

Spring 2019

Feeling Colors: Reflections on the Creative Process of a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Kimberly Ann Knowles

Lesley University, kknowle2@lesley.edu

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Feeling Colors:
Reflections on the Creative Process of a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder
Development of a Method
Capstone Thesis
Lesley University

Submitted April 15th, 2019

Kimberly Knowles

Art Therapy Specialization

Professor Raquel Stephenson, ATR-BC, LCAT

Abstract

This thesis explored the implications of choice in individual art therapy sessions with a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder, contrasting the creative process of unstructured expression and a more directed book-making activity focused on emotions. Research took place within the scope of six weekly 45-minute individual art therapy sessions with a 12-year-old boy in a therapeutic day school. The design of this study was based on the pre-established presenting needs of the student, focusing on growing skills for self-regulation, addressing social-emotional deficits, and providing an outlet for positive self-expression. The sessions were documented by the clinician, a clinical intern studying art therapy at the Master's level, in clinical and personal notes. This researcher conducted an extensive literature review and applied analysis via a detailed process of response artwork and reflection. Observations and initial findings suggested prominent themes of space and containment, attunement, and connection. In result, data indicated that both directive and unstructured artistic exploration of emotion may show effective significance with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, with emphasis on the importance of growing self-efficacy in the process.

Keywords: art therapy, autism spectrum disorder, social-emotional, emotional expression, creative process, response art, self-efficacy

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Feeling Colors: Reflections on the Creative Process of a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Introduction

Art therapy has expanded upon traditional psychoanalytic techniques to provide individuals with a refuge, emotional expression, and potential for meaning-making (Malchiodi, 2012). For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, many of whom face challenges regarding recognizing and communicating emotions in themselves and others, art therapy has offered an alternative avenue for connection and understanding (Capps, Yirmiya & Sigman, 1992). This thesis aimed to investigate visual art-making, in the contexts of both directive and process-oriented creation, as a therapeutic tool for the emotional expression and understanding in a youth population with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The purpose of this study strove to explore how fluid and structured art-making experiences impact a client with social-emotional deficits, within the therapeutic setting of individual art therapy sessions. A detailed review of literature examined the roles of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, with a focus on the roles of natural motivation and growth through frustration. Research also touched upon Lowenfeld's Creative Development, with an investigation of the esteem-building forces behind creative expression. Finally, theoretical background was informed by Bandura's Social Learning, contrasting and applying theories of observational learning and self-efficacy with a population which often faces natural challenges with social interactions.

As the principal researcher, I was acting in dual roles for the duration of this inquiry, also serving as the primary clinician within these sessions. Data was collected throughout the six-week study via observations and notations, with analysis in the form of response artwork. The research questions included: How did emotion-focused art therapy interventions impact a client

with social-emotional deficits? What differences emerged between process-oriented art-making and a book-making directive for emotional expression and understanding? How did art therapy benefit a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Literature Review

This literature review explored classic techniques, modern approaches, and future implications related to the distinct topics of art therapy, Autism Spectrum Disorder, theoretical backgrounds of development, and artistic expression. The subject matter has been partitioned into more precise sub-categories that delineate further meaning. Initial literary investigation delved into the field of Art Therapy, focusing on a) Origins and Definition, and b) Specific Populations. Autism Spectrum Disorder was explored in relation to a) Diagnosis and Definition, b) Emotional Expression, and c) Expressive Therapies. Following this, foundational psychological theories informed a section of Theoretical Background of Development, separated into the work of a) Piaget's Theory of Development, b) Lowenfeld's Creative Development, and c) Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Finally, the over-arching topic of Artistic Expression was explored through a) Storytelling, Narratives and Self Exploration, b) Emotional Regulation via Art-Making, and c) Self-Efficacy in Artwork. A final encapsulation of relevant sources and information in the field was provided in the Summary of Literature.

Art Therapy

Origins and Definitions. A relatively young modality within the psychological field, Art Therapy has reached beyond traditional techniques to combine the healing aspects of the creative process with classic approaches in mental health, presenting a therapy which can connect to, and support, a variety of populations in pursuit of wellness. Carson and Becker (2004) accentuated that "creativity is paramount to the therapeutic process," emphasizing the

importance of creative thinking and flexibility from all clinicians, regardless of theoretical background, and touched upon the healing aspects of playfulness for the client within the context of a session (p. 111). It was a small step, then, to expand these ideals about creativity to the specific processes at work within the safe space of an art therapy session, where the co-creative process and trusting therapeutic relationship between client and clinician could make space for expression through methods that go beyond verbal communication. Art therapy has grown from origins within the foundational dream imagery of Freud or the symbolism and collective unconscious of Jung, to also understand the healing potential of artistic self-expression (Durrani, 2014). The integration of perspectives, focused respectively on the symbolic values of the art created in session and the innate healing nature of the creative process, has proved powerful in helping clients express what they cannot say with words, whether it be due to trauma, development, or differing abilities.

On a base level, many art therapy sessions have involved materials and prompts that aim to engage a client in self-expression through visual means. Malchiodi proposed that “the process of image-making and creative expression heals and transforms unpleasant experiences through symbolic communication” (Durrani, 2014, p. 102). Though goals and methods within art therapy have varied from session to session and case to case, dependent on an individual’s needs, the use of art as a form of communication and conversation without words has remained a pivotal asset to this field. The role of the art therapist, then, included fostering a safe space for this expression, building a sense of therapeutic relationship, and use of the therapist’s “third hand” of metaphors and artistic techniques which help to guide the progress of a client. Malchiodi presented background knowledge of artistic materials that expand beyond general artistic knowledge of the mixing of colors or reactions between different paints, into a

knowledge of a client's needs and how they interact with materials. Guided by the framework outlined by Hinz's "Expressive Therapies Continuum," or ETC, art therapists could choose materials that are fluid and elicit greater affect, or that have structure and encourage more contained, cognitive processing (Malchiodi, 2012, p. 122). Similarly, considerations have been given to the openness of a prompt, with open studio models supporting less structure compared with high complexity in very structured and specific directives. Newer perspectives in the field have emphasized transitions between these different states, allowing the clinician to help artfully conduct a client through layers of resistance and helpful containment.

Newer research into the impact of art therapy techniques and their interactions with the brain have added further levels of significance to understanding how this creative healing process may unfold. Art materials and prompts have elicited reactions on different levels of the ETC, like the kinesthetic/ sensory level or the symbolic/ cognitive level, which each stimulated different areas of the brain. For example, implementing sensory stimulation, through a water table or textured materials, resonated in the diencephalon, the midbrain region responsible for motor skills, stress responses, and attunement. Implementing these tools during session could have been beneficial with client goals involving self-soothing, connection and approval, and routines or rituals in session. The symbolic/ cognitive level stimulated the cortex with executive function, communication, and self-image, and may have been involved with bibliotherapy and art exercises for self-esteem building (Malchiodi, 2012). Ultimately, these theoretical perspectives and artistic tools could be adapted to the goals of many, making art therapy a versatile and effective approach.

Specific Populations. Art therapy acted as an avenue for bridging the gaps of connection and communication for many individuals within populations for whom typical verbal

language is a challenge (Capps, Yirmiya, & Signman, 1992). This could range from young children or those with developmental delays, who may not yet have developed the language or cognition to verbally discuss their emotions and experiences, to individuals who lack the ability to verbally communicate, and even to overcome language and cultural barriers, or communicate with those experiencing the loss of language that might stem from growing older. Individuals who have experienced trauma, overwhelming experiences which may come with triggers and emotions too overwhelming to discuss in traditional words, could also benefit from this externalizing and empowering method. Durrani commented on the “inadequacy of language in reflecting the inner, emotional world,” an observation which can be readily addressed through the range of techniques and materials available within art therapy, allowing the experience to more readily be tailored to the needs of each client (2014, p.102). This holistic approach to therapy has stimulated both hemispheres of the brain, as well as applying creativity and problem solving that could have helped adapt the experience for resistant clients while deepening the meaning-making process (Hecker, Lettenberger, Nedela, & Soloski, 2010).

When working with the specific population of children, art therapy has acted through a common “language of play” (Hecker, Lettenberger, Nedela, & Soloski, 2010, p. 193). Materials like toys, crafts, and other art supplies, were an approachable and familiar tool within the session space. Though their purposes may have been more deeply informed by therapeutic intention, they still evoked a sense of fun and allowed children to communicate and express in ways that seemed more comfortable or natural than sitting still to simply verbalize with an adult. Furthermore, children were able to continue moving, playing, and creating throughout a session, centering the space around an activity rather than around themselves, which may have added an extra layer of comfort for some youths.

When working with a population of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, art therapy may also have been particularly effective. Traditional language is a skill which often develops with some delays in individuals with ASD, and an individual may have experienced struggles in modulating social interactions. Numerous factors may have contributed to these difficulties, including inhibited sensory regulatory abilities which cause overwhelming sensory overload, a predisposition for comorbid anxiety, and lack an intrinsic desire to communicate with others (Durrani, 2014). In art therapy, communication could have taken place through visual art rather than verbal language, aided with repetition and mirroring in the process. Furthermore, an art activity itself may have acted as a rewarding experience to help motivate an individual with ASD to engage and feel seen and understood (Hecker, Lettenberger, Nedela, & Soloski, 2010).

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Diagnosis and Definition. Autism Spectrum Disorder, also referred to as ASD, was a term given to a neurodevelopmental disorder which was defined by social-emotional difficulties and stereotypic behaviors, with an onset in early development (Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rogers, 2008). Though autism has been a known condition for several decades, it was not until the most recent 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, or DSM, that ASD became a diagnostic continuum that also enveloped Asperger's syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorders: Not Otherwise Specified, with different abilities of physical and cognitive abilities appearing in different severities across a spectrum within the same diagnostic label. ASD was characterized by, and perhaps most known for, the presentation of Criterion A, "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts," including lacking reciprocity and verbal communication abilities within a social context, and Criterion B features, like restricted interests, repetitive movements, and hyper- or hypo- sensory

sensitivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 50). The DSM also outlined criteria for an onset in early development, and for a clinically significant impact on an individual's functioning.

Autism Spectrum Disorder has been diagnosed in early developmental stages, typically around age two, with early intervention having showed significant implications for long-term success (Durrani, 2014). Perhaps the most well-known components of ASD have been sensory dysregulation and difficulties with self-regulation, presented in rigid thought patterns, repeated behaviors, challenges with social interactions, and struggles with sensory overstimulation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Atypical responses to sensory stimuli were most commonly thought to include auditory and visual cues, between which an individual with ASD may have a slower than typical response time when shifting focus, which have appeared as being hyper-focused or easily-distractible (Rogers, 2005). This sensory overload may also have included proprioceptive, vestibular, and tactile responses, and each individual has their own individual sensitivities. Furthermore, ASD has often presented with impaired early attachment to caregivers, as well as children facing challenges with communication and peer socializations while growing up, which may in part have been due to the unpredictability of sensory output in other individuals and led to withdrawal as an early coping method (Kuoch & Mirenda, 2003).

Emotional Expression & Understanding. For individuals with ASD, social interactions and communication have been particularly challenging, in part because of difficulty with affect expression and emotional recognition (Capps, Yirmiya, & Sigman, 1992). Verbal communications may also have been interpreted as odd or different by typically developing peers, verbal deficits and difficulties maintaining a back-and-forth conversation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Difficulties with overwhelming sensory experiences and lack of

regulation may also have led to lack of curiosity or interest in communicating with others. At times, an individual with ASD who experienced overactive or underactive sensory stimuli might have either withdrawn or created sensory output like sounds or disjointed movements, in efforts to re-regulate their sensory experience (Durrani, 2014). These deficits in traditional interpersonal communication could have made communicating one's emotional states challenging, especially for children with ASD. In addition, these children might have experienced difficulties creating and recognizing appropriate expressions, which might have inhibited their individual abilities to understand the emotions of others, as well as to have had their own emotions be understood.

In a study by Capps, Yirmiya, and Sigman (1992), different groups of children with ASD and typically functioning children in a control group were asked to identify emotions in videotape scenarios, as well as to relate them to personal experiences when they had felt the similarly. Previous studies have focused primarily on basic emotions, while this study chose to expand to include more complex and socially instigated feelings, like pride and embarrassment. The children with ASD were found to, on average, take longer to identify more complex emotions, though this could have been in part due to how much more familiarity there was to happiness while less repeated education was given about feelings like pride. There were occasional errors, with some children misidentifying the emotions for other behaviors, although their overall abilities to relate to and identify these emotions were strong. The largest implications revealed how, despite an ability to identify these feelings, the process of taking longer to evaluate social context and label them appropriately, compared with their typically-functioning peers, could have had a negative impact on socialization with peers. Responding in a social situation to a peer who is feeling joy, with the misinterpreted response that one would

give a peer who is feeling itchy, reflected an example how traditional verbal communication could have led to misunderstandings for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Expressive Therapies & ASD. For children with ASD, where traditional verbal communication has been a challenge, studies have revealed a need for creative therapeutic tools like play-based interventions, improvisational music therapy, and art therapy. In 1981, the Denver Model utilized play therapy, focusing on interpersonal relationships and language development, by using play strategies and toys to connect to children with autism (Rogers, 2005). The strategies elicited increased interest and prolonged engagement from participants, and were credited with increasing success. Music therapy has also been shown to be an effective tool with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Specifically, a study examined the use of improvisation in music therapy, discovering that by focusing on the attunement between the clinician/parent and the child, and using the sensory stimulating tool of music, auditory mirroring and turn-taking improved interpersonal interactions with young children (Kim, Wilgram, & Gold, 2008). Children were not only able to feel connected and understood, but also have a way to communicate without verbal language through spontaneous music-making expression.

The current field has been lacking in research about art therapy and application to the needs of individuals with autism. It was proposed that, because of the ability to engage so many different senses with art materials and techniques, this multi-sensory approach could easily be altered to fit the individual needs of a client. Furthermore, expanding beyond meeting the sensory needs of a child, art has also been a way to engage in repeated movements and expression; by sharing this expression with the therapist in the room, the child has been able to connect and relate to an individual and thus part of the world around them. Many studies about art therapy as an intervention with Autism Spectrum Disorder in children have focused on

cognitive and behavioral aspects of treatment, however there has been a need for more research addressing the previously neglected potential psychological implications for the social and emotional development of children (Durrani, 2014).

Theoretical Backgrounds of Development

Piaget's Developmental Theory. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development centered around the role of the child as an active force, in their own right. Based on a stage model, Piaget formulated four periods, including Sensorimotor Intelligence, Preoperational Thought, Concrete Operations, and Formal Operations, and additional sub-stages which outlined specific development which occurred between birth and age 12. Period I, from birth to age two, included development of reflexes, various reactions, and object permanence. Period II continued until age seven, expanding their thinking to include symbols, later use of language, and egocentrism. Egocentrism, the inability to view a situation from another's point of view, typically ended as a child entered Period III, when thought began to resonate more with logic and organization from ages seven until 11. As a child transitioned into Period IV, they functioned with more abstract thought and hypothetical constructs. Learning theorists argued with Piaget's model, drawing attention to the impact of external forces such as environmental reinforcement and being taught by other individuals. Piaget, however, retained that the natural learning that occurred through a child's actions, frustrations, and a drive to adapt or act despite those frustrations, were the strongest influences in children constructing their own worlds (Crain, 2016).

Piaget built these stages modelled after typical development, so application to a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder, for example, has brought up interesting connections as well as short-comings. This theory posited that although stages were outlined in a specific order, it was not due to a genetic schedule, but was rather a logical progression of advancing skills (Crain,

2016). If it were an assumed progression of skills, with a genetically induced delay, such as ASD, then that progression would change. So, one could have argued that the same natural progression would have occurred, merely at different ages than Piaget originally proposed, as the skills would still be acquired over time or with assistance. Furthermore, an interesting difference with this theory was the notion of natural curiosity, something which was hindered with autism, presumably as a protective factor due to the sensory overstimulation that often occurred unpredictably in many social settings and new environments. Perhaps, in accordance with Piaget's ideals, then, differences revealed a need for more manufactured curiosity, fostered and encouraged via a safe space for exploration, which may help an individual progress through the stages.

Lowenfeld's Creative Development. Lowenfeld's developmental model explored six artistic stages that individuals encountered on a fluid track of creativity. Stages began at age two, outlined via graphic features and content through age 17. This theory studied children's artwork to find commonalities in the scribble stage, pre-schematic stage, schematic stage, dawning realism/ gang stage, pseudo-naturalistic stage, and finally the crisis of adolescence (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987). Malchiodi (2012) stated that "art making not only was a source of self-expression but also had the potential to enhance emotional well-being," revealing a holistic view of creativity and self, and a theory of development in which the two are fundamentally and positively linked (p. 115). Particularly interesting, in context of this study, were stages three, four, and five. The participant fit a biological age of 12, overlapping with the dawning realism and psycho-naturalistic stages, though his cognitive developmental deficits would place him in a younger age range of the schematic stage.

The schematic stage, ages seven through nine, was characterized by individualized schemas, informed symbols which appeared in a two-dimensional world with a spontaneous appearance, free from concern for design aesthetics. In the subsequent stage, from ages nine through 12, children began to transform their still-present symbols into smaller, more detailed forms. Above age 12, the pseudo-naturalistic stage appeared in artwork with a self-critical eye from the child, and concern for accuracy in representation of proportions. Despite some basic physical abilities necessary for fine and gross motor functions in art techniques, Lowenfeld & Brittain (1987) dismissed these factors as insignificant, explaining that young children “are satisfied with their own means of representation,” thus enabling them to internalize this contentment (p. 18). This theory also acknowledged the fluidity and individuality of these stages, as well as explaining the driving factors for creative development to be seeking understanding and curiosity.

Lowenfeld’s Theory of Creative Development placed importance on the connections with self-expression and positive self-esteem. Art education was mentioned at length, with a focus being placed on growing creativity ability, not specific artistic skills, as that ability could grow and exist free from external validation, especially in children and teens. Art was also explained to be an opportunity for an experimental spirit and to take responsibility for oneself. Creative meaning-making was explored as not only an individual process, but as a form of social communication. Lowenfeld & Brittain (1987) elaborated that “expressing the self on a sheet of paper also means viewing that expression... the viewing and looking at one’s own work and one’s own ideas is a first step in communicating these thoughts and ideas to others,” and thus an individual art process has become an expression of thoughts and feelings not only to oneself, but to others (65).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Bandura's theories of development were based on the ideals of observational learning, detailing how individuals learn from the people and situations around them. This theory focused on the cognitive processes of observing, where an individual's mind absorbs an entire string of information at once. Learning new skills, songs, and other specific mimicking, was dependent on specific attentional and retention processes. Processes of retention focused on visual symbols and verbal cues, proposing that an individual can imitate something observed long after the initial observation, using a symbol or cue to trigger the entire string of informational memory. Attentional processes required interest from the viewer, which could come from the content itself, the environment, or the model who was presenting. Bandura, unlike some other theorists, disbelieved in spontaneous interest. Instead, he insisted that, for this social learning process to occur, an individual must have an interest or motivation, because they were ultimately believed to be acting in search of a goal (Crain, 2016).

This theory of observational learning shared similarities with the theories of conditioning, proposing that consequences could be observed and learned vicariously, without directly experiencing them, and impacting future actions. This could be seen in examples of social norms and culturally accepted practices, like socially acceptable aggression in sports and video games, where behaviors are modeled without consequences and thus learned to be acceptable. Bandura further delineated the concepts of self-regulation and self-efficacy, proposed as more complex and internalized reactions to this learning model. Self-efficacy explored the complexities of an inner critic and motivation, with higher motivation persisting despite failures and setbacks when an individual believes that they are good or can achieve things. Building an ability to reflect on oneself and remain confident that they can achieve, would, in fact, have increased their ability or potential to achieve. With self-regulation, standards of internalized

rewards and punishments guided individuals on how to act or how to adjust their actions in different situations (Crain, 2016). Children have often not yet internalized these regulations and must instead rely more on following the modeled behaviors of adults and other models around them, while individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder often struggle with understanding these unspoken social standards. For individuals with ASD, the natural processes of pro-social behavior and social learning may have been hindered, though an expectation for regulated behaviors remains, leading to a need for specific therapy or assistance to learn these skills.

Artistic Expression

Storytelling, Narratives, and Self-Exploration. Creating a narrative, and feeling empowered to explore one's own story, has been a contained form of expression that has allowed for an individual to safely process life situations, supported growing empathetic responses, and may have served as a tool to envision one's personal life narrative (Chavis, 2011). Writing and artwork were a natural pair of expressive tools, as expressive writing often finds its origins in other forms of expression, including sound, physical movement, and visual art-making. Storytelling may have involved written words, as well as offering another nonverbally accessible avenue for communication being fostered through movement, drama, and imagery (Durrani, 2014). These tools informed the technique of the social story, an intervention designed to model life situations and appropriate responses for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Carson & Becker, 2004; Kuoch & Mirenda, 2003). For children especially, storytelling through art has provided a way to tell and retell stories about their own challenges, helping them learn about themselves and explore responses and adjustments to life changes. Chavis (2011) directed that, "we can all be writers capturing the truth of our own lives... if we give ourselves a chance to

trust our voice,” further emphasizing that constructing narratives not only allows for learning and expression, but also improved self-esteem (p.160).

Emotional Regulation via Art-Making. Emotional regulation has been a self-regulatory skill lacked by many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, which can affect attention, behavioral responses, and even educational experiences (Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rogers, 2008). Dysregulation often appeared in children with autism when severe sensory dysfunction and unprotected changes arise. Art-making has provided sensory stimuli which can be controlled by the client, allowing them to adjust input and output and provide an opportunity to understand these sensations (Durrani, 2014). Clients have worked to increase awareness and understanding, as well as externalize problems. Furthermore, they could have created a concrete product which could give an external focal point that may help reduce the stress of uncomfortable sensory experiences (Hecker, Lettenberger, Nedela, & Soloski, 2010). Art-making could be inexpensive and not time-consuming, with materials that could be guided by an art therapist to provide more containment or expression in accordance with the ETC (Carson & Becker, 2004).

Self-Efficacy in Artwork. Building a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, or belief in one’s abilities, could be fostered throughout the art-making process. The concrete nature of a final art piece allowed it to exist beyond the creation of it, serving as a reminder of accomplishment as well as a reminder of overcoming challenges in the art-making process. The breadth of materials and techniques available to individuals during art-making in an art therapy session could have allowed a child access to a directed space where they can make choices and be in control (Kim, Wilgram, & Gold, 2008; Rogers, 2005). A child with ASD could make a choice based on their own interests, something which has been shown to increase motivation and

which subsequently can increase the positive judgments in self-efficacy appraisals, part of a positive self-reflective cycle (Crain, 2016). Furthermore, this experience of expressing without language, which may lower anxiety and feel like a more accessible form of communication for an individual with autism, and related language deficits, could have led to powerful experiences of being able to express, to be heard, and to succeed in being understood.

Methods

Materials

Research environment & participant. This research took place within a therapeutic day school, which functioned with near proximity to an urban center on the East Coast. The primary participant was a full-time day student at the school. This student was a 12-year-old male, to be referred to under the pseudonym Anthony, who presented with behaviors consistent with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Anthony was from a South American, supportive, single-parent home, where English is not the primary language spoken. He was a client for individual therapy sessions, where I acted in a dual role as researcher and clinician, meeting once weekly for a 45-minute session. This client was familiarized to this process, as he had attended similar sessions with expressive therapies interns during the past two school years, and met with this clinician for approximately one month before research began. Typical session space was a multi-purpose room on the lower level of the building, which held at times held a small library and meeting space, and was used by the clinical interns as a primary session space. This room was the location of this research, with occasional departure from the space due to use of a sink in the adjacent lunch-room. A large, conference-style table was centered in the room, and acted as the workspace.

Experimental materials. Materials available to the participant were vast and varied, and the clinician supported his independence and freedom in exploring different textures, mediums, and experimenting within his choices. Anthony was encouraged to use any materials in the room, which included a shelf with board games, various play figurines, a dollhouse, and sand-tray. He was also given access to the art cabinet, which contained various paints and papers, craft materials like feathers, string, and beads, fabric, glue, tapes, containers, brushes, pre-cut magazine images for collage, dry materials like colored pencils, crayons, and oil or chalk pastels. When Anthony chose to engage in unstructured art-making, he was allowed to select any art materials he felt drawn to, with the clinician offering help if he was seeking a certain tool or substance. When he chose to work with his picture-book directive, Anthony was offered paints or oil pastels and an 11 x 17 in paper, though he was allowed to select any additional or alternative materials to work with.

Procedure

The framework for this study was built on the development of a method. A participant, who was already newly familiar with me since I had taken over as his clinician at the start of the school year, was chosen due to his presenting diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as his inclination towards creative and artistic expression. The method would be applied in individual therapy sessions with Anthony, occurring weekly for 45 minute blocks, with the protocol running for six weeks throughout the fall semester. Sessions would follow a prescribed format, with an opening check-in, choice of art activity, and mindful-breathing closing exercise. Check-in, with the client using a familiar “Zones of Regulation” chart to identify a color-coded feeling and color combination for his current emotional state, and closing, with a breathing exercise acting as a mindful and containing cool-down, were implemented to keep consistency

with the pre-established routine of the participant. The main activity in each session, as developed by this method, required this clinician to ask Anthony to choose to either a) engage in free-form art-making, with materials and process of his choosing, or b) work on an on-going picture-book project, “Mr. Cat’s Emotions.” Anthony was given agency over how to spend his own time within sessions, with the sessions focusing on social-emotional growth through experiencing emotional expression or building emotional understanding, respectively, through these options.

Methods of analysis

Data consisted of observations from my sessions, collected in clinical and personal notes after each session. Information was recorded regarding the essence of statements made by the participant, descriptions of client artwork, and the process of artistic interactions within the session. Artistic reflections as part of an altered book were also provided by me, in response to each of the six sessions within the protocol. These artistic reflections were used as a form of analysis, looking for themes, providing a visual filter for emotions, and allowing for another medium for processing my personal experiences during research, within the limits of this procedure. Ultimately, data was organized by weekly session number, and presented within groupings of similar client processes, including an Initial Phase (weeks one and two), Free Art-Making (weeks three, four, and five), and Character Development (week six).

Results

Introduction

Research based on the topics of exploring emotions through non-directive art expression and structured book-making prompts revealed extensive results. Through a multi-step process, a participant with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Anthony, was first presented with a choice between

art-making styles each session, thus experiencing a creative process, and I, the researcher, made observations followed by processing and analysis via my own art responses. Results included information gathered from observations, conversations with the participant, and my personal experience, as documented in both my personal notes and artistic responses. Examining the process through an objective lens of art, as well as viewing them within larger thematic contexts, allowed me to gain data about the use of structures and non-directive artwork with an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Initial Phase

Week 1. In the initial stages of research, taking place during weeks 1 and 2, I introduced the proposed content with which participant began to interact. Anthony transitioned smoothly to the session, following a typical routine of color and feeling check-ins using “Zones of Regulation,” as a creative activity, and closing breaths. He selected a color to self-report a positive emotional state upon arrival, but further discussed a negative state when asked about classroom and peer challenges. He selected a board game that involved tumbling and stacking, offering a nonverbal invitation to me to join him. He was observed to exhibit low impulse control, often throwing the game pieces and making noises when excited or frustrated, responding positively to redirection around safety and boundaries from this clinician. At the end of the game, I prompted Anthony about a new book project, explaining that he could choose between three formats: an “All About Anthony” book, an emotion character book, or a book about his toy cat’s adventures. Anthony chose the book option about feelings, fidgeting with art supplies while engaging in a back-and-forth question and answer about which feelings to focus on. He was asked to select an emotion and pair it with a color for each, with me acting as scribe, as well as prompting with questions. At one point, Anthony stated the name of his toy, but was

able to verbalize without prompting, that he understood that imaginary friends and feelings were different. Finally, the six emotions selected included anger, sadness, fear, disgust, confusion, and an original word coupled with an open-arm motion, with the selected title “Mr. Cat’s Emotions.” Anthony requested to work on the book in the next session before closing.

After the session, my reaction art, Figure 1, was a pen sketch within an altered book. It contained loose line-work, making the images of feathers in a diagonal across the page. It was made without color or shading, excepting the dark overlapping lines in the same feather style in the top right and bottom left corners. Materials were chosen in part because of availability, and I connected with their ease of movement across the smooth page. I was inspired by the motions used by the client during the session and I focused on the word “following,” reflecting upon the importance of working from a client-centered approach in these sessions, yet retaining a structured holding environment. I processed feelings about flexibility and flow in a loose and brief art-making process.

Week 2. During the second session, the client entered the clinical space with visibly increased body movements from baseline, moving around the room with a toe-walk to explore organizational changes. Anthony identified a feeling of frustration in regard to his lost glasses, shaking and bending the wire frames of a temporary pair while perseverating over calling his mom and finding the original pair. I confirmed that we could call his mother together after the session, and made a large paper envelope, instructing Anthony to put his glasses and negative feelings inside before he slid it across to the far end of the table. After the introduction of the new picture-book project the past week, this was the first session that Anthony was given the choice of free-choice art-making or working on the book project. He chose to work on the book, following me in a tandem process of visual directions to fold large paper into a book format,

done while standing and pressing on the table to allow for movements and proprioceptive stimulation. Anthony actively engaged in the process, watching my movements and repeating them quickly but silently, with minimal verbalizations of prompting from me. When given the choice about what to do next, Anthony sat down and chose to open different blue Play-Doh containers, twisting and squishing it through his fingers in one hand before closing the session.

Themes in my subsequent response art, Figure 2, included pressure, understanding when something is done, and organic forms. The image was made of acrylic paints in an altered book, with a minimal palette of red, white, blue and gray. Water and mixing of colors were used to turn an initial layer of a red blob into a form with depth and shadows. My reflections were based on the organic nature of the unstructured art-making forms that the client made at the end of session, formed by the pressure of his hand, yet showing a natural shape that seemed to resemble a completely organic form in nature. There was also an element of my process which responded to the synchronized folding process. I strived to see what it felt like to attune to the client's art process, without over-working the materials, but rather letting them almost fall to the paper in their own intended form, after the end of the session.

Free Art-Making

Week 3. During the subsequent three weeks, Anthony engaged in processes of improvisational art-making. Anthony began the 3rd session of this research period by bringing in a cat figurine, selecting a positive color for check-in, and describing a negative emotional state due to pain from a shot, as well as a positive state of relief at finding his glasses. When offered a choice in creative process, he chose to make art without a directive, immediately standing up to get the bottles of tempera paint from the cabinet. I covered the table with a large paper to act as a drop cloth, and Anthony began a process that involved opening containers of paint and pouring

them directly onto the paper. He squirted paint directly on top of the cat figurine, moving it across the paper in a gesture that appeared like it was walking, leaving a pattern of footprints along the paper. I observed a fluid and creative process, with Anthony mixing paints in a water container, pouring it over the cat and paper, then dipping the cat into different “paint-water” mixtures. At different points, Anthony identified appropriate daily functions involving water in brief verbal narrations about the figure, such as bathing.

At several points, water and paint spilled from containers or overflowed the paper, and I prompted Anthony with permission to be messy, as long as we kept it within the boundaries (for example, the paper or table), or we would have to stop to clean up. This initiated a rhythm of problem solving and learning boundaries as cues for slowing down or pausing, with me prompting Anthony by asking if he needed paper towels, prompting to slow down, and structuring the free-form and sensory materials he was drawn to working with. Anthony responded well to repeated prompting, at times reaching quickly for the paper towels as water began to spill on himself or exclaiming a one-word need for containment as a verbal request for my help. During clean-up, I asked Anthony if he wanted to keep the table covering, pointing out that it was almost like an accidental painting. Anthony expressed surprise at how big and colorful the painting had become and confirmed wanting to keep it. We closed the session and upon transition back to class, Anthony responded to his teacher’s inquiry that today he had made a “masterpiece.”

Response art to this third session, Figure 3, took form by expanding to stretch across two pages of the altered book, with a focus on texture and choosing a familiar crafting material. The image was made with small squares of tissue paper, in shades of pink, blue, and purple in a gradient from dark to light as the pieces rose through the page. My thoughts during this process

flowed from a place of satisfaction. The session contained a strong dynamic of push and pull, with vigilance around repeated cuing in my hopes to help Anthony slow down, leaving me feeling drained. However, observing Anthony as he saw his accidental finished art piece, which was in many ways a visual representation of his process, and then witnessing him express the closest thing to pride that I had seen him experience so far, was fulfilling. That energy and feeling, of being substantiated in the significance of trusting that artistic process, stayed with me as I made this piece. Once dried, I re-visited the image, adding grounding lines at two different baselines in my own response to a desire for an increased sense of grounding.

Week 4. In the 4th session, Anthony arrived with an orange cat puppet, who spoke for him during the check-in. He had the puppet report that it was a good day to visit school, and Anthony used the puppet to draw an image with an orange crayon, with check-in reflecting the puppet's favorite color and mood. Anthony then used his own voice to tell me that the cat needed a nap, carefully placing the puppet in the art cabinet while I asked him which choice he wanted to work on that day. Anthony verbalized wanting to work on his book, selecting paints from the cabinet. He began to squirt paints into containers and pour water in them, mixing and pouring for a substantial amount of time. I provided frequent reminders about boundaries for the art materials and cued for pauses when mixtures overflowed, providing a safe space and the tools to make paper towel dams on the edge of the table. He returned to the cabinet, tip-toeing and making an exaggerated facial expression when he reached in for tape, nodding when I whispered, "are you trying to not wake the cat?" He let out an audible sigh, assumed to be relief, when he closed the cabinet door and proceeded to tape over the container filled with the paint and water mixture, overlapping the tape and even adding paper into the covering as he worked. I prompted Anthony that time was almost up, and asked if he wanted to keep his creation for the next

session. He verbally confirmed and helped with cleaning up the space before we closed the session with a mindful breathing exercise.

The artwork created in response to the fourth session, Figure 4, was made with simple acrylics and pen on another page in my altered book. The ebb and flow of the energy of this session resonated with me as I squirted acrylic paint onto my page. I had first drawn a circle in pen, then surrounded it with loose and overlapping brushwork, with the same high energy, informed by the fluid creativity I had just witnessed, as well as the sometimes-haphazard motions that lacked some body awareness throughout the process. I allowed myself let go of the expectations of the session, letting go of the questions in my mind—if Anthony made a verbal choice but acted in direct contradiction, should I have redirected him about that boundary, or would that have cut off his innate expression? I let myself focus on the sensory satisfaction of feeling my brush glide through thick paint, spreading it but remaining in a bordered boundary. As the paint dried, I added a pen barrier around the outside, connecting to my own role of holding that safe space, allowing for mess and the freedom to express and explore within those session walls.

Week 5. Due to a school holiday, session five was scheduled for a different time, which was a change in the typical routine for Anthony. At check-in, Anthony described a negative or neutral state, using short phrases and brief answers as is typical of his communication style. He selected a color, wrapping yarn repeatedly around a toy car while he spoke with me. His focus fell on excitement around the holidays, but in response to my questions, also reflected on dislike of the heightened volume, which was congruent with his sensory sensitivities. Anthony engaged with me in a pre-scheduled portfolio review, selecting four pieces that he would want to show and noting aloud how much work he had created. I reinforced that he had been working very

hard and had been very creative thus far. Anthony then chose free art-making for the session, and while I took out his choice of paints, he took a skein of yarn and wrapped it on objects in loops around the room; he benefitted from repeated questions or prompting before he brought the yarn to his seat and began painting. He used the water and paint in a familiar style of pouring and mixing, making narrative statements out loud to observe changes or asking questions while maintaining his eye-contact and focus within his art materials. Anthony and I cleaned up, then he returned to the closet for scissors and proceeded to cut the wrapped yarn, still left on his toy car from the beginning of session, noting in response to my question, that it was a good feeling.

My fifth piece of response art began with a material choice directly influenced by Anthony's yarn wrapping in session. In figure 5, I punched holes in my altered book page, adding concentric circles in oil pastel before stringing an embroidery thread through and around these spaces, then added the words that came up for me—connections and boundaries. I connected with the rhythm that Anthony seemed to explore so much in session, wrapping on different scales and pouring, back and forth. I noticed my own frustration at the loose wrapping I did, how the materials kept moving, and thought through the importance of pressure in the wrapping that Anthony did. Our session was prior to a larger school event, and in my reflections while wrapping, I could imagine Anthony's desire for pressure, control, and containment, in the face of a loud, chaotic, and atypical afternoon schedule. I also thought about the natural creative flow, and how just like ripples in a pond, sometimes our bodies know what artistic flow we need to express and ground ourselves in within that moment.

Character Development

Week 6. The 6th session was focused on character development, marking the first-time Anthony had actively engaged with his personified emotions through artwork. Anthony

transitioned into the beginning of this session with excess energy increased from his baseline, seen in wiggly body movements. I asked him what would help settle his body into the session, even offering to do the session on a picnic table outside, amongst other options, and Anthony chose making art. He checked in by describing how his body wanted to move, confirming my initial impressions of dysregulated behaviors, and making a fidget by repeatedly driving a toy car through paint that he squirted onto the paper that covered the table. When given a choice for the session, Anthony verbalized wanting to do his book, but kept adding paint to his car and repeating his motions within the boundaries of the paper. I asked him if he wanted to finish his car tracks before starting his book, or if he changed his mind, and Anthony both confirmed still wanting to work on his book, as well as accepting my suggestion of setting a timer. Anthony continued covering the car in paint and engaging in mark-making on the paper until the timer went off, transitioning to a new spot as I directed.

He remained standing, using a large brush and orange paints to create a stick-figure cat, made of simple geometric shapes with a single pass of a lightly saturated brush that let the bristle marks show in the painted lines. I asked him questions about the character while he worked, creating an image of the new emotion that he made up a name for. He reported the feeling to be a positive and relaxed feeling, which lived far away, and told me what it would feel like by likening it to a cat. After he declared that he was done, he chose to work on sadness next. He used the oil pastels this time, making a large blue oval head and two big circles on top, then adding simple details for a face, and lines which he explained were tears. Anthony told me about this character as a bear that lived under the sea, while he collected pom-poms to place on the nose and each ear. He helped clean up before closing with a breathing exercise and returning to class.

The sixth piece of response art, Figure 6, was highly process-oriented, made with acrylic paints on a page of my altered book. I covered the page in an orderly series of dots, progressing down each column while gradually mixing in other colors to shift as a subtle gradient from one color to the next. There was a slow rhythm of dipping my brush in the paint and tapping the page, repeating again and again. I found myself once again reflecting on the scaffolding that I placed in a session with Anthony, how I helped him shift and transition in order to do the things he wanted to do without getting stuck, all the while trying to follow his own process. There was a meditative and mindful quality in my simple painting process, leaving me with a more grounded sense than before.

Summary

In summation, this six-week study served as a solid grounding for future work with Anthony, as well as having strong implications for future work with the implementation of choice and social-emotional art therapy for populations with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This process showed Anthony to have moments of growth, creativity, trust, and creative expression. Throughout my extensive documentation, it was ultimately the process of my art-making which was the largest guiding force in my making-meaning from this study. The establishment of a routine, with emotion-based check-ins, choice of art materials and subject matter, and a grounding breath exercise to close, seems to have been a necessary scaffolding to engage and contain the participant within the desired art content.

At the end of this research, I was able to review with Anthony, asking him about his progress and goals moving forward. Since Anthony often opted to engage in free art-making, I was curious to see if his engagement with character development and an emotional story book was merely due to an internalized obligation. When reviewing our work together, Anthony was

able to confirm a desire to continue on with the same dual topic format during sessions, and elaborated that the scope of making his own storybook seemed overwhelming at times. He accepted my suggestion to continue using a timer to help structure the time in session into manageable pieces, reserving space for both expression and cognitive exploration while maintaining an element of choice in the order of events each time. This need for containment, the creative processes, and moments of attunement that I found through reflection in my art journals were fundamental parts of the course of events and progress made.

Discussion

Discoveries

Over the duration of the study, three prominent themes emerged: a) space and containment, b) connection, and c) fluid processing. Space and containment are concepts that first came to my attention during the response art phase. It was through this reflection that it became clear that a primary role of this art therapist was to act as a containing support, maintaining a safe space that would facilitate Anthony's exploration of his chosen art materials (Malchiodi, 2012). Some of the work that Anthony focused on throughout the session revolved around boundaries, his movements often took up a great deal of space, while he worked with me to also learn about safety in boundaries. As he moved through the space with different sensory materials, engaging in visual, auditory, and proprioceptive stimulation, there was a visible shift towards regulation in the pace and scope of his movements, as well as his sounds (Kuo & Miranda, 2003). The materials also served a significant purpose in containing, with both choices serving dual purposes. When Anthony engaged in the picture book process, it was a structured prompt with which he engaged on a cognitive level, working with symbols and reflection. When he chose instead to pour paint and water together, and to explore new materials in an open

fashion, he expressed his current state and externalized emotions often through silent exploration. In those instances, the structure of the session acted as containment, with notable transitions through different stages of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Malchiodi, 2012).

Connection and attunement were themes that served an important role as this therapeutic relationship grew. As I witnessed the creative process for Anthony, I grew an understanding of his unspoken voice through motions and marks. Watching him connect to his creative process connected to the basic psychological theories upon which the study was based. Piaget had posited that an individual had a natural rhythm of frustration and growth, and though Anthony did not align with this theory's age-oriented process, I saw a willingness in Anthony to try despite small moments of failure, gaining knowledge and experience through these repeated patterns (Crain, 2016). Perhaps the most relevant theory to this experience was Lowenfeld's self-efficacy, with the creative aspect of these art therapy sessions serving as a strong motivator for Anthony's interest, keeping him engaged even during more dysregulated sessions. During the session when Anthony discussed his final product as a masterpiece, I was able to see the importance of the roles of choice and satisfaction in his product, witnessing him verbalize a statement that reflected pride and positive self-worth (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987). Due to the individualized nature of these sessions, Bandura's models of observational learning were less relevant. However, during one session, Anthony followed this clinician through the steps of folding paper for his book (Crain, 2016). The success of that fluid skill transference made me curious for the potential of future implications regarding more focus on multi-person sessions, in order to further explore the involvement of modeling.

Overall, the fluid processing throughout the study reinforced my knowledge that the creative process is an individual one. I was merely there to hold the space and serve as guidance,

but the true dynamics at play were between Anthony and the art. The creative process allowed him a narrative, at times constructed on the future pages of a book about a cat's emotions, and at times through the nonverbal expression of color and line, which substituted for the words he did not always possess (Capps, Yirmiya, & Signman, 1992). This externalizing force appeared to be a positive and beneficial influence on Anthony's days.

With minimal research done examining visual art therapy and individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, this study discovered strong implications of connections between the nonverbal communication supplied by art therapy and the need for nonverbal communication within the autism community. Art has supplied an avenue for connecting and communicating for Anthony within these sessions, and could potentially be explored with others to help overcome these barriers (Capps, Yirmiya, & Signman, 1992). Anthony benefited from the symbolic communication within sessions, as he could substitute colors for emotions in a system that was part of his routine and predetermined to avoid unpredictability. At times, Anthony might have struggled with a verbal communication due to factors like anxiety and lack of social initiative, which are present for many individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, sessions allowed a trusting space where he could explore communication that would be witnessed by myself, as well as the reciprocity that comes with sharing artwork and feeling understood (Kim, Wilgram, & Gold, 2008). The building blocks of back-and-forth musical improvisation have shown similar connection and skill building moments as Anthony was able to experience as he engaged in improvised art-making and communicated with me, responded to my questions, or shared his images with me (Rogers 2005).

Durrani (2014) outlined the overwhelming depth of emotion that individuals can often find difficult to put into words, especially when that deficit is experienced by an individual who

already struggles to communicate with others, as some individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder experience. Anthony's characters served as a language substitute, allowing him to convey the complexities of emotions that he experiences but may not understand fully or in others. Both emotion characters made by Anthony during these sessions were said to have homes in different far away places, potentially providing a metaphor for the disconnect that Anthony might feel at times from this realm of emotions when in overwhelming situations or socializing with peers. Capps, Yirmiya and Sigman (1992) also explored the difficulties with affect expression and emotional recognition that add extra challenges to peer socializations for many individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. By allowing Anthony to make his own emotion-based characters with the intent to develop a story about them, it allowed him to make a personal connection to and build understanding of these emotions in context. Anthony was able to talk about his personified feelings, which took the apparent forms of a cat and a bear, and perhaps build a familiarity with them that could allow for quicker or more accurate identification in other contexts. Anthony did not assign a face to his first emotion, but associated it with a sense of calm described by a cat's purr, adding a sensory component and personal observation that show a connection to real-life implications. By the second image, Anthony depicted his sad bear in blue, and added tears, showing a connection to the actual representation of the emotion on an individual. He was able to start exploring and building knowledge about emotions by using familiar art processes and approachable materials, a strategy that could continue to scaffold building further pro-social behaviors (Hecker, Lettenberger, Nedela, & Soloski, 2010).

The response art portion of my research and data analysis process has lent depth to my observations and added meaning to my role as a researcher. Arguably, this step was one of the most beneficial in helping me to sort through the data and contemplate the perspective of my

dual roles of researcher and clinician, helping me to pull further meaning from this process. In my own artwork, themes of time and patience emerged. My personal material choices often involved paint, requiring drying time by nature of the wet material, as well as including layers or potential mixed media components of line work in pen. This process allowed me time to live with my artwork, helping to structure a space in my brain to process the evidence of my sessions for research purposes, as well as to filter through my emotions. There was also an aspect of choice, either leaving me images and imperfections that emerged from the initial paint, or clarifying and altering them through continued work. A mixture of both styles emerged, becoming a mindful practice of knowing when a process was complete. This process was particularly important in my role as a researcher, as my clinical work continued past the end of the period of the study. Excepting the need to let go, and remain grounded within, only the data collected within the duration of these six weeks was difficult as I continued to see growth and results through continual work in similar styles to those which were documented in this paper.

As I began to review the data of the study and formulate findings on my results in this thesis in general, a final piece of reflection art took the form of Figure 7. I applied layers of gesso and paint to cover a previously yellow page, tapping rhythmically at first in order to apply a base, with later additions of swirls from gathered paper towel. This process was experimental and not at all product oriented, as I acted without specific intention, except hoping process the overwhelming scattered thoughts and various data that needed to be understood. The final piece was process oriented and rhythmically soothing, as I let the materials guide me. Tapping motions mixed paint in different amounts on different parts of the paper, while the twirling motions picked up and removed much of the pigmented color, leaving voids of the original white gesso behind. The circles became like ripples in the pond, each affecting and overlapping the

marks made by the others. This became a metaphor for this capstone research process, with each layer of the research process informing the next, the client affecting my own artistic process in each response piece, and ultimately reflecting a hope for this research to add to the field and leave a reverberating influence of its own in future studies.

Limitations

There were several inescapable limitations within the scope of this study. On a base level, the setting for this research took place within a therapeutic day school site. The school's schedule at times changed the routine of sessions. Furthermore, holding sessions within the hours of a school day often led to unpredictable external factors entering the space, like difficulties with peer bullying and exhaustion from a day of academics. The space within the school where individual therapy sessions took place was a multipurpose room without a sink, which, along with other material restrictions, was a potential hindrance to the free art-making. A general time restraint for the collection of data also had potential to impair the significance of this study. The study itself only ran for six sessions over six weeks, though the work itself continuing with this participant throughout several months until the end of the school year. In addition, the nature of restrictions on data collection opened the door for more potential bias in reporting, as the images from this participant and his exact words are not available to the reader. There was potential for bias within my interpretations, not only because I was unable to confirm my results by providing more direct data from the participant, but also due to my roles as researcher and clinician. As I was the individual conducting the research as well as analyzing it, there was potential for my own hopes and intentions of this study to have influenced how I interpreted the final data. One final limitation is the potential for bias that needs to be named due to my dual roles of researcher and clinician. Sticking to a more steadfast methodology may have

led to more distinct data, however at times I had to default to the priority of being a clinician, and put the needs of this client first over the intentions of the research.

Implications

The implications of this study had both long and short term significance. In the short term, sessions continued as outlined in this capstone until the end of the school year. The elements of choice, structured and unstructured art-making, and a focus on identity and emotions all aligned with the participant's goals and continued as part of his treatment plan. In the long term, this study indicated a need for more opportunities for choice in sessions with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Ultimately, it indicated a need for continued research utilizing art therapy with a focus beyond traditional behavioral impacts, and into the realms of socialization and communication.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study revealed themes of containment, connection, and fluid processing through a six-week series of individual art therapy sessions with a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder. There as a place for art therapy experiences for individuals with ASD, and within that there was a significant role of choice. Furthermore, emotion-focused interventions, like creation of a structured children's book about emotion characters or simply using open art materials to externalize and express feelings, could have a significant and positive impact on clients. Though each of these prompts, and each session, looked different, the regulation of overwhelming sensory input for Anthony was mediated through his own actions and his own creative communications. Benefits have had the potential to reach beyond my initial research goal and hypothesis of building understanding, and into the realm of contributing toward building a sense of self.

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APPENDIX A: Researcher Art Responses

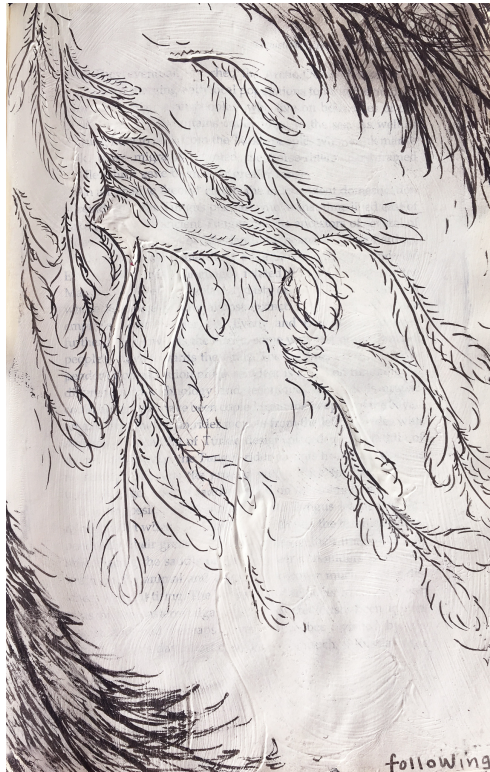


Figure 1. "Week 1," Pen, 2018.



Figure 2. "Week 2," Acrylic, 2018.



Figure 3. "Week 3," Mixed media, 2018.

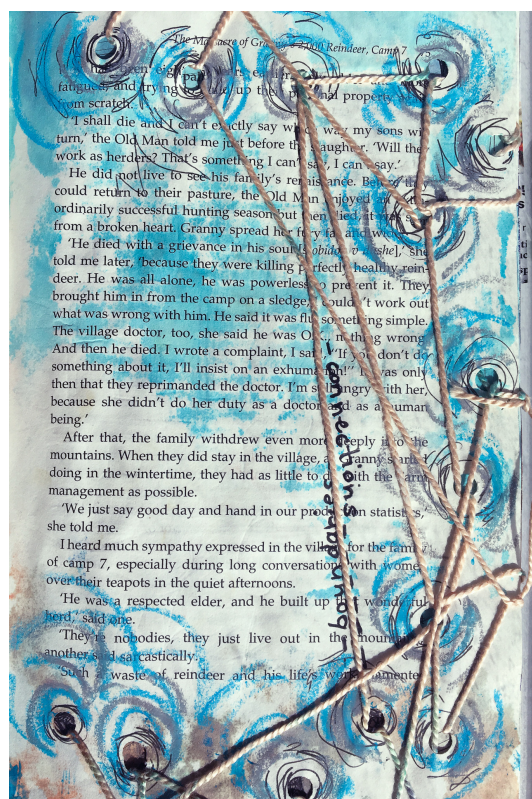


Figure 5. “Week 5,” Mixed media, 2018.



Figure 7. “Final Thoughts,” Acrylic, 2018.

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Kimberly Knowles

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Feeling Colors: Reflections on the Creative Process of a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Date of Graduation: May, 2019

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Raquel Stephenson