

Mandala Mornings: A Creative Approach for Elementary School Counselors

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Abstract

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) has identified one of the ways elementary school counselors can assist students to become successful in school is to offer small group counseling through the responsive services delivery system. Expressive arts, such as creating mandalas, provide a non-threatening approach for school counselors to support the students they serve. This article describes how elementary school counselors in a large school district incorporated mandalas in the delivery of their responsive services. An example of an early morning group using mandalas is described.

Keywords: mandala, expressive arts, school counseling, responsive services, group counseling

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Professional school counselors play an important role in supporting academic success for all students (ASCA, 2012). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) provides a framework for school counselors to implement comprehensive, preventative, and developmental interventions that focus on the personal, academic, and career needs of students (ASCA, 2012). School counselors deliver these interventions through guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support (ASCA, 2012). However, challenges such as large caseloads can impede a school counselor's ability to provide services for all students. Through the responsive services component, school counselors often provide short term individual and group counseling for students experiencing difficulties (ASCA, 2012). However, with an increased emphasis on high stakes testing, many school counselors are no longer permitted to pull students from the classroom to provide group counseling services, requiring school counselors to develop creative strategies to maximize their availability for students. While most school counselors report facilitating small groups, limited time for group counseling is the most often cited obstacle to leading these groups (Dansby, 1996; Steen, Bauman & Smith, 2007). School counselors from a large suburban school district in the Southwest consulted to address the challenges they encountered when trying to provide responsive services for students. Through their collaboration, they developed unique expressive arts counseling approaches based on mandalas. They titled these activities "Mandala Mornings." This article describes the rationale for developing this approach and provides examples of

Mandala Mornings activities that other school counselors can utilize on their own campuses.

Mandalas as Expressive Arts Counseling

Research in the use of art across a broad spectrum of mental health interventions has been growing for the last 15 years (Ziff & Beamish, 2004). Scholars such as Gladding (2005), and Rogers (1993) have advocated for the use of arts as an adjunct to counseling. Artistic expression has been identified as an effective and creative counseling technique to help clients explore their own unique worlds (Wiener & Battles, 2002). Art materials and activities provide counselors with opportunities to encourage client self-expression, awareness, and growth. Unconscious material is often brought into consciousness and is then open to processing in the counseling relationship (Jackson, Muro, Lee, & DeOrnellas, 2008). Opportunities for clients to work on personal awareness and personal growth contributes to the psychological well-being of the client and can enhance his or her personal life, and personal relationships.

Expressive arts may seem less threatening than verbal expression for some clients. Therefore creating mandalas, or circular representations can be a creative outlet to potentially help clients (McIntyre, 1990). While the word mandala derives from the Sanskrit language meaning circular or round, the use of circular forms for meditation and self-exploration are found in several cultures and religions, such as Native American, Celtic, Aboriginal, and Christian (Olsen & Avital, 1992). Mandalas can represent spiritual wholeness and the equilibrium of all cosmic and life forces of our world, symbolizing the totality, including the outer as well as the inner forces of

existence (Slegelis, 1987). Therefore, mandalas can be an important indicator of the process of personal growth for a client.

Clients with little or no training in art have discovered that they have the ability to draw and paint mandalas (Roberts, 2000). The creation of mandalas is not limited by any specific expressive art method. While most often drawn on paper with a pencil or crayon, mandalas can also be drawn in the dust, painted on canvas, or developed through collage. Through the drawing, painting or construction of a mandala a client's process of individuation may be enhanced (Miller, 2005). As a client grows in personal self-reflection, the design of the mandala may change from a simplistic form into a more intricate design, moving the clients towards fulfillment of their own identities and purposes in life (Hansen, 2005).

Mandalas in Counseling

Carl Jung used mandalas in his own personal life as a tool for reflection (Henderson, Mascaro, Rosen, & Skillern, 2007), and the study of mandalas became a key focus in his work with dreams (Wiener & Battles, 2002). An important aspect of Jung's therapy included the interpretation of mandalas, however, Jung did not interpret the mandalas himself, believing clients could develop their own conclusions about what their mandala represented to them (Jung, 1973). Jung posited that the journey toward individuation and ultimately toward the self, was a journey toward mental health. Using mandalas assisted the emergence of the self from the unconscious (Henderson, Mascaro, Rosen, & Skillern, 2007), consequently facilitating individuation (Hansen, 2005).

More recently, benefits for clients using mandalas in the counseling process have included the development of self-reflection (Fincher, 1991). Using mandalas as a container for unpleasant feelings can lower blood pressure, relax muscle tension, and slow thought processes, minimizing physical and emotional stress responses (Malchiodi, 2003). Counselors have used mandalas in group, individual, and couples counseling to help clients gain clarity, insight and self-understanding (Rappaport, 2008). Malley (1999) proposed that school counselors may find mandala drawings can help foster mind-body connections, generate insight, and empower clients.

Art therapy using mandalas has also been used to help reduce anxiety among clients. In a study conducted by van Der Venet & Serice (2005), 50 adults were randomly assigned to two groups. One group viewed art and the other group engaged in art making. The participants in the art making group engaged in drawing free-form mandalas, coloring pre-drawn pictures and mandalas with various art media. The findings of the study indicated that the group engaged in art making experienced a reduction in anxiety. This study was a replication of a study conducted by Curry and Kasser (2005) that also examined the use of mandalas to reduce anxiety. Curry and Kasser's findings indicated that coloring a mandala for 20 minutes was effective in the reduction of anxiety levels with their population.

Pisarik & Larson (2011) explored the relationship between authenticity and psychological well-being by examining the effects of drawing and interpreting mandalas created by college students. The findings of the study indicated that the group of college students who participated in drawing their own mandalas reported higher self-awareness, unbiased processing, and personal development, supporting the premise

that the mandala can be an effective tool for helping people facilitate greater self-awareness, and moving toward a higher level of psychological well-being.

The mandala has also been found to be an effective therapeutic tool within numerous populations and settings, including clients experiencing schizophrenia, psychotic disorders, and dissociative disorders (Cox & Cohen, 2000). Persons diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder were able to symbolically code representations of traumatic events in their mandala artwork, allowing them the ability to maintain secrecy while also communicating about and resolving these traumatic experiences. The language of mandala is symbolic and may help translate the mystery of human life to a scale that can be apprehended by a person who is seeking healing through self- reflection.

Using Mandalas With Children

Research with infants conducted by Fantz & Miranda (1975) demonstrated that people are born with a desire to look at circles. Kohler (1992) also found that circles are more quickly perceived and recognized as meaningful. Children as young as two years of age draw circles, and by age three children begin assigning meaning to the circular forms they created (Kellog, 1967). Therefore, drawing mandalas taps into a child's natural affinity for circles.

Gerteisen (2008) introduced the use of mandalas when working with children who had experienced abuse or neglect. Her goals were to help the children gain a sense of inner control by practicing the soothing activity of coloring, while also helping them to increase their social interaction. Gerteisen found that using this form of therapy provided a way for the children to nonverbally express themselves at a sensory level

that they could understand. Even though school counselors often use expressive arts techniques with children (Ziff, Pierce, & Johanson, 2012), very little information about a school counselor's use of drawing mandalas is available.

Mandala Mornings

School counselors at a large suburban school district in the Southwest regularly use mandalas when providing responsive services at elementary schools. Below is a personal account from a former school counselor from this district describing her perception of the emergence and continued use of mandalas by elementary school counselors.

School Counselor's Personal Account

Many school counselors in the district routinely provided mandala coloring sheets or circle templates for free drawing of mandalas and noted that children benefitted whether coloring a pre-drawn mandala or crafting one of their own. These early pioneers explored a variety of media with children in the school counseling setting for mandala coloring or creating unique mandala designs to include: crayons, colored pencils, fine tip markers, glued tissue paper, watercolors, and collage.

The interventions utilized in Mandala Mornings groups evolved over several years from a variety of professional experiences and the adaptation of current practices to the format of a mandala. It all started with an idea... to use mandalas as the primary modality and a common thread throughout the group process. As counselors in the district became intrigued by the use of mandalas with early morning small groups, they attended trainings at state counseling association professional growth conferences in an effort to spark innovative strategies for utilizing mandalas as an expressive arts

technique in small group sessions. At regular meetings and “idea sharing” opportunities, counselors engaged in on-going conversations regarding the use of mandalas to explore feelings, foster mindfulness, promote coping strategies, or craft a timeline of significant life events. In developing Mandala Mornings sessions, counselors often drew upon experiences with various art media and expressive arts tasks to develop innovative session plans. Some of the techniques utilized included crayon resist, collage, watercolor, sand tray, and chalk on black paper. The six sessions highlighted in the article are reflective of the unique sessions crafted and delivered as part of a Mandala Mornings group as a result of over a decade of experience and through on-going collaboration.

Many counselors reported that mandalas were increasingly becoming an invaluable instrument in their school counselor toolkit for individual school counseling sessions. Although children are encouraged to self-refer to the school counselor for support, it is most common for a child to be referred to the school counselor by parents, classroom teachers, school administrators, or other school staff. A child or youth can show resistance, apprehension, or occasionally agitation when called from the classroom for a session with the school counselor. It was often reported that the use of mandalas helped foster positive relationships, encourage engagement in services, and transform negative feelings towards the invitation to a school counseling session to a more positive attitude.

As high stakes testing became an increasingly significant focus in the new millennium, classroom teachers and campus administrators often expressed reluctance to willingly release students from the classroom for sessions with the school counselor

due to the demands for instruction and the preparations for standardized testing. There continues to be on-going concern on many campuses about activities that take time from instruction. School counselors in the district found it necessary to look for opportunities to provide services that did not impact instruction in order to consistently and effectively provide much needed school counseling services.

A small group of counselors turned to one of the most reliable and flexible interventions in their school counseling toolbox for the answer – mandalas! Children and youth were highly motivated by the use of mandalas in the school counseling setting and the benefits were overwhelmingly obvious to the school counselors who had utilized this technique in individual and small group counseling sessions. The next dilemma was to determine when this service could be provided and what would be the most beneficial and effective format.

It quickly became apparent that in the 30-60 minutes prior to instruction, a large number of children had already arrived at the elementary campus waiting for the school day to begin. There are many factors that contribute to the early arrival of students at each of the elementary schools in this district to include early drop off times by working parents, scheduling needs of the transportation department in a large district, or the necessity to drop off younger children at the elementary campus in order to transport siblings to the secondary campuses. With the new awareness that many children referred for school counseling services were available prior to the school day and coupled with the well-established benefits and appeal of mandalas, Mandala Mornings were born.

Mandala Mornings are small group counseling sessions scheduled weekly for six to eight weeks at least 30 minutes prior to the start of the school day. Once students are referred for small group school counseling services, the school counselor pre-screens each child referred for appropriateness and to identify their specific needs and goals for services within the group setting. Once parent or guardian permission is obtained, referred children are then grouped based on common presenting problems such as age, developmental levels, or similar group counseling goals. The flexibility of mandalas contribute to the efficacy of this expressive arts technique with children experiencing grief issues, transitioning to a new school community, experiencing family changes, exhibiting poor school performance, or struggling with a lack of self-confidence that is impacting social relationships or school performance. As Mandala Mornings became more widely used at elementary campuses throughout the district, it was not long before new techniques and variations were introduced to augment the traditional mandala technique and session plans were modified to include a wide variety of media and techniques for crafting mandalas.

Session Plans

The following is a series of Mandala Mornings sessions that will progress from structured/directive experiences to an unstructured/non-directive format as group participants build understanding and confidence in crafting mandalas. These 30-45 minute sessions can be easily adapted and beneficial for children and youth ages 5 and older. Unless otherwise noted, the list of materials needed for each session are:

- Colored pencils
- Pencil sharpener
- Crayons

- Fine point markers
- Blank white paper or pre-printed circle template copies
- Circle pattern, such a paper plate or card stock tracer
- Rulers for making straight lines, if needed
- Printed mandala coloring sheets. There is a wide assortment of free mandala coloring sheets available on the internet and books of coloring sheets in local bookstores.
- Instrumental music to facilitate quiet reflection and foster creative thinking

Evaluation/Debrief

Fifteen minutes prior to the end of each group session, provide group participants an opportunity to bring their work to a stopping point and remind them to place the date somewhere on the front or back of the mandala. Have them return art media to storage containers and prepare for a brief group discussion to close the group and to process the group experience in order to initiate insight. Utilize one or more of the following questions to debrief the activity:

- What title would you give your mandala?
- What did you notice when you were creating your mandala?
- How did you feel as you were working on your mandala?
- What were your thoughts as you were working on your mandala?
- Reflecting on your mandala, were there any surprises?
- Looking at your mandala, what does it represent to you?
- Looking at the colors you selected, do they represent/symbolize anything for you?
- Is there anything you would like to add/delete/change?

Session One: Introduction to Mandalas

Objective. This initial session will provide group participants an introduction to the concept of mandalas and exposure them to a variety of mandala designs by providing opportunities to color a mandala from a selection of preprinted mandalas.

Procedure. Following initial introductions of group participants and an initial discussion of group norms, define the concept of mandalas. Explain that a mandala is loosely defined as a “circle.” Tell group participants that they will have the opportunity to create a variety of mandalas at upcoming group sessions. Inform group participants that for this first session they will have the opportunity to select a mandala from a variety of pre-printed coloring pages and ask them to select the coloring media to use to color their mandala(s). Provide quiet instrumental background music for participants as they color their mandalas. Close the session using the evaluation/debrief procedures previously outlined.

Session Two: Torn Paper Collage Mandala

Objective. This session provides group participants with an opportunity to construct a mandala from torn paper pieces.

Additional Materials. This session will require additional materials:

- 8.5 x 5.5 sheets of various colored construction paper (this is half of an 8.5 X 11 sheet)
- Glue sticks

Procedure. Provide participants a preprinted mandala circle or instruct them to draw a circle in the middle of blank sheet of white or black paper by freehand or by tracing a circle. Instruct each group participant to select 3-4 half-sheets of construction

paper that will be used to craft the mandala. Next, tell participants that they will be crafting today's mandala using pieces of *torn* paper. They will tear pieces or shapes from the half-sheets of construction paper they selected and paste them in the circle to craft a mandala design. They may also extend pieces outside of the circle if they wish when crafting their mandala design. Close the session using the evaluation/debrief procedures previously outlined.

Extension. As a variation of the torn paper collage mandala described above, participants can use magazines to tear words, pictures, or designs to craft a mandala collage.

Session Three: Feelings Mandala

Objective. This session provides group participants with an opportunity to identify eight emotions and then construct a sectional feelings mandala.

Procedure. Provide participants a preprinted mandala circle or instruct them to draw a circle in the middle of a blank sheet of white paper by freehand or by tracing a circle. Using a ruler or by freehand, have participants divide the circle into 8 equal "pie slices" by drawing a line down the middle of the circle from top to bottom, then drawing a line through the middle from side to side. Next, they complete the "pie" by drawing a line from side to side in the circle, halving each of the four sections they created with the first two lines.

Tell participants that today's mandala is going to include eight feelings that would make up *their* feelings mandala. Each section of the feelings mandala will illustrate one feeling. Tell participants that they may incorporate the feelings word in their design for

each section. Tell participants, “When you think of each feeling, what colors or shapes or symbols come to mind?” Note: If participants need support in selecting feeling or emotion words, it is helpful to have a feelings chart handy for them to refer to during this activity.

Evaluation/Debrief. Close the session using the evaluation/debrief procedures previously outlined.

Session Four: My Life in Rings Mandala

Objective. To use the concept of a mandala to create a timeline of significant life events similar to the tree rings found in a cross-section of a tree trunk.

Additional Materials. This session will require additional materials:

- Cross-section of a tree trunk to illustrate tree rings
- Watercolor paints and brushes

Procedure. Discuss with group participants how it is possible to measure a tree’s life by the rings in the trunk, with each ring representing one year of life. Some rings are thicker than others. Ask participants, “Why do you think some rings are different sizes and colors than others?” Note that tree rings vary in size and color from year to year depending upon conditions in the environment. If available, provide cross-sections of tree trunks for participants to handle and explore. Then say, “Think about the years of your life, important events, accomplishments, and significant memories. Ask participants to freehand or trace a circle using a tracer in the middle of a blank sheet of paper. You may choose to allow participants an opportunity to preplan the rings for their *My Life in Rings Mandala* by encouraging them to draft a list of life events in chronological order. Next, have them begin by drawing a circle with a dark crayon or permanent marker in

the middle of the mandala and proceed with additional concentric rings around this circle with one band for each year of life. Participants will fill in spaces/rings with significant memories or events. Complete the mandala by having participants use a light application of watercolor paints. Close the session using the evaluation/debrief procedures previously outlined.

Session Five: Crafting a ME Mandala

Objective. This session provides group participants with an opportunity to craft a unique and personal mandala.

Procedure. Using art media of their choosing, prompt group participants to draw a free form circle or trace a circle in the center of a blank piece of paper. Prompt participants to close their eyes and utilize visualizations to picture the circle and reflect on designs, symbols, and colors that represent them and make them unique.

If group members are having difficulty getting started, encourage them to start in the middle of the circle. Encourage group participants to also work outside of the circle if they so choose. Provide quiet instrumental background music for participants as they color their mandalas. Close the session using the evaluation/debrief procedures previously outlined.

Session Six: Gratitude Mandala

Objective. This session provides group participants with an opportunity to construct a mandala that reflects gratitude and appreciation related to personal experiences that promote well-being and happiness.

Procedure. Provide participants a preprinted mandala circle or instruct them to draw a circle in the middle of a blank sheet of white paper by freehand or by tracing a circle using a tracer. Next, tell participants that today they are going to have the opportunity to craft a gratitude mandala. Ask participants, “What is gratitude?” Discuss how gratitude is a feeling or attitude of thankfulness, gratefulness, and appreciation. When someone expresses gratitude they show kindness by expressing appreciation to someone. When someone expresses gratitude they exhibit an attitude of gratefulness for something they have received. Ask participants, “How do you acknowledge and express gratitude?” Ask participants to reflect about the good things in their life, the positive experiences they have had, and the people they appreciate for their kindness and support. Continue by asking, “What or who do you treasure? What or who brings you joy? What brings you enjoyment? When do you feel grateful?” For young children, simplify the instructions by asking them to think of 3-5 things that make them happy. After allowing for reflection, instruct participants to utilize available art media to craft a mandala using words, symbols, designs, and/or drawings representing their personal appreciation and gratitude.

Evaluation/Debrief. Close the session using the evaluation/debrief procedures previously outlined.

Discussion

The small group activities focusing on mandalas are presented here in such a way that any school counselor could immediately utilize these activities in his or her own students. These activities require a minimal investment in materials and are easily implemented. However, school counselors wishing to implement Mandala Mornings

groups must first assess the level of administrative support they experience. For example, a school counselor may have to convince the campus administration that facilitating counseling groups before school is a better use of the counselor's time than non-guidance activities such as bus duty. Also, while students were usually available before school in this particular district, that may not be the case in other districts. School counselors need to assess when the most advantageous and least disruptive time to pull students for group occurs on their particular campus. Additionally, even if most students are available before school, not all students are available for various reasons. School counselors need to provide services for other students who may not be available in the morning but would still benefit from counseling support. Finally, although this has never been a concern for this particularly large school district, it is possible that some parents or community members may attach religious or spiritual connotations to the mandalas. School counselors need to know the communities they serve and be able to address this concern should it be raised.

Conclusion

School counselors face many obstacles when trying to provide responsive services for students, particularly group counseling. First, administrators and teachers may be reluctant to release students from content instruction so they can attend group. Secondly, creating developmentally appropriate group counseling activities that are effective with elementary aged children can be challenging for some school counselors.

The elementary school counselors in this district addressed the initial problem by scheduling the groups in the mornings before classes began. Secondly, expressive arts modalities in counseling, including the use of mandalas, have been found to benefit

clients from childhood to adulthood. The anecdotal support the elementary school counselors using Mandal Mornings have experienced is strong enough for them to continue this approach since they first initiated it in the 1990s. Future research may provide empirical support for how children participating in the Mandala Mornings groups benefit. Utilizing qualitative methods by interviewing the school counselors about how Mandala Mornings has impacted the availability of students for responsive services may also provide useful data regarding how utilizing mandalas benefits students.

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Biographical Statements

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Mary G. Mayorga is an associate professor in the College of Education & Human Development, Department of Counseling, Health & Kinesiology at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, in San Antonio, Texas. She obtained her Ph.D. at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi in counselor education in 2005. She has a master's degree in counseling from Texas Southern University, and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. She has certification as a licensed professional counselor, national certified counselor, certified chemical dependency counselor and certified anger resolution therapist. Dr. Mayorga has been a counselor educator for 10 years and has taught at the University of Houston-Victoria and is presently teaching at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. Her areas of expertise include psychopharmacology, wellness, and community health and mental health. Research interests include conflict resolution, communication, wellness and self-care in counseling and multiculturalism.

Veronica Ball is an associate counselor for the Department of Education with the Archdiocese of San Antonio and a team leader for small group services with the Center

for Health Care Services. She has 36 years of combined experience serving as an elementary educator, school counselor, and district/department counselor supervisor. She is a certified professional school counselor and a licensed professional counselor in Texas. She continues to provide professional development sessions on a variety of topics in serving children and adolescents which focus on creative counseling approaches to include bibliotherapy and expressive arts techniques.