

ArtBreak



a creative guide to joyful and
productive classrooms

Katherine Ziff

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PREFACE

IN 2008 I began an ArtBreak journey with twenty-nine children in an elementary school in southeastern Ohio where for six years I was a school counselor. I thought to meet the diverse needs of the children referred to my office with a model I had learned about years ago: a small-group art studio that was part of a Medicine and Art class taught by Mary Anne Bartley at the Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Her art studio was designed to be a restorative place to support learning. There medical students, “dragging their cares and woes,” relaxed, expressed themselves, allowed creativity to flow, and emerged as active learners “ready to tackle whatever they confront from new and more productive directions.” My thought was: “If an art break could do this for medical students, what might it do for schoolchildren?”

The inspiration of this medical-school-based atelier combined with what I discovered in Lisa Hinz’s book on the expressive therapies continuum (ETC), a theory from art therapy, gave form to the creative counseling program for children dubbed ArtBreak. I drew on two more theoretical streams to work out and complete the structure: child-centered education, as elucidated by Carl Rogers, and the developmental stages of group counseling. ArtBreak is therefore a program that works across traditional disciplinary boundaries, integrating theoretical frameworks from counseling, art therapy, and child-centered education.

The purpose of this book is to share the how-to’s of ArtBreak with educators, counselors, social workers, psychologists, families, children’s librarians, and others who work with children. The book includes much detail and attention to methods and materials, the purpose of which is to support readers in using art materials with confidence and working with an authentic child-centered focus.

Much, if not most, of traditional schooling is not truly child centered. (If it were our schools would look a lot different.) A shift in mindset is required to provide such an experience. By way of example, throughout the book I illustrate my own progress (and stumbles) in working toward a child-centered focus.

ArtBreak allows children to relax and provides them with an opportunity to express feelings; improve social skills; find community; engage in teamwork; develop empathy; hone cognitive skills; practice problem solving; build imagination and persistence; and, for some, engage in work that is transformative and deeply healing. I have experienced the work as an exhilarating challenge, a journey with children through the school year that is joyful, productive, sometimes poignant and difficult, often humorous, and always seeking to be supportive of child-directed learning.

This work is based on a year of planning and five years of offering the program in two schools to about 150 children (in kindergarten through sixth grade) in over 350 weekly small-group sessions. It was also piloted in a middle-school academic support program and expanded into individual elementary classrooms. A summer version of ArtBreak was supported as a public-library-based summer studio by a grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Project LAUNCH. The program has been peer reviewed in national publications and professional conference presentations.

I have masked in various ways the name identities of the children. Their families gave permission for their work to be used for purposes of teaching and research, and the school district gave its institutional blessing on the research that we undertook.

The program's development owes greatly to the friendship and consultation of Margaret King, early-childhood educator emerita at Ohio University, gardener, and photographer, who guided me to fully appreciate and have the courage to try my idea of a child-centered studio. Dr. King was quick to point out the benefits of the program's child-centered approach and encouraged me constantly. She donated materials; delighted in my accounts of student-directed

turns of events in the studio and interpreted their importance to me; suggested scholarly resources to build the theoretical framework; cheerfully admonished me when I strayed from a student-centered mindset; and gave me tours of her beautiful flower garden that flourishes in a profusion of abundance and diversity.

School district teachers and administrators were critical to developing and maintaining the program. Families, teachers, and school staff embraced the program, filled it year after year with referrals, and donated all kinds of things to fill our studio shelves. Thanks also for the support and expertise of Lori Pierce, Sue Johanson, Jeremy Yehl, Heather Skinner, Denny Boger, and Kacey Cottrill (who bought the studio's red drying rack). Art educators Tami Benyei and Theresa House recognized what I was trying to do, shared materials, and suggested better ways to do things. My school counseling colleagues Patsy Barrington, Sean Kelbley, and Emily Dodd were unfailingly optimistic and supportive. My husband, Matthew, cheerfully fell in with the project and for five years gave advice and encouragement from his perspective as a design educator, helped me scrounge cardboard boxes, saved jar lids, and donated throw-aways from his workplace. When one of our groups asked for lighting for a winter-holiday installation, my son Ben, trained as a theater electrician, came out and provided beautiful light and shadow effects for the school to enjoy. Dawn Graham and Jane Hamel-Lambert at Ohio University's Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine provided encouragement and Project LAUNCH funding for three summers of an ArtBreak collaboration with children's librarians at the community libraries in Athens, Meigs, Vinton, and Hocking Counties, which were documented by photographer Josh Birnbaum. His photographs of the summer programs illustrate this book.

Thank you to the *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* for permission to use a table and vignettes from an article published in the journal in 2012. My Wake Forest colleagues Nathaniel Ivers and Edward Shaw provided statistical expertise, an advanced perspective on implications of the program for child-stress mitigation, and collaboration on an article in the *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*.

Sam Gladding, teacher and colleague, has, through his scholarship and work with the American Counseling Association, created an enduring framework to support counselors to professionally engage creativity in our practices. Gillian Berchowitz and her colleagues at the Ohio University Press are both expert and gracious in their work, generous with advice and analysis, and supportive of creative process at all levels and venues. Finally to my ArtBreak partners and astute teachers, the children: thank you, take care of each other, and take care of the stuff.