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## Art Therapy's Supportive Role in Self-Esteem for Youth and Correlating External Factors

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Art Therapy's Supportive Role in Self-Esteem for Youth and Correlating External Factors

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Mental Health Counseling with specialization in Art Therapy

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### Abstract

The development of self-esteem in children and adolescents has been greatly influenced by the environment in which they have been exposed and nurtured. The external factors that have been present in an individual's experiences shape the format and understanding in their perception of self, especially self-esteem. Correlations have been recognized between external factors and levels of self-esteem. With these external factors growing and evolving, research and various therapeutic interactions can support the positive growth of self-esteem. Art therapy has played an altering role in children and adolescents' perceptions of self through exploration in empowerment and creative therapeutic skills. Art mediums and techniques have been used to reframe the mental perspective of self-esteem and its relationship to the individual in their identity. With a stronger connection toward positive self-esteem, individuals can continue in the progressing phases of adulthood, supporting their empowered sense of self.

## Art Therapy with Self-Esteem in Children and Adolescents with Consideration for Correlating External Factors

### **Introduction**

Self-esteem and its development vary depending on a person's maturity and understanding in characteristics such as age, mental processing, environmental influences, empathic learning, etc. Individuals can manifest developmental levels based on influences of features like these that occur throughout their lives. There may be strong alterations in self-esteem and its stability when trauma or influential experiences impact a person's life. Art therapy is a strongly-constructed support for the initial evaluation, discovery, development, and maturation of self-esteem in those who are deficient seeking improvement. Art provides tools and techniques that allow for descriptive details and reflection without the necessity of verbal communication. When dealing with traumatic events, art therapy brings relief to those who verbally communicate the experience. This can also be observed in other circumstances such as in an individual's learning a primary language and culture or in children who have not developed a strong descriptive vocabulary.

Self-esteem is reliant on the influential factors that occur in an individual's life, shaping their perspective of self and others. Parental interaction and styles have strong correlations to a youth's understanding and implementation of the rules in their world. Gittins and Hunt (2019) studied the relationships of parental control and their children's corresponding levels of self-esteem and self-criticism. They concluded that the parental support rather than parental control encouraged their children's growth and resulted in higher levels of self-esteem (2019). The parental role of authority with nurturance and guidance can impact not only self-development but also the interaction with additional external factors (Vague language) such as academic

pressures. Garcia and Serra (2019) researched parental styles and their relationship to motivation in school performance. Their studies concluded that youth in Spain who experienced encouragement and support for growth with indulgence from parents exhibited high levels of competence, adjustment, and self-esteem (2019). These findings support the strength of parental involvement in youth development of self-esteem. Youths are also included in the social environments that are influenced areas of life such as peer relationships. Esentas, Özbey and Güzel (2017) supported the development of self-esteem in social peer contexts based on the honest open communication about the social interactions and observations. They found through group discussion and documentation themes the participants collaborated on strengths within the social setting as well as themes for improvement (2017).

Interactions and experiences in identity of self are found in the school environment for children and adolescents. The roles of peers, teachers, performance, and motivation are considered to have strong influences on youths' self-esteem. Peer support can be seen in various forms including face-to-face interactions, social media, virtual communication, etc. Chen and Bello (2017) found the influences of social media were dependent on the individual's level of supportive needs. Communication through the environment of social media adds a relatively new form of supportive intricacy for social development and self-esteem. Youths are navigating academic support to their advantage in social communication without the availability of a physical presence.

Art Therapy interacts with people by using a thematic base for therapeutic sessions in order to reflect and potentially resolve a client's presenting concerns, issues, worries, goals, or intentions. Alavinezhad, Mousavi, and Sohrabi (2014) reviewed the presence of self-esteem and its relationship to effects of social interactions, positive internal self-understanding, and self-

regard and aggression. They found that art provided the means to symbolically express anger and the feelings that are associated with the overall mask of anger. They hypothesized a reduction in aggressive behaviors and/or mentalities through the combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Art Therapy (2014). These researchers allowed that art embodies the anger present in participants and harnesses the mediums used to release emotions in a manner that does not have negative consequences. The exploration and attempts in creating with different materials can assist a client in finding the emotions and drive for their purpose in seeking therapy. Given that self-esteem is related to external factors, art therapy can assist in determining which factors are contributing to lower self-esteem and how these might be resolved in creating art for higher self-esteem. Coholic and Eys (2016) applied arts and mindfulness approaches with children who were vulnerable, and the children reported improved emotional regulation, self-esteem, empowerment, understanding of respect, and verbalization of needs. The integration of art in collaboration with theoretical frameworks can result in varieties of treatment options moldable to specific client needs. The results show the strong correlation of mindfulness practices and the decrease in emotional reactivity along with stronger self-awareness. Coholic (2011) researched art-based and mindfulness-based approaches for children with needs due to vulnerability and hypothesized that these approaches might be helpful for improving self-esteem, self-awareness, and resilience. Both mindfulness and arts-based approaches were found to impact participants by focusing on their understanding and appropriate expression of emotions, empathizing with the emotions of others, and establishing of coping skills for growth in self-esteem (2011). Art therapy has the ability to hold a therapeutic space of open expression that is most comfortable for a client, allowing them the opportunity to find themselves in their time and space.

### **Literature Review**

Self-esteem has developed a coveted position in societal factors of acceptance and normalization. Self-esteem has quantified our understanding and acceptance of self, based on the relationship to the “norm.” In this development, individuals assess their position within the standard and how that standard relates to their whole self. Self-esteem has been identified as a fluctuating contribution to our mental health, and it is wanted in elevated levels. Numerous external factors can contribute to one's self-esteem, and many individuals have sought out treatment to resolve and/or improve their identity by targeting improvement in self-esteem.

Self-esteem has been associated with self-worth, appearance, and the prospect of relationships. Adams et al.'s (2017) hypothesized that if one's worth resonated with appearance, it would lead to a higher self-objectification that would result in greater appearance anxiety that in turn would lower self-esteem. They measured four categories: contingent self-worth, self-objectification, appearance anxiety, and self-esteem with 208 graduate women (2017). This study supported their hypothesis, but they responded with an additional study after potential bias was identified. The responses of 191 women supported the hypothesis of the original study as well; with the exception of contingent self-worth which was measured in a mass pre-session with self-objectification, appearance anxiety, and self-esteem. These results of the study support that among those who identify as women there is a strong correlation for self-esteem to be linked to physical appearance and anxiety. This supports the need for growth beyond simply looking at physical attributes into the mental and emotional contributions and accomplishments of individuals. If encouragement of wholesome self-esteem were developed earlier in life, youths might be less fixated on physical appearance and the growing anxiety of self-presentation

attenuated. Orth, Erol, Ledermann and Grob (2018) studied the interdependent relationship of well-being and self-esteem in romantic partnerships. Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1993) provided the theoretical framework associated with this study: the emotional contagion theory that suggests that two people in a romantic relationship begin to mimic and unify in physical and emotional responses, allowing for empathetic process and interdependence. The authors hypothesized that there is mutual influence between partners that includes well-being and self-esteem. They also suggested the environment of the couple could have effects on their well-being, including factors such as family conditions, residence, safety, financial circumstances, stressful events, and quality and availability of social involvement (2018). There is conflicting evidence shown in previous research relating to the positive and negative affect between couples in respect to gender, sexual orientations, and presenting circumstances, but studies related to life satisfaction support both participants in the relationship mirror their trajectories on the level of satisfaction in the relationship. In observation of five longitudinal studies, the researchers found that there were strong relationships of mutual influence and shared environment for life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, and depression among the couples studied. The shared environment was the only significantly correlating factor for co-development of self-esteem (2018). These behaviors of codependency and shared emotional statuses are important when reflecting on youth development in initial stages of personal interest between partners. Youths' understanding and strength of self-image and self-esteem could promote stronger independent characteristics that may not be reliant on another's influential behavior.

Another related factor that is important is the support or denial of parental involvement during childhood upbringing. Gittins and Hunt (2019) researched self-esteem and self-criticism in relation to parental support and control, and they hypothesized that adolescent self-concept



was encouraged by behavior control. Therefore, adolescent self-esteem would increase as self-criticism decreased. The authors also suggested that parental support would increase self-esteem and decrease self-criticism but psychological control would show opposite results. The test models for measurement included the Children's Report of Parent Behavior Inventory used in session 1; Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) used in sessions 1, 2, and 3; and Levels of Self-Criticism Scale-Internalized Self-Criticism Subscale (LOSG) used in sessions 1, 2, and 3. After the three measurement scales were administered to separate groups, results showed that girls reported an increase in self-criticism related to parent behavior control. Also, children reported that relationships with strong parental support resulted in an increase in self-esteem. Parental support had the effect of increasing boys' self-esteem and decreasing girls' self-criticism. The overall findings support an increase in parental support correlates to increases in self-esteem and decreases in self-criticism. This strengthens the need for a factor of parental guidance and support in childhood for a healthy development of self-esteem and growth. Garcia and Serra (2019) discussed the rate of dropout and the related motivation for performance among teenagers as well as the involvement of socialization. The authors reflected on the four parenting styles, highlighting the model of authoritative parents who ideally balance nurture and discipline for the well-being of the child. Self-esteem is recognized by the Garcia and Serra (2019) as an outcome of socialization. They hypothesized that average or above-school performance would be correlated with better adjustment skills, and the "warmth" (p. 5) of parental presence would correlate with higher self-esteem. There were 2069 Spanish participants between the ages of 12 and 75 included in an anonymous questionnaire that addressed questions on parental style, school performance, self-esteem, psychosocial maturity, and emotional maladjustment. The study showed that parental styles did not have significant correlations with school performance.

Those who had indulgent parents scored higher in competence and adjustment than those who had authoritative (ideal) parents. Both authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles resulted in the lowest outcomes. The study also shared participants with low school performance had the lowest socialization outcomes in current and future life phases (2019). The results culminated to show that the indulgent parenting style was the most ideal for the population studied. The studies support the presence of the parental role that focus on qualities of nurture and support as being significant to self-esteem.

Academic learning is vital to a youth's development not just intellectually but also the development and maturation of social interaction, personal identity, and identity among larger groups. These social contexts can impact self-esteem through the positive and negative experiences present over the span of early life. Self-esteem is a factor in an individual's identity that is continuous and constantly changing throughout life in careers, education, and societal demands. In Akin and Radford's (2018) study, high school graduates of 14 schools explored the relationships of their urban learning environments with the promotion of self-esteem and resilience. The quantitative questionnaire was categorized into three parts: learning environments, self-esteem, and resilience. There were additional subcategories that offered open-ended questions for personal responses (Akin & Radford, 2018). This combination of quantitative research with qualitative notation allowed for the importance of personal recollections of the graduates to be recognized. The authors found that positive correlations with self-esteem and resilience came from the school staff's positive modeling for the student body. They also noted a positive relationship with the involvement of community speakers in and outside of the school setting (2018). These external factors within the learning environment facilitated a positive image of self and a sense of community among the students as a whole

because of the inclusion and representation of the cultural surroundings. From reports of family and friends, the graduates shared a stronger self-esteem going forward into careers, further education, and life development. This supports the influences of positive examples in strong societal factors that can impact the growth for self-esteem, and even more important, self-identity.

There are some external factors that work in combination with one another to influence the development of self-esteem among children. Fedorenko and Bykova's (2016) qualitative study hypothesized that providing learning materials, promoting activities, and offering positive adult influences could encourage children's self-esteem to grow in the late preschool timeframe. The sample surveyed for this study consisted of 45 senior preschool children in Kirov, Russia who had the assistance of their teachers and parents. Correctional lessons were held twice a week for 25-30 minutes each. The three phases of motivation, reconstruction, and consolidation were highlighted in activities and discussions to promote positive development and served to highlight the children's self-esteem. The youths showed strength in self-esteem that correlated to their environment (Fedorenko & Bykova, 2016). Their participation and understanding of positive self were influenced by the presence of positive influences such as adult encouragement and interesting activities. This displays the strong relationship youths have to environmental factors in understanding their sense of self at an early age.

DeDonno and Rivera-Torres (2018) investigated the influence of perfectionism on self-concept. They looked at perfectionism through the positive light of academic engagement and the negative light of procrastination. They hypothesized that maladaptive perfectionism would negatively impact academic self-concept and adaptive perfectionism would positively associate with academic self-concept. The sample of 103 women and 33 men at a southern university

participated in the study as part of their psychology course. The study used the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) scale and the Academic Self-Concept Scale (ASCS) for measurements of general aspects of academic self-concepts and specified characteristics of maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism (DeDonno & Rivera-Torre, 2018). Maladaptive categories were labeled as concern over mistakes, doubt, parental expectations, and parental criticism. The adaptive categories included personal standards and organization. DeDonno and Rivera-Torres (2018) concluded from the questionnaire that high doubts in self lowered the levels of academic self-concept. There was no significant relationship to concern over mistakes, parental expectations, or parental criticism. These findings could be related to the newly-gained level of independence in life-making decisions. The second hypothesis also confirmed results that having high personal standards and organizational traits correlated to a high academic self-concept that supports the relationship of high personal standards, academic achievement, and academic engagement (2018). This study demonstrated how the presence of heavy influences such as perfectionism shape the confidence and self-esteem of youths. The presence of a strong influence like perfectionism has the power to motivate or dishearten a youth depending on their self-esteem and level of resiliency.

Phan and Ngu (2018) acknowledge the presence and interaction of self-esteem with domain-specific factors. They related academic self-esteem with performance, whereas non-academic self-esteem correlated with depression, anxiety, general life satisfaction, etc. The authors presented the hypotheses that the psychosocial factors related to self-esteem are global and domain-specific and each contribute to educational and non-educational results (2018). They focused on levels of self-esteem based on rates of success or failure, rates of self-esteem in relation to academic engagement and interaction, rates of interest in correlation to future

academic performance, and social relationships with other members present in academic environment. After observation of 283 sophomore students' questionnaires the authors specifically paid attention to enactive learning experiences, general self-esteem, domain-specific self-esteem, relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, interest in learning tasks in math, and academic performance (Phan & Ngu, 2018). The study showed the strong positive correlation of enactive learning with the development of self-esteem for both global and domain-specific self-esteem. Also, global and domain specific self-esteem are related to the social interactions among peers, interest in learning tasks, and academic performance. The final key finding was that positive relationships with teachers correlates with stronger interest in learning and completing tasks (2018). This research supports the relationship of self-esteem to the learning environment and correlating influences with different academic influences such as peers, teachers, and staff.

New forms of alternative learning and focus on the improvement of youths' levels of self-esteem are forming in the therapeutic field. Ghilay and Ghilay (2015) presented a new model for increasing children's motivation and self-esteem in education. The model is based on the child being the "architect" (p.386) of their life. The authors promoted the idea that the child is influenced by ideas such as the "self-fulfilling prophecy" (p.386), reframing techniques, removing emotional roadblocks, promoting components for success, and implementing solutions of self-determination for future presenting obstacles. The 14 sessions encouraged expansive thinking to determine solutions, which stimulate youths to find multiple alternatives that provide solutions for difficult tasks or troubles. There were 67 students observed in two separate groups, using the new model presented here to determine if improvements would impact their self-esteem and motivation (Ghilay & Ghilay, 2015). Results showed significant change over the 14

hours of ISMS (Improving Student Motivation and Self-esteem) from the initial reported questionnaire to the final closing. After verbal confirmation from the participants of success in the results, the authors noted "...students became more enthusiastic, responsible, self-confident, optimistic and completely determined to succeed. They learned how to adopt positive and creative thinking and in what way to discover new capabilities, which have been hidden so far" (Ghilay & Ghilay, 2015, p.393) This new model for promotion of self-esteem workshops in an academic environment strengthens the confirmation that self-esteem plays an impactful role in the development of skills for success in life experiences.

Youths also explore and determine their identity of self through involvement among peers, which can strongly influence their self-esteem. Esentas, Özbey and Güzel (2017) studied 10 groups of 18-22 young women who attended the same camp and each were led by a group leader or activity and observed by a member of the camp community. One young woman from each of the 10 groups was asked to keep a camp diary to document feelings, expectations, advice, feedback, etc. with the freedom to record them at any time. The qualitative research was recorded with reoccurring themes in three models: young women's improvement in self-awareness and leadership skills, focus group discussions, and the recordings from diaries. Improvement in self-awareness and leadership skills were documented with themes of "voluntariness, acculturation, awareness, self-confidence, time management, prejudice, adaptation, regularity, role modeling, communication, friendships, responsibility and team work" (Esentas, Özbey & Güzel, 2017, p. 201). Focus group discussions showed themes of "prejudice, awareness, friendships, regularity, responsibility, empathy, role modeling, nature love, communication, time management, acculturation, voluntariness, team work and self-confidence" (p. 201). The diaries' recordings shared the young women's options from the diaries in themes of

“acculturation, responsibility, empathy, voluntariness, communication, role modeling, adaptation, prejudices, self-confidence, team work, friendships and awareness” (p.201-202).

These related themes among different versions of records within the study show relationships to self-esteem and the factors that are contributing to the environment itself. The researchers reflected on 10 core themes of prejudice, communication, friendship, acculturation, self-confidence, awareness, team work, responsibility, voluntariness, and taking a role model that were present in the three models presented for the study (2017). In these themes the youths were able to identify areas of success as well as deficits in open communication of self-esteem and concerns that were presented within the space. This open dialogue promotes honest and supportive growth in categories that are higher and improvement for categories that are lower. This reflection supports the tools for growth in self-esteem among peers as an influential factor.

When an individual has low self-esteem, they can experience a sense of loneliness due to their lack of involvement or inclusion. Erkmen and Altin (2018) focused on the correlation between students' loneliness categorized by gender, their views on social media, and involvement in sports. Among the 175 female and 269 male secondary school students, both loneliness and social media attitudes were correlated to gender and participation in sports (2018). Correlations were found between loneliness and gender, and loneliness and participation in sports, specifically showing females had higher loneliness ratings than males, and those not in sports had higher loneliness ratings than those who took part. The study suggested that females are more likely to display loneliness than males in the same environment. Also, those who participated in sports also have a lower rating of loneliness than those who did not (2018). The study supported that taking part in activities with others can promote a sense of belonging that may correlate to the rising levels of self-esteem. It appears that positive involvement among

peers in a group setting that presents challenges to be overcome offers an opportunity to grow self-esteem.

Authors Chen and Bello (2017) hypothesized that providing and receiving support through the social media outlet Facebook lowers stress among involved members, which in turn increases life satisfaction. They reviewed other studies where supportive evidence was available, but they did not provide details about the specifics of their hypotheses. Through an online survey presented for extra credit, 382 college students were measured based on a short version of the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB; Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981); Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Chen & Bello, 2017). The authors found that students with lower self-esteem who received of social support had raised levels of life satisfaction, but those with higher self-esteem did not receive any benefit from the provided social support. The social support that was received was shown to raise stress levels, resulting in lower life satisfaction. Chen and Bello (2017) shared the possible reason for the minimal effect on the provided support through Facebook was the possible lack in familiarity amongst the Facebook "friends." Another finding of the study showed that providing social support increased levels of stress and decreased life satisfaction. A possible reason for this contradiction may be that the pressure of caring for others and devoting time and effort leads to stress and life dissatisfaction (2017). The final finding showed that the providing of social support led to improved life satisfaction for students with low self-esteem, but for those with high esteem there was no change in life satisfaction. Chen and Bello (2017) concluded that students with lower self-esteem may be searching for assistance in life satisfaction, so the format is supportive of their needs, whereas those with higher self-esteem are content and do not desire



social support. These results provide context for further understanding and support of self-esteem and their correlations to youth needing peer support. The importance of social interactions in strengthening self-esteem is seen within the various avenues that support can present.

Self-esteem is present in the early developmental stages of children and adolescents, and its importance continues into adulthood. Proper care and maturation of self-esteem in early ages provides a stronger base for continuation of growth later in life. Orkibi and Bar-nir (2015) hypothesized that collective self-esteem and its relationship to job satisfaction and subjective well-being correlated with the interactions of work engagement and meaningful work. The second hypothesis focused on the differences between creative art therapy students and practitioners, with a focus on the changes between their professional statuses. The authors' study is based on the presence of an individual self-identity and a collective social identity, which are both needed for satisfaction. Participants included 75 students and 158 practitioners of different expressive arts modalities that were measured in this study on the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992); the Job Satisfaction Scale (Judge et al., 1998); Utrecht work engagement Scale; Work and meaning inventory (WAMI) (Steger et al., 2012); Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988); Subjective Well-being Composite Score (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Zhang, Howell, & Stolarski, 2013); and a background questionnaire (Orkibi & Bar-nir, 2015). The study showed that the students displayed higher collective self-esteem than the practitioners. They shared a collective identity that increased levels of self-worth. Orkibi and Bar-nir (2015) provided possible explanations for this contradiction to the hypothesis as the students' naïve understanding of the profession in the real world, their boosted pride, and their defense for the field, and a collective positive perception of the studies. The lower measurements

of the practitioners' attitudes are not lower than expected because of the abnormally high results from the students. The reality of the field is present among the practitioners who are aware of the positives and negatives (2015). These results show the positive traits that accompany strength in self-esteem (I'm not sure I follow. It appeared that the practitioners' self-esteem lagged behind that of their students) through further education and in establishment of a career (I think this is what you mean). These findings support the reality that self-esteem can vary in (I think this is what you are trying to say) the future as well.

Art therapy can support the care and growth of self-esteem in various ages from early childhood through adulthood. Art therapy and arts-based approaches have been presented to show positive correlations between children's development of self-esteem and the use of art in the following studies. Coholic and Eys (2016) shared the positive relationships of children who developed self-esteem through the use of mindfulness in art-based activities. The children noted differences in themselves that include improved emotional regulation, verbalization of needs, self-esteem, empowerment, and understanding of respect (2016). This supports the notion that the development of expression through art has roots in the child's level of self-esteem. There are correlating factors associated with these results as well, such as the interaction with parental figures and/or guardians that play a contributing role in their acknowledgement of positive growth in self-esteem. Children and guardians were interviewed together after completion the study to portray a realistic picture of how the HAP (Holistic Art-based Program) benefited the child. The researchers used art materials to allow the children to express their experiences of the program (2016). This presence of parental participation correlates with the rate of self-esteem. Coholic (2011) also researched art-based and mindfulness-based approaches, specifically in relation to children with vulnerable needs. The author's hypothesis asked if these approaches are

helpful for improvement of self-esteem, self-awareness, and resilience, and if so, to what extent. This study included 50 children who were studied over three and a half years through an arts program offered by a child protection agency. The participants were to learn skills that enhanced attention focus, imagination application, emotional exploration and expression, and strengths development. The results were gathered from interviews with children and parents, when available (2011). The use of art and mindfulness with children vulnerability did have strong relationships with each other in this study. The results encourage the development of similar future studies. The participants noted there was benefit in the practices if the material was engaging and non-threatening. The results showed the strong correlation of mindfulness practices with a decrease in emotional reactivity as well as stronger self-awareness (2011). Both the mindfulness and arts-based approaches focused on the understanding and appropriate expression of emotions, empathetic thoughts of others' emotions, and the establishment of coping skills. These findings support the use of art-based approaches to assist in the increase of self-esteem.

Miner-Romanoff (2016) examined the relationship between incarcerated youths and art and its positive correlations to self-esteem and empowerment. In 2013, 81% of participants in the arts program reported "benefits cooperation with others, task completion, and increased self-esteem from public recognition and art sales" (p.64), and 93% in 2014 stated "positive benefits including increase in self-esteem, decrease in stress, and pride or recognition of the ability to reach a goal from completing, exhibiting, and selling their art to benefit a charity for at-risk youth" (p.64). The experience provided the participants allowed for a sense of recognition and self-accomplishment that might not have been present previous to the installation of the art program shared with the community. Visitors to the community gained new perspectives on incarcerated

youth after they saw their expressive art. The bond the community found through art may well be a correlating factor to the improvement in self-esteem among the participants.

Youths can struggle with verbal communication but may benefit through art therapy's nonverbal alternatives. Cumming and Visser (2009) studied the use of art with children in a school setting, specifically refugee children who speak English as a second language. The authors noted that art is an expressive communication for children who are challenged or resistant to verbally communicating about traumatic events. Performing artistic tasks can help to boost these children's self-esteem by allowing them to succeed at tasks in a supportive environment (Cumming & Visser, 2009). The refugee children in this study were participating in art workshops with local English-speaking children in Britain who assisted them in assimilating to their new environment. The group-based and multisensory workshops were held with the mixed grouping of children over a six-month period. The results of this qualitative study noted incidences of social interaction, smiling, talking, shared pictures, group work, willingness to participate, displaying confidence, and initiating conversation. With continuous interactions, the distractions of washing hands, drawing in own space, etc. during teachings decreased and the positive qualities increased. Observations showed a significant progression toward positive social interaction for the refugee children who were unable to communicate in English. The results of the workshops displayed positive progress for the refugee children's acclimation to an unfamiliar environment (Cumming & Visser, 2009). This study highlights the benefit of providing nonverbal creative communications in art therapy for youths that are challenged in the ability to accurately depict their trauma or experiences.

Cologon et. al (2019) researchers were a collective group that identified with having a disability and those who do not, and they searched to find answers using arts-based methods to

“truly listen” to children experiencing disability. They were (This should be in the past tense) looking for multiple forms of communication, use of art over generations, art for data use and social justice presence. They categorized their methodological approach into three groupings: listening, meaning-making, and generating. In this study, the arts-based approach sought to work with children rather than observing them to allow for the children to be heard in a shared space with the researchers. To express the voices of the children, the research based on voluntary involvement without any forced or pressured participation (Cologon et. al, 2019). This article accentuates the importance considering various populations and their self-identification as well as the respect for the true voice of a given population. This highlights the fact that self-esteem is unique to each individual based on their characteristics and experiences.

Bat Or, Kourkoutas, Smyrnaki, and Potchebutzky (2019) also acknowledged that children may have difficulty verbalizing their experiences and that drawing provides an alternative form of communication. They noted that negative emotions of anger, guilt, and shame are associated with aggressive tendencies (2019). Family system theory suggests that repeat exposure to hostility and/or rejection could result in children's acting aggressively for mental self-protection. The study focused on the drawings of 12 Greek children with self-reported aggressive behaviors. The format was that of semi-structured interviews. Children were instructed to free draw during their first interview. During the second interview, the children were asked to draw a person picking an apple from a tree (PPAT). Each drawing was examined for formal elements based on the Formal Elements Art Therapy Scales (Gantt, & Tabone, 1998) and Symbolic-Content of PPAT rating system (Bat Or, Ishai, & Levi, 2016; Bat Or, Kourkoutas, Smyrnaki, & Potchebutzky, 2019). In the free draw interview, almost the entirety of the children's drawing explanations were related to the children themselves. The children's descriptions of the second

drawing of the PPAT had no relation directly to children themselves. The person in the image was described as a stranger. Assessment of the participants' aggressive behaviors was inconclusive, and only speculations were presented. The limitations of the formal PPAT versus the free draw could further explain the imagery differences (Bat Or, Kourkoutas, Smyrnaki, & Potchebutzky, 2019). The authors suggested that the children might need assistance in developing their narratives based on the imagery they created because of their conflicting emotions. They also suggested using art as the medium in further research (2019).

When self-esteem is low or lacking, youths may feel frustrated and confused. The lack of exposure to healthy positive self-esteem could lead to unwanted expressions such as aggression. Alavinezhad, Mousavi and Sohrabi (2014) reviewed the presence of self-esteem and its relationship to the effects of social interactions, effects of positive self-understanding, self-regard, and aggression. They shared that art provides the means to express anger symbolically along with feelings that are associated with the overall mask of anger. Through the combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Art Therapy, they hoped to observe a reduction in aggression. Alavinezhad, Mousavi and Sohrabi (2014) used the measure of the Child Inventory of Anger (ChIA) and Coppersmith Self-esteem Inventory (Coppersmith, 1967). In the study, 30 children participated in a 10-week study of 2-hour art therapy sessions that featured a narrative therapy-based CBT approach. The results showed (People can “share” but I think results “show”) that Art Therapy was a viable option for reducing aggression in the participants (Alavinezhad, Mousavi & Sohrabi, 2014). The art interventions provided them a safe space to communicate emotions, which reduced the need to express them in other manners. The adjustments were seen in peer relationships, physical aggression, and frustrations. This study allowed for creative expression without judgment or correction, enabling the participants to appreciate the expressive

space supporting the use of art in fostering self-esteem. Fletcher and Lawrence (2018) observed the process of art-making's effects on children who had different social behaviors and development of identity formation. They reviewed the theoretical approaches of Erikson, Vygotsky, Christiansen, and Csikszentmihalyi and their descriptions of self-esteem to understand their relationships to social behaviors. Art gives a creative outlet available throughout any phase of life. Fletcher and Lawrence (2018) hypothesized that art-making would positively impact the development of self-identity and self-esteem among participants. They wanted to understand how children and adolescents with different social behaviors identified self, self-concept and self-esteem. There were 17 students who participated in three 50-minute focus groups with measures based on the Hierarchy of Identity Concepts (Christiansen, 1999) and the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 2012; Fletcher & Lawrence, 2018). Four themes emerged: social environments impact identity, desired occupations and activities impact identity, creativity impacts identity, and art allows for enjoyment and relaxation. This research supports the idea that social behaviors are reflected in self-esteem and can be expanded through the use of art.

Art therapy has the ability to create a unique space for emotions and offer relief when self-esteem and mental health need nurturing. Roghanchi et. al (2013) presented rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) as means of communication in thinking, feeling, and acting through artistic means. They focus on the artistic medium of engraving to facilitate healing by reducing stress and anxiety, decreasing depression, improving mental health, raising levels of self-esteem, and increasing self-confidence. Roghanchi et. al (2013) hypothesized that REBT and art therapy used in combination would promote self-esteem and resiliency in the college student population of their study. For this study, 24 students were randomly divided into two groups: control and

experimental. The scales used for the study of the interventions were the Persian version of the Coppersmith's Self-esteem Inventory (SEI) and a Persian translated version of the Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003; Roghanchi et. al, 2013). Results showed that after 20 hours in sessions that featured the use of REBT and Art Therapy, the participants showed increased resiliency and self-esteem. The authors noted both relaxation and a visible calming of the participants in the voluntary participation (Roghanchi et. al, 2013). This research supports the use of art to release emotions and tensions that could be contributing factors to lowering self-esteem.

Lee (2017) applied imaginative drawing to her art class with children to explore their creativity with an opportunity to experience emotional connection and empathy. Lee (2017) established three purposes for including this kind of drawing in her course: (1) as an interactive process through which mutual engagements are possible between students and their art teacher; (2) as a series of creative problem-finding and solving behaviors; and (3) as an emotionally rewarding and psychologically meaningful process and experience. Lee divided the classes of 15-20 students into smaller groups, and each group chose an artistic prompt for imaginative drawing. Lee (2017) had to develop creative interactions and involvement with her students to engage them. The children used one another as social supports for encouragement through the creative processing of their drawings. They were able to develop ideal presentations of their wants and needs that might not be available to them in reality. The author reflected on her role as facilitator for children to experience the drawing opportunities and her importance in developing a creative space. The mutual space opened up the opportunity for the children to communicate with the author in more depth. Lee (2017) noted the students became proud of their accomplishments in their drawings and were more motivated to continue learning and creatively



expanding in their academic environment. The promotion of self-esteem in a collaborative learning environment combines teaching not only from the provider but also from the classmates involved in the process of building self-esteem.

Youths can struggle with self-esteem if there is no motivation for change or progression. Hickman (2006) observed the interactions of peers in the school system and their relationships to inactive learning. He implemented tutoring in the arts as an alternative to traditional punitive actions as a resource for reframing social leadership in a positive format. Through observation and semi-structured interviews, he studied the interactions of two students in their social and academic life (2006). Both subjects of observation had to endure negative associations with the behaviors they had previously exhibited without being recognized for the positive traits they contributed. The opportunities for teaching allowed the participants to experience the challenges and responsibility involved in educating others. Both students commented on their changes in perspective as well as those of their peers. When the activities were chosen and thought out with participant inclusion, the interactions of the classes were more enmeshed (Hickman, 2006). The formally structured classes were not as well received. The behaviors continued beyond the study, but the lessons of the interactions remained for both participants. The teaching method is a creative alternative when students do not adhere to expected behaviors. Art is transformed into a dual teaching tool where creativity allows for encouragement and behavioral changes allow for increased self-esteem.

Haberlin (2017) explored the art-based research in relation to five gifted children, and he provided context for the societal definition of "gifted" and how it results in characteristics and behaviors of children who are labeled as such. The students were instructed to create themselves with thought bubbles reflecting on a peak moment of their week for five weeks; data intake

ended after five sessions with consideration to data saturation (2017). Four themes emerged from the depictions of peak experiences: teacher as catalyst, praise and/or recognition, intellectually challenging curriculum, and creative activities (2017). The findings were that the gifted children desired acceptance and understanding like many children their age. Regardless of labels, they required specific attention and affirmation that they were indeed “gifted.” The results show the desire of these youths for the confirmation and encouragement of self-esteem, including the reinforcement of positive self-image from teachers, instructors, parents, etc. The motivation of self is instilled, but it facilitates growth through external factors such as individuals a child might admire or want to satisfy.

### **Discussion**

Self-esteem is an essential building block in supporting mental health. Children and adolescents grow in various environments that can influence changes that occur throughout life. Gittins and Hunt (2019) shared the importance of supportive parental guidance at an early age, and Garcia and Serra (2019) reflected on the differences in outcomes of supportive and unsupportive parenting styles. Academic pressure such as performance and motivation can hinder or enhance evolution of self-esteem in youth as well (DeDonno & Rivera-Torres, 2018). Esentas, Özbey and Güzel (2017) explored the relationship that collaborative peer communication and support have with self-esteem and developing healthy habits in social environments. Ghilay and Ghilay (2015) and Hickman (2006) examined the support academics play in the development of alternative and new artistic expressions for youths who struggle with self-esteem. Art therapy has a strong relationship with fostering self-esteem in youths. Coholic (2011) and Coholic and Eys's (2016) use of arts-based approaches in combination with

mindfulness displayed the versatility in which creativity can be applied to promote growth in self-esteem.

The benefits of art can continue to be explored to heighten self-esteem. Arts continue to incorporate creativity in structured, semi structured, and informal experiences. The use of art to increase self-esteem should be the purview of therapists and youths alike. Increased research can explore the benefit of using art to heighten self-esteem, self-image, and identity, while at the same time decreasing depression, anxiety, anger, fear, etc. Creative and artistic alternatives can foster an inclusive atmosphere for children and adolescents in academic, social, and societal realms.

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