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An Open Studio Approach to Adolescent Identity Formation: A Development of a Method

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Expressive Arts Therapy

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Abstract

Adolescence is a time of growth, enhanced understanding of self, and testing out how one may present in a group. Erikson described this stage as an opportunity to branch out from family influence and begin to understand one's role among peers. This method involved an open studio approach using altered books to support adolescent identity formation. The participants were all from a private middle school in the Boston area. Participation was voluntary for each student and all materials were provided by the facilitator. Participant engagement in the group increased each week. The open studio group appeared to appeal to certain students due to their ability to choose when they wanted to join and the level of their engagement. During the open studio, themes emerged as talking points, and included participant engagement, peer relationships, self-esteem, and group roles during adolescence.

Keywords: identity formation, adolescents, altered-books, open studio

An Open Studio Approach to Adolescent Identity Formation

Introduction

“Let go of who you think you’re supposed to be and embrace who you are” (Brown, 2010, title).

How does one become, or even know what she would like to become? Adolescent identity is formed by a number of aspects, all of which may vary based on the individual. Gender, age, cognitive functioning, location, and socio-economic status are among some of the factors that impact one’s identity. Powel (2004) discussed the importance of identity formation specifically during the time of adolescences. Powel (2004) also noted that when Erickson discussed the fifth stage of development he also commented on the importance of peer interactions. Erickson was concerned with an individual’s ability to navigate challenging peer interactions and how one may consequently come to an agreement within these interactions with peers. He communicated that one’s identity could be impacted by their capacity to manage peer interactions as it may provide a template for how future instances would be addressed (Powel, 2004.)

Otting and Prosek (2016) explicitly discussed how the arts along with a “Feminist Therapy” provide space for self-exploration and expression. While completing an internship at a middle school the emphasis on peer interactions and their role in identity has been brought to the forefront of concern by parents and staff at the school. The current enrollment at the school is all girls of color while the staff members are about 50% white and 50% of color. A concern that has been continuously raised is that of how the adolescent girls will see themselves in the larger context of society. This concern is based on the student’s outward appearance, being someone of color and living in the city of Boston. Families have discussed their desire for the students to see people who they resemble at the school and in positions of power.

Understanding one's identity is partially done by understanding one's role in a group setting both from their point of view as well as from how others see them. Berzoff, Flanagan and Hertz (2011) discussed Erikson's emphasis on sense of self being derived from one's relationships, culture and societal forces. How one adolescent reacts in any given situation will differ from their peers, whether that is in a socially accepted manner or one that deviates from a norm. Jang and Choi (2012) recognized that sense of self within a group was an issue which could be addressed in an arts-based group with adolescents. Altered books are a way for individual self-exploration in a manner that may be less overwhelming than an empty paper or canvas (Cobb & Negash, 2010). Therefore, the use of an altered book group could support positive peer interactions, creative exploration, and a deeper understanding of one's role in the context of social groups.

The ability to use art in formation of identity has the potential to eliminate language barriers. Huss, Kaufman, Avgar, and Shuker (2016) noted that forms of non-verbal communication, art and symbols, can be extremely helpful especially in moments of distress. As previously noted, Erickson emphasized the importance of conflicts and an ability to resolve such issues (as cited in Powel, 2004.). Therefore it is imperative to consider the use of language, verbal and non-verbal, within the process of identity development and exploration. One way to incorporate the use of art within the formation of identity is with altered books in an open studio setting. Altered books have the ability to support numerous forms of communication through the creative process of changing the written and visual work in a book to reflect the individual (Cobb & Negash, 2010).

An open studio will permit students to have ownership over their work and promote independent thinking (Cobb & Negash, 2010). It will also be an opportunity to explore different modalities and mediums in a contained space, using a day and time-frame to provide such

containment. Broach, Pugh, and Smith (2016) found that an expressive arts group that was directed by the participants expanded the positive sense of self for those involved. They also recognized that a group setting with the arts supported the participants in their development of self-esteem and understanding of roles in a group, their own roles as well as how others function in that setting.

Literature Review

Identity Formation

Erikson's Stages of Development. Erikson expressed the concept of age and development in stages. Throughout each stage he discussed situations that may occur and lead to an individual becoming susceptible to challenges. The challenge during adolescence is described as "identity versus role confusion" (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2011, p. 96.). Erikson acknowledged that this is an extremely challenging time in an individual's life. Not only are there changes in one's body and hormones but they are also facing more pressure from their peer groups. Self and group perception is extremely important as well as the understanding of what is right and wrong. Erikson argued that this particular stage does not have a set outline for positive functioning rather emphasized that how someone adapts to societal and cultural pressures will inform how well they resolve the challenges in this developmental stage (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2011).

Components of Identity. Adolescence is a timeframe where uncertainty leads to curiosity and in turn finding a cohesive sense of self (Nelson, Kling, Wangavist, Frisen & Syed, 2018). Syed and McLean (2016) stated that it is important to consider that not only is identity questioning who an individual is but also why they are such a way. As previously noted, identity is formed by a number of aspects and interactions. In order to understand identity formation with adolescents it is also important to understand the break-down of each aspect and the role

played within identity formation. For the purpose of this research the factors highlighted will be gender, self-esteem, race and culture, and one's role within a group setting.

Gender. The formation of identity may differ drastically if the adolescent identifies as female, versus male, transgender, non-binary or gender fluid peers. Otting and Prosek (2016) acknowledged that society impedes the development of non-male identity, speaking specifically to female identity, because society is currently male dominated. Lane (2017) echoed this line of thinking by noting that female adolescents are faced with distinct challenges that male adolescents would not experience. It is argued that one reason for the differences in gender is due to the hormonal changes that occur in adolescents (Powel, 2004). Wastell (1996) noted that as development occurs identity is being formed and therefore impacted by hormonal differences.

Body image is also a central challenge faced by female adolescents. Emphasis is frequently placed on the female body when exploring identity. There are consistently comparisons of body shapes, and sizes being made by and about female adolescents (Nelson et al., 2018). These comparisons are made between peers as well as adolescents and their female caregivers. Powel (2004) theorizes that higher percentages of female caregivers in the United States compared to male caregivers can be directly related to body image comparisons by adolescents. Arguing that as children and adolescents develop they will compare themselves to those around them. If they are more often than not around female caregivers then the female adolescents will feel a more direct link to the caregiver, as well as a greater opportunity to analyze their similarities and differences (Powel, 2004).

Self-Esteem. Haney and Durlak (1998) have identified self-esteem as a main component in identity formation. They have divided self-esteem into two ideas; the first being how one sees their self-worth and the second as "self-concept" or the traits that one displays (Haney & Durlak, 1998, p. 424). Within the development of self-esteem is an adolescent's level of confidence, in

themselves as well as their abilities to function with peers (Jang & Choi, 2012; Nelson, et al., 2018). An individual who is having a difficult time accepting themselves may also begin to present with difficulties in peer interactions.

Self-esteem, as discussed by Myers, Willse and Villalba (2011), also relates to an individual's current age, where they are in their development of hormones, body types and what physical activity is integrated in their lifestyle. Adolescence is a time that puberty begins, which may impact the above-mentioned aspects of one's self-esteem. Changes to one's body, and body type may drastically alter how they view themselves. This could be a negative or positive view point which impacts a person's overall view of themselves and in turn their self-esteem (Nelson, et al., 2018). An added pressure to self-esteem in adolescents is academic achievement (Powel, 2004). Are adolescents meeting their academic standards? Where are they in relation to how their peers are performing academically? These are questions that may cross the adolescents' minds. Powel (2004), Lane (2017) and Nelson, et al., (2018) all considered academic performance to be a meaningful component when regarding adolescents' self-esteem.

Race and Culture. Another important consideration for identity is the dominant cultural group that the individual is relating within (Myers, Willse, & Villalba, 2011). Erickson expanded on Freuds understanding of development by emphasizing the importance of accounting for culture when considering identity (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2011). Nelson, et al., (2018) examined the idea of body image relating to self-esteem in the context of culture. They noted that there are often views of body image coming from a Western culture, which could impede the views of those not within the dominant culture. Otting and Prosek (2016) communicated that Western culture limits identity formation by narrowing the values to those specific to dominant society.

Svensson, Berne, and Syed (2018) also discussed the characteristics which have been prevalent in their research. A main component of their work is within the differing ethnic backgrounds of individuals and how ethnicity impacts formation of identity. They argued that in order to gain an understanding of a person's ethnicity and its relationship to their identity one must also have an understanding of the ethnicities of individuals surrounding them in social situations. It is also argued that the prior understanding and background of an ethnic group will alter and impact the view of an individual currently in that group.

Svensson, Berne, and Syed (2018) acknowledged that one's position in an ethnic group is not seen without understanding the other individuals in the group. Lane (2017) found that African American adolescent girls face unique difficulties while navigating identity as they are often under-represented and not given sufficient space to develop in the dominant culture in the United States. They also conveyed the importance of recognizing that ethnicity is a socially constructed idea and without others social norms would not be present.

Additionally, Svensson, Berne, and Syed (2018) asserted one's identity has the potential to shift within each social context. A student at the all-girls school may view themselves in a different context depending on their communication and interactions throughout their day with those of the same or different ethnicities. This reinforces the argument that identity is not solidified, but fluid and continually influenced in the context of social engagements and community.

Group Roles During Adolescence. Throughout the period of adolescence there is an increase in extra circular activities which may provide a space where one's identity is challenged by the social expectations of the group (Powel, 2004). Svensson, Berne, and Syed (2018), Broach, Pugh, and Smith (2016) as well as Myers, Willse and Villalba (2011) posited that these different situations will cause adolescents to display different parts of their identities depending

on who they are around and the activity they are participating in. Throughout each of these activities they argue that one's identity may start to solidify; however they bear in mind that all identity is liable to change to fit the environment. For example, a student who feels more comfortable participating in an arts based activity may present with more confidence in a painting group than they may at a soccer game.

If an adolescent is a minority in a group setting they may feel the need to adapt to the majority and shift their identity to better fit in with the group. This can potentially lead to feelings of discrimination if a certain race, ethnicity or gender is not represented properly in a group participating in an activity. McAdams (2013) noted the importance of this representation versus sense of discrimination because one's role in a group is essential to their internal identity formation. Erickson emphasized that culture plays an important role in formation of identity. He cautioned that comparing a developing adolescent to the dominant culture could also inaccurately label them as "deviant" while the individual may simply be fitting into another part of society ((Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2011).

Jang and Choi (2012) supported the belief that identity will shift over time with their research of a clay-based group study. They found that participants were able to become more comfortable in their role within the group as the weeks passed. Some of the participants noticed they were interacting more freely with their peers as they felt more comfortable due to the length of time they were spending together. It is hypothesized that the comfort level increased due to the participants having many opportunities to interact and establish connections with their peers in the group, and as a result led to them being more open regarding their identity. Lane (2017) agreed with the need to provide a consistent and supportive place for adolescents. They add that it is crucial to implement group opportunities for African American adolescent girls as there is often an imbalance in their representation in society and dominant culture. This lack of

representation is on a leadership and systemic level. Lane (2017) noted the importance of African American adolescent girls having the opportunity to view individuals who look like them in positions of power as well as in the groups they participate in.

Importance of Adolescent Identity

Adolescent identity formation has close connections to mental health status (Myers, Willse, & Villalba). Female adolescent mental health in particular has shown to be extremely influenced by one's sense of self. Nelson et al., (2018) found that negative body image led to lower self-esteem along with an increase in symptoms of depression and anxiety. It is critical to note that self-esteem increases at a developmentally different time in females compared to males. Powel (2004) found that self-esteem in female adolescents are two times lower than male adolescents.

Also of note is that adolescence is a period of time when peer relationships are strengthening (Nelson et al., 2018). Along with branching out from family, adolescents are subject to increased stress and vulnerability as well as deeper self-reflection (Jang and Choi, 2012). Tension within relationships heightens as individuals are trying to find their place within all of their roles (Powel, 2004). Individuals academic performance is connected to their identity, partially due to the relationships formed during this time (Haney & Durlak, 1998).

Expressive Arts

Impact on identity. With identity formation being connected with mental health, especially with female individuals, it is essential to have tools to provide support. The use of expressive arts allows for curiosity and exploration of identity. Creative activities foster a more stable sense of self and independence as the use of different modalities provides opportunities for self-reflection (Otting & Prosek, 2016). A specific clay-based study by Jang and Choi (2012) found that participants noted a positive change in self-esteem. Myers, Willse and Villalba (2011)

also stated that creativity is important in increasing self-esteem and therefore should be considered when counseling adolescents.

The expressive arts were also found to support peer interactions and a greater understanding of one's role in a group (Jang & Choi, 2012). Huss, Kaufman, Avgar, and Shuker (2016) discussed the ability for the arts to foster non-verbal communication. They discussed the ability to use symbols and gestures rather than words. As adolescents are developing physically and mentally, they may also be using slang and language that has specific meaning for them, increasing the importance for other forms of communication.

Altered Books. The use of a book as a medium for art and expression is believed to have begun when monks in Italy were using paper from previously written texts to recycle and write a new text. The reasoning for recycling the books came from wanting to cherish the paper and use a sacred item more than once. Others believe that the book altering began during the Victoria era when pages and images would be torn from one book and added to other books as pictures for the new book (Cobb & Negash, 2010). Song (2012) discussed that both of these strategies are used in modern day altered book making. Other potential methods of altering a book include painting, poetry, collaging, and stamping (Song, 2012). The use of a variety of materials and an ability to create on top of completed text allows for creative expression in a contained space. Song (2012) also discussed how altered books provide an enjoyable way to engage students in a reflective process.

Methods

The open studio format was introduced in December of 2018 to provide an overview of the group that would begin in January upon return from a school vacation. In the overview the students were given examples of altered books in the form of photographs. The students were also informed of the time and day of the week that the open studio would occur, with an

emphasis that participation was voluntary for all students. The open studio officially started on the third week of January and ran for one hour every Friday during the lunch and recess periods at the school for five consecutive weeks. Students were also given the opportunity to request specific songs to be played each week during the open studio hour. Throughout the weeks data was collected using an altered book created by the facilitator during and after the open studio group time.

Participants

The participants were all students enrolled in a private school with an affiliation with the Christian faith located in the Boston area. The students ages ranged from eight to fourteen and they are all students who identify as Black, Latina, Asian or a combination of these three identities. Each student was informed that their participation would be completely voluntary and that they were welcome to come and go throughout each open studio time frame. They were also informed that the studio would occur during their lunch and recess blocks at school. A total of 21 students participated throughout the five weeks in the open studio, however the number of students in the studio at any given time varied.

Environment

All open studios took place on school campus. The first open studio was held in the art room which is a large room with ample lighting and a sink, on the second floor. Unfortunately, access was only possible with a school staff member escort. The following studios were held on the third floor of the building in the computer room and library, to increase autonomous student access and provided ample light. These rooms allowed for independence and movement to and from recess and lunch, however they were not as large as the art studio nor did they provide immediate access to a sink.

Materials

Twelve books were initially purchased from local Goodwill stores. A supplemental purchase occurred during the second week of the open studio to account for the growing number of participants. The books varied in size, page numbers and content, all with language determined to be appropriate for students in grades four through eight. Some of the books contained images while others were strictly text. Magazines were donated by school staff members for collaging, as well as pom-poms, glitter, and paint. Hot glue, glue sticks, tape, ribbons, scissors and paper were set out for use. Other materials provided included: markers, crayons, oil pastels, colored pencils, paint, paint brushes, and charcoal. The students were invited to bring in images or materials from home if they wished, but it was made clear that bringing their own images or supplies would not be a requirement or expectation to participate in the open studio.

Week One

Students were reminded that the open studio would be starting and informed where it would meet. Nine students joined the first week which met in the art studio room. To begin, a brief review of altered books, the open studio format as well as the following rules was shared:

1. to respect one another, the art, and yourself,
2. to use school-appropriate language, and
3. to leave the room as it was found.

Students were encouraged to move around the room while creating and given the option to request specific music throughout the hour. The first twelve books and various materials were placed on the table and the facilitator communicated that students were allowed to look through the books and chose the one they wanted. An example book started by the facilitator was also provided as a reference. Students were also informed that while the facilitator may offer suggestions, the students held the ultimate authority in how to approach their art and what they

created. Students were informed that the book they chose now belonged to them and they were free to do whatever they wanted with it. The facilitator provided a safe space for the books to be maintained at school if students did not want to bring them home.

Weeks Two Through Five

Nine supplemental books were purchased, making a total of 21. The open studio was now held in the computer room as well as the library. The facilitator provided reminders and updates to all students on the location of the open studio and that it was voluntary. All of the creative materials were placed on a table in the center of the room and the books that were started the prior week were placed near the door to allow students access to their book the moment they entered the studio space. Students were reminded of the group rules as they entered the room. New students were directed to choose one of the unclaimed books and oriented to materials choices and rules and expectations of the open studio.

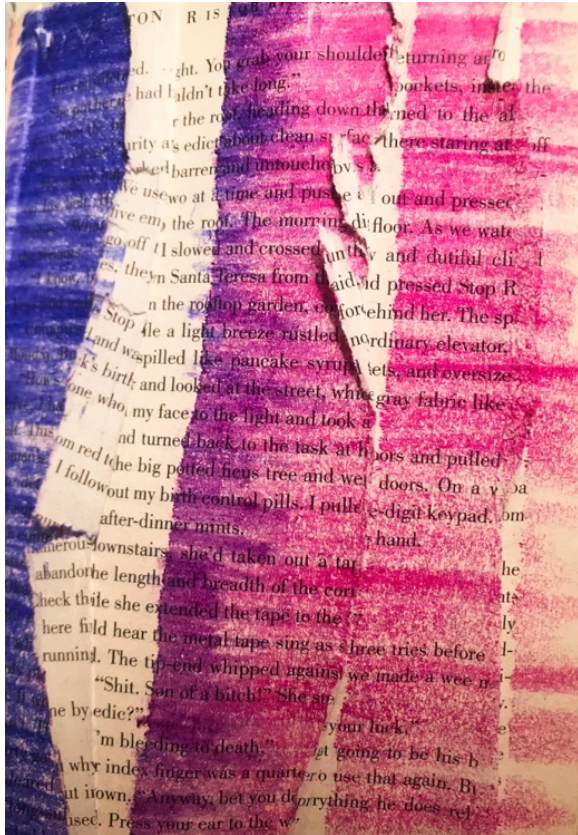
Results

The main purpose of this inquiry was to gain greater understanding on how identity is formed in adolescent girls. Would they be better supported with autonomy and an open studio approach compared to rigid guidelines for what to create? The following results were collected by the facilitator in an altered book which was created alongside the students who were creating in their own book. As the weeks progressed themes began to present, such as, participant engagement, peer relationships, self-esteem and group roles during adolescence.

Participant Engagement

The initial group contained twelve books and the students were more engaged in participation than anticipated for the first group. Nine books were selected at the first group. There were five students who did not join the first group but asked to participate in the next group later in the day. The students were initially reluctant to tear pages and looked to the

facilitator for permission to begin the process. Once reassured by the facilitator, the students presented with excitement and appeared extremely engaged in reconstructing their chosen books. See Figures 1 and 2, which are this author's art response to the students' reluctance to tear the pages.



Figures 1. Torn

Growth From Destruction

Peel back the pages

Rip
shred
find

The words were there all along

Covered by pigment

enhanced by color

You

Figure 2. Growth From Destruction

The following week many students who met individually with this author began to ask to bring their books to their individual sessions to work on. The next week, nine more books were purchased and were available at the open studio, along with the other three left over books from week one. Participation in altered book making steadily increased each week. From the fifteen

total students who participated in the open studio, eight students asked to have time to create in their books outside of the structured open studio time. A desire for students to create a second book emerged as well as students who requested to bring their books home throughout the weekend to work on at home.

The materials that students appeared most drawn to initially were the paint and textured materials such as feathers and pom-poms. When paint was first presented many students took time to view all color options, but once one student chose their color the other girls appeared to be inspired to choose the same color. Many of the students used the oil pastels to create images as well as blend colors on the pages. Although markers, crayons and colored pencils were available they were seldom used.

Engagement also increased as students appeared more assured of what they wanted to create. Students began to advocate for their needs, asking for specific materials as well as by asking for support from the facilitator to decide what to create. When students reported not knowing what to create in their book, a list of suggestions were provided which included items such as favorite things, foods, animals, colors, music, etc. They were also given suggestions to create pages of their family or friend groups, places they have traveled or would like to go to someday as well as pages of goals. Many of the students used their books to collage about their favorite foods and pop culture.

Peer Relationships

Students participating in the open studio began to ask their peers to also come to the group. Some girls would come to socialize and did not wish to create their own book. Other students began the time working on a book but would be shifted into conversation and focus on socializing rather than the book for the majority of the open studio session. Some of the students began to interact with peers who were not in their identified friend group, asking questions about

their books and asking for opinions on what was being created. Students in the sixth grade began to approach the facilitator asking for advice and support for navigating more challenging peer relationships. During the weeks of open studio, seven new students signed up for individual and dyad sessions with the facilitator throughout the week to discuss different coping strategies and skills regarding peer interactions. See Figure 3, which is this author's art response to participants exploration of new peer relationships.

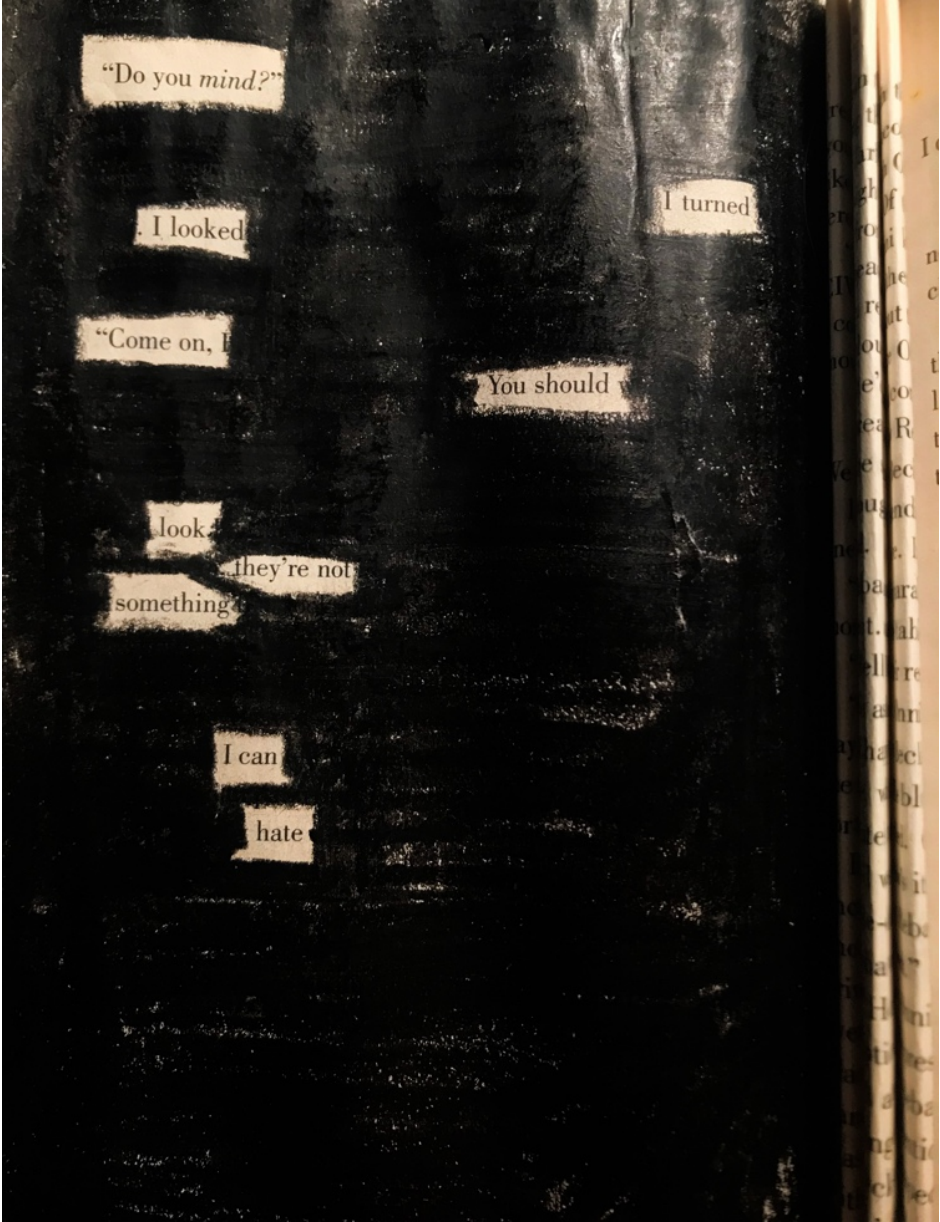


Figure 3. Open, blackout poem.

Self-Esteem

At the start of the open studio group the students presented with self-doubt. Many students expressed concern that what they created would not look good. They were reminded that there was no template for them to follow and it was their creation. They were also consistently reminded that it was not going to be graded or judged and if they wished, it did not

even need to be viewed by others. Students who began the open studio with more apparent self-doubt also appeared more comfortable within the first two weeks. Noticeable shifts in positive facial expressions as well as more open body language occurred when these students were complimented by their peers. These interactions appeared to instill confidence in the students and they presented as more positive in the open studio space as the weeks continued. See Figure 4, this author's response to increased self-esteem in participants.

Other students completed their books quickly, within two studios, and appeared very proud of what they had done. These students started asking peers if they needed any help or if anyone wanted them to make anything to go in their books. Some of the students said "yes", while others politely declined the offer. When students said "yes", the students offering support presented with positive affect, a smile, and an increase in conversations. When the students declined and there was a perceived rejection by peers the reaction was quite different. The students offering support to create the books became more withdrawn from positive conversation and presented with closed body language.

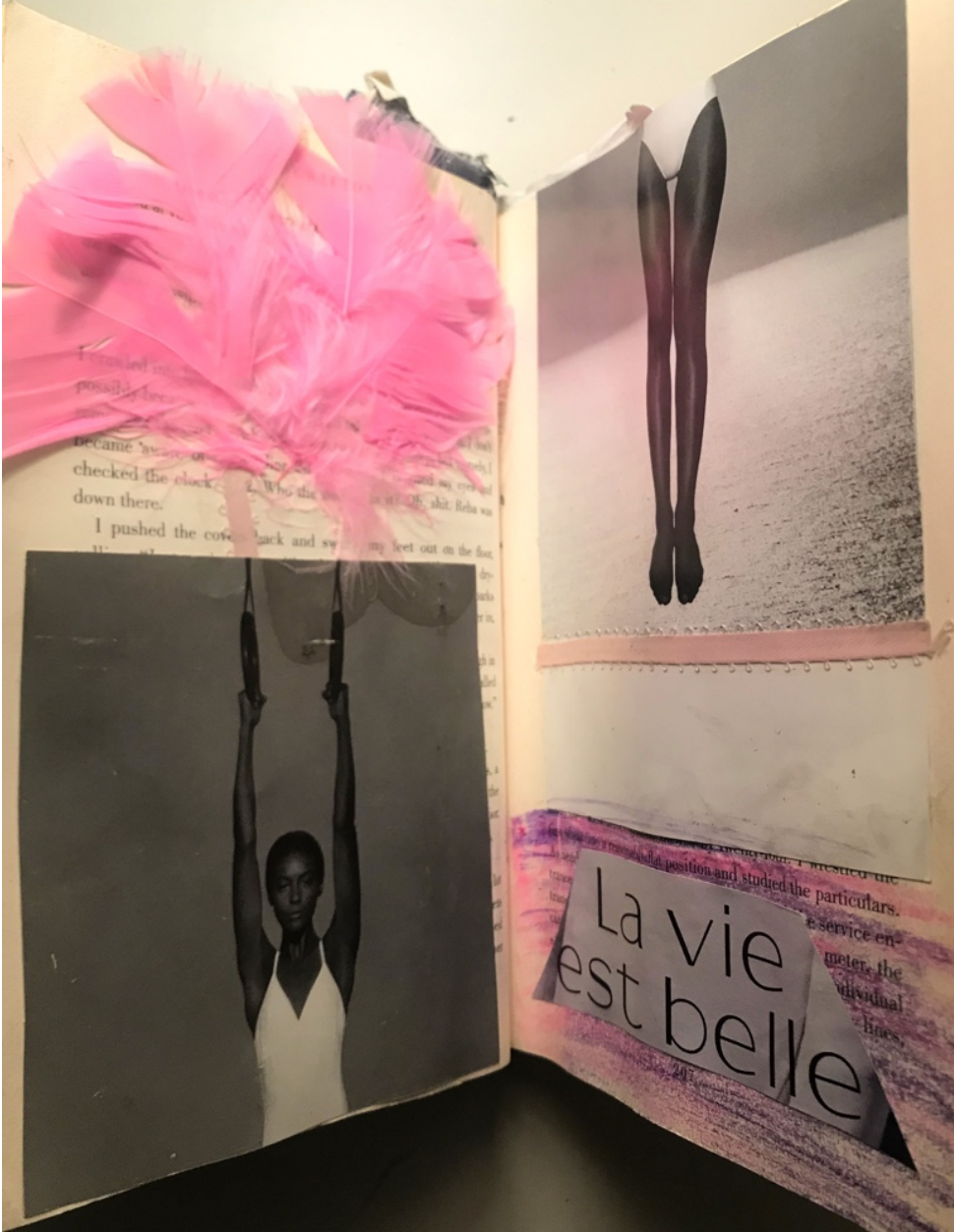


Figure 4. Drift

Group Roles During Adolescence

Students began to identify how they view themselves as well as how they thought others may see them. They also began to talk about their role in groups as leaders, mediators, followers, etc. Students began to identify how their view of themselves in the group could also

translate to their role in families. Some students noticed that they enjoy taking on the role of the helper in various situations. Other students appeared to take pride in their ability to be trusted by adults whether that was by being given a task by a teacher or being responsible for something at home. Many of the students appeared to take ownership over their role in group settings, however, some students presented with more difficulty in understanding their role in the larger context of a group. See Figure 5 which is the author’s multimedia art response to students’ group roles during adolescence.

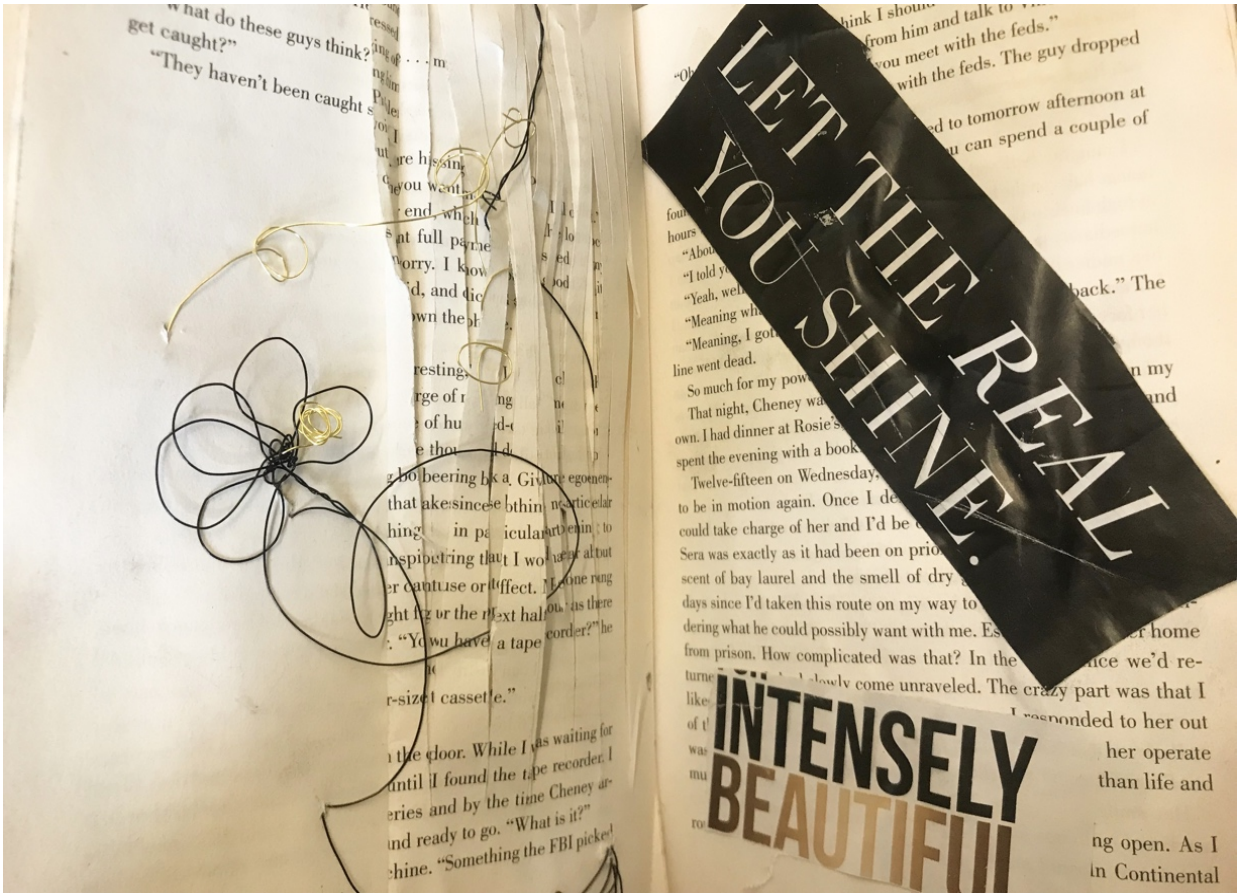


Figure 5. Adaptation

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between using an open studio approach, altered books, and formation of adolescent identity. The use of an open studio was intended to foster autonomy in the students. It was also intended to provide a sense of containment while they explored the materials and created sections of their books. Students reported a sense of enjoyment while creating their books and explored interpersonal peer relationships. Students also reported an increased self-awareness directly linked to their likes and dislikes.

Findings

The use of an open studio approach appeared to provide the students with a sense of independence. They reported enjoying the ability to explore the creative materials without prompts while still having the option to seek support from the facilitator or peers if they were unsure of what they wanted to create. Many of the students also reacted positively to having a choice to participate or not.

There were some students who would attend the open studio simply to interact with peers and communicate with the facilitator. Certain students asked their peers to create images for one another's books. Some of the students also communicated the feeling of independence when they were provided the choice to share their creations or keep them private. They were also noting an increase in their autonomy as they were permitted to move in and out of the studio space as they wished.

Participation and an increased engagement by the students were noted as well. There was also a increase in the number of students seeking the support of this author to understand their peer interactions and discuss their own emotions. Many of the student's sought support to increase their ability to advocate for themselves and discuss what they would like from their

peers and family members. Others used the altered books as a mode of communication and exploration of their own emotional states.

Limitations

Although this study was conducted with positive intentions it cannot be overlooked that many limitations were present. The first of which is the identity of the facilitator. Being a white female impacted the use of materials to be specific to the facilitators background. The school where the research was conducted was a private middle school, only supporting those who identify as female from the ages of eight to fourteen. There were also 21 participants in the open studio, which is a small sample size.

The research was only done at one school in the Boston area, eliminating cultural differences that would be accounted for in other areas of Massachusetts and the United States. The affiliation with the Christian faith also limits the sample as other religions and spiritual views were not specifically accounted for. All materials were provided by the facilitator therefore funding and supplies were limited.

Future Research

In consideration with the limitations of the study it is also understood that further research regarding the formation of identity in adolescents would benefit the field of Expressive Arts Therapy. An additional area that would be useful to explore would be that of public school systems. Along with the exploration of different school systems, a larger age range of students would be advantageous, allowing for greater understanding beyond the adolescent period of development.

Increased funding as well as a wider variety of the materials supplied would impact the creative exploration. More variety in a contained space could permit participants to make new

connections and combine the materials in a larger number of ways. It is also recognized that including facilitators other than a white female may impact the research outcome.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Type of Project: Thesis

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

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