter-of-factly, it stunned me. I wanted to believe her, so I was also concerned that Mary might have been in shock. She never talked lovingly of her mother, and this seemed to make it quite clear how truly detached she was from a real mother her whole life. Perhaps this was concrete evidence how removed many of these girls were from their personal lives, and how much they had numbed their feelings and separated from their families emotionally. She plainly claimed she did not feel like thinking about it because the National Examinations were next week, and she needed to focus on her studies. Her mother’s funeral service would be that weekend, and she said it did not mean anything to her that she was going to have to miss it.

I struggled with how to respond to all of this. I told her I was sorry for her loss and asked her if she needed anything. Being our last session, she wanted to do a painting together, and chose the most commonly drawn object by the girls to illustrate—a house. She drew the house, and I painted the grass and the sky (see Figure 31). She did this very quickly though. I imagined it would have been hard for her to really take the time, with all the emotions she was already trying to avoid. I invited her to hold on to our image, and told her I would pray for her and her family.
She thanked me for coming up with the idea for writing the letters, knowing that she could always write another when times got hard. She claimed she was motivated to finish school. At the end, we hugged tightly.

She stopped by again the next day to say a final good-bye. I was touched and wished her the best in making her trip to America.
Chapter VII

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introducing art therapy to traumatized girls at a boarding school in Kajaido, Kenya, was a remarkable and unforgettable experience both for the girls and for me. The therapy sessions, art process, and therapeutic relationships appeared to have a positive impact on the girls’ views of themselves—expressed through their words, hugs, thank-you letters, and art creations. I began to see many smiles, receive pleasant greetings, and saw more positive interactions between the girls as my days progressed at the school. Whether I saw a girl only once or several times during my limited stay at the school, I felt as if I was making a positive impact on the lives of the girls at the school.

Art therapy was a completely new and unheard of phenomenon at the boarding school and throughout much of the country. In a world where daily survival focuses on disease prevention, early pregnancy, poverty reduction, and searching for employment, developing a positive sense of one’s self hardly seems possible. Yet this ignorance towards self-awareness appears to contribute to the threatening cycle that continues to keep the Maasai people in a constant struggle. The women feel like they have no purpose or ability to make a difference and develop meaningful futures for themselves and their children.

Therefore, the main focus of art therapy at the school was to empower the girls so they could feel that they mattered—not only to themselves, but also to
their classmates and teachers, their families, and their society. Together, the girls and I discovered how art could transform and offer them a meaningful way to express pride in who they were. The girls realized they were much more than just people needing only basic needs for survival. They learned that they could receive respect and that they deserved it, which in turn helped them to respect themselves.

As previous research indicates in working with traumatized children, the art tasks in this study helped the girls to uncover unresolved painful memories and emotions from their past lives, but deal with them in the present in a trustworthy and supportive environment. Their traumatic experiences and painful feelings emerged as they created their art in the moment, allowing their creativity to be a safe container and acceptable way to find their voice and tell their story.

How essential and empowering it was for the girls to be given control over the sessions’ development and what activities they would engage in was immediately apparent. This was an enlightening opportunity for them—perhaps a first for many—to feel worthy and powerful through making their own choices, especially in the presence of an adult. Simultaneously, they were encouraged to play, make a mess, have fun, and be a child; all rarities in their lives yet necessary for any child growing up.

The sessions existed in a friendly atmosphere and presence that attempted not to judge, ridicule, or reject them, but to comfort and praise them for their
strengths and abilities to vent such difficulties and intense material. They were also encouraged to focus on their current situations as much as possible through questions about their present experiences so that their painful memories would not control them or destroy their self-concepts. They were further empowered by identifying their strengths and coping skills, creating hope for their futures, and viewing their lives full of opportunities instead of limitations.

The art tasks the girls created consisted of three art forms—drawing and painting, doll-making, and beadwork. Much of their emotional release and stress ventilation occurred through their drawings, with the most frequent subject matter being the house. This seemed to associate with an intense longing to feel a sense of “home,” since most came from quite disturbing family backgrounds and currently lived at a school that did not offer much sense of comfort or belonging. They also preferred to draw stereotypical images when feeling the need to stay “safe,” or they would illustrate images of gratitude in order to please me and show their appreciation.

Because the girls benefited greatly by having a part in decision-making, this was carried into the art-making process through allowing them to choose what to draw and selecting the intervention and materials. The few times that a specific directive was used, the art task was approached with more resistance and defenses, and safe or stereotypical images were the typical outcome. Perhaps if more time was available, this could have been dealt with more.
Their favorite art tasks, the beaded jewelry and dolls, offered external symbols of support and provided concrete testimony of their achievements in therapy. These tasks provided a way for the girls to show others what they were able to accomplish, therefore contributing to their empowerment. The beads helped them to connect with their cultural background as well, as beadwork was the woman’s way of ownership and pride in the Maasai culture. The dolls also provided a means for them to share and talk about their feelings and difficult lives in privacy. They often felt too ashamed, fearful, or inhibited to talk to anyone else, or assumed that the other girls at the school wouldn’t listen or understand what they were going through.

Because of the popularity of the beadwork and dolls, they also became a lesson for me in setting boundaries and limitations. In order to remain true to the purpose and intentions of art therapy, and avoid sessions occurring for the sole purpose of having a new necklace or doll, each girl was limited one opportunity to make one of each. This also allowed the limited time available for this study to be used for those girls who needed it most.

I hope to return to Kajaido in the near future to be able to do more at the school. I also hope to stay for a much longer duration than the short three weeks over which this study took place. The time limitation made it quite challenging because how or when healing might occur for a girl depended not only on her interaction in the art process, but also on the therapeutic relationship. However,
developing the necessary relationship needed in order to uncover painful material takes time and patience from the therapist and the client. Therefore, I immediately tried to appear as friendly, encouraging, and supportive as I could be, in order to allow every possibility to unfold. Simultaneously, I had to be mindful not to encourage the girls to open up too much repressed or unresolved material because they would likely not be able to appropriately and fully deal with intensely traumatic or repressed material in the little time that we had together. Due to this dilemma, I am curious if having more time available to allow sessions to become more intimate might help to limit the stereotypical and copied drawings, as well as the girls’ attempts to please as they increasingly became more confident and comfortable in working with the art and with me.

Another desire in returning to the school would be to introduce group sessions in addition to individual sessions. There was not enough time during this study to be able to organize groups that could offer beneficial healing for the girls. However, many of the girls were dealing with similar emotional conflicts and interpersonal difficulties. Many girls felt that none of the other students would understand their struggles and consequently felt alone in their pain. Their isolation and depression only increased from not trusting the other girls and feeling unable to make friends. Group therapy would offer the girls an opportunity to hear similarities in each other’s stories, identify with others, and create avenues to make meaningful friendships.
Before returning to Kajaido, however, I also desire to learn the Kiswahili language. Although being restricted to the English language did not prevent art therapy from being effectively administered, knowing their language may help them feel that I could identify and understand them on an even deeper level. This may even encourage more sensitive disclosures that the girls felt desperate to share but could not. Common language would also contribute to a greater level of comfort and trust in sessions between the therapist and child.

It might have also been beneficial to know their teachers and Headmaster better than I did, as well as know more about how their education was administered. I sat in a few classes to gain an understanding of their academic experience and was shocked at first. I had done prior research and was familiar how most of the emphasis was on the National Examination, and punishment was much harsher than in Western educational systems. I was also aware of the public embarrassment that was associated with punishments occurring in front of the other classmates. But I was not aware of the respect demanded by the teachers. I had not been aware of the exaggerated emphasis on class rank, which was announced to the girls on a regular basis. The girls would tell me about being corrected for a mistake or mannerism or not being one of the top students, and I quickly saw how drastically this lowered the girls’ self-esteem. I was also not aware of the intense competition among the girls, trying to be the one called on to answer the teacher’s question in order to get recognition or praise. Girls would
even steal each others’ writing utensils so they could not complete their homework.

Because education and after-school chores were the only aspects of life these girls knew at the school, I soon realized how much their daily repetitive lifestyles kept them from dealing with their internal conflicts and painful memories. But, this also kept them living a monotonous lifestyle instead of having an opportunity to express themselves and discover their individuality. They all wore the same school uniforms and lived out the same lifestyle. Observing this, it was no surprise how competition and isolation naturally developed. Knowing more about these aspects may have also affected how I would have directed the art therapy sessions.

Nonetheless, art therapy was able to give the girls more than a break away from this repetitive living. They were invited to be whoever they desired to be at that moment in time, and could express it creatively through art. They could reveal as much emotion and conflict as they wished in a safe and accepting atmosphere. They could feel understood and listened to. And they could feel like their own person for them, not the daughters or students that their parents and teachers instructed them to be.

Art therapy accomplished the merging of two cultures and two worlds into one that made sense and was meaningful to both them and me. I did not know their native Kiswahili language, but the girls had the ability to describe their
painful experiences in English and in their art. Through playing with creativity, the girls at the boarding school developed hope for their futures; and because of their desperation for my part in this, I am destined to return.

Figure 32. Saying farewell.
References


Appendix

Informed Consent and Release Form

I, ___________________________________________, have been informed of the purpose and intent of the research to take place and agree to participate. I am aware that confidentiality is guaranteed at all times unless I am in danger to myself or others, or I know of another minor in danger.

I have been notified that if any photography, quotation, or artwork that I am a part of is used in the results of this study, any identifiable information of every participant will not be included to respect my anonymity. In addition, my rights, needs, and values will be placed in high regard and considered first when decisions are being made about the data collected.

The researcher, Stephanie Spisak, has informed me of her background, having a B.A. in art therapy and psychology and currently aiming to get her Master of Arts in Art Therapy. She has informed me that all data collected in this study will be used solely for educational purposes and only with my permission.

____________________________________________    ______________
Participant                                      Date

____________________________________________    ______________
Stephanie Spisak, B.A.                           Date