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Participation Investigation: The Development of a Method for Working with Arts-Averse Adolescents

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

Date: June 29, 2020

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Specialization: Expressive Arts Therapy

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Abstract

The therapist's role in fostering engagement in art-making is an often-overlooked topic within the expressive therapies. Many individual clients and groups present as disinterested in art which can put the expressive therapist in a particularly challenging position with regards to working in their preferred methods. This paper investigates primary motivations and barriers to participation as they relate to adolescents presenting with behaviors that interfere with their academic success by delving into literature examining participation and relationship building. In an attempt to identify possible solutions that encourage engagement with the arts, four principles for the design of inclusive arts experientials are developed and implemented as two distinct arts experientials. Results show promise in the efficacy of a method by which the expressive therapist can work towards expanding their scope of practice to engage individuals and groups in the art making process.

Participation Investigation: The Development of a Method for Working with Arts-Averse Adolescents

Introduction

Expressive therapists are often faced with a common dilemma. Much of the literature, research, and training tends to overlook one of the more conspicuous complications of the work. Many writings on the subject of expressive therapy describe sessions with groups or individuals in which members are willing participants; people who have sought expressive therapists for a particular skill set, training, or the services offered. The reality of the expressive therapies is that many times therapists work in school settings, residential care, youth programs, treatment facilities, or detention centers. The individual's expressive therapists work with are often presented with, or subjected to, our efforts; sometimes against their learned or natural predispositions. Confronting the actuality that individuals or groups might present as disinterested in art making can at times put the expressive therapist at odds with the structures they find themselves in and aligned with; this puts the therapist in a conflicting position between what is expected of them by their employer, and the importance of the developing the therapeutic alliance which has been shown to strongly encourage desirable therapeutic outcomes (Leibovich, et al. 2018).

My initial curiosities around the subject of participation grew out of a specific early interaction I experienced with one group of students. After two weeks of mixed engagement with students, some choosing to participate in art experientials, some not, I found myself faced with a group of particularly challenging middle school boys. They did not seem to be interested in traditional art making, when presented with typical art supplies they preferred to sit with idle hands, when told, "or you can do whatever you would like, we have a room full of materials, use

your imaginations, go wild," they would poke around the materials in the space, exploring for a while, before returning to their seats. A bit more emboldened by the loosened structure of the space and the knowledge that they were free to do as they pleased, many of the students would vacillate between going hands-on with one another, being purposefully disruptive, and sitting quietly with their hoods up and heads down.

I wondered, after observing for a while, if perhaps presenting them with an alternative to traditional art-making, something more active, that provided a specific challenge, might prove to be more fruitful. The expressive therapist often works intermodally, embracing the polyaesthetic nature of expression (Knill, et al. 2004), and in this moment I felt emboldened to challenge the student's perceptions of art-making by providing them with an alternate point of entry into creative experience.

I walked away from the students to a pile of scrap wood that we had in the art therapy space. The pieces of wood were slivers of hardwood that had come from the wood shop at the collaborative, the school's cabinetry instructor had donated them to our space for use however we deemed fit. I proceeded to move two chairs into the open space of the floor and faced them towards one another about five to six feet apart. I then drug the overflowing box of wood scraps within reach of the chairs and began to construct a bridge between their seats by myself. It was not long before, after looking over my shoulder to the students sitting quietly around the table, that I noticed I was being watched. I went back to constructing my bridge in silence. A few moments later, I looked up to notice a student standing over my shoulder watching what I was doing. He asked, "what are you making?" I told him that I was building a bridge between the two chairs. He watched a few moments longer before offering some engineering advice; a few

moments after that, he was helping me to build the bridge, and not long thereafter the other students who had seemed disinterested were involved in the construction process.

I stepped back from the construction of the bridge and watched as they worked diligently as a team to bridge the gap between two chairs. They bickered some, and arranged themselves into specific roles, weaving thin slivers of hardwood together as birds would build a nest. Sometimes the bridge would collapse and they would start over, sometimes there were 'emergencies' in which the bridge would look particularly precarious and one would shout out for assistance from a classmate; an extra piece of wood, or a spare hand. I was relinquished of all building duties as the students saw the construction through to completion. I watched as they all stood back to admire their creation with excited looks of pride on their faces, having accomplished something daunting. There were cheers and high fives shared amongst the group in direct contrast to the behavior they had been exhibiting moments before, (and for several sessions before that).

I was intrigued by this process of bridge building that had taken place before me and was curious as to what differed between this experiential and ones that had been previously presented to the students. I had instinctively tapped into something that had engaged the students, but without having yet investigated the literature, was left unsure as to why. This thesis reviews literature on the topic of arts participation, combined with personal observations of adolescent students at a special education middle and high school, in the synthesis of a method by which I believe the expressive therapist can work to increase engagement in the arts with students who present as arts-averse.

Literature Review

Resistance and ambivalence often emerge as topics of inquiry regarding clients' willingness to participate in the therapeutic process. Resistance is often viewed as the client's avoidant struggle to uncover painful unconscious material or as an inhibition to change; ambivalence on the other hand is the natural conflict between the client's desire to change and maintain the status quo (Urmanche, et al. 2019). While these are both important factors in participation in the therapeutic alliance, I was more concerned with investigating participation with regards specifically to art-making in which expression can often be unconscious, personal, and abstract in nature. I found the literature around participation in the arts to be somewhat limited and often specific to the value that can be derived from participatory outcomes. The question of engagement and encouragement of participation in art-making was a more challenging topic of study. This literature review seeks to identify primary motivations and barriers to participation in art-making; as well as investigate the importance of the therapist's role in developing a sense of satisfaction and safety in the therapeutic process.

The Expressive Therapies on Facilitating Creativity

Founding members of the expressive therapies' community often wrote similarly about conditions for the facilitation of creativity (McNiff, 2004; Rogers, 1993). Natalie Rogers (1993) noted that many of the same conditions found to foster client-counselor relationships also supported the environment for creativity. Rogers outlined psychological safety, psychological freedom, and the need to offer stimulating and challenging experiences as primary conditions for the facilitation of creativity. Psychological safety is outlined by Rogers (1993) as the person-centered approach of accepting the client with unconditional worth and the creation of an environment free from external evaluation of the individual's artistic output. Psychological

freedom involves the therapist offering complete symbolic freedom to the client within their artistic expression. Rogers summarized psychological safety and psychological freedom as “the soil and nutrients of creativity” (Rogers 1993, p. 17) but noted that creating stimulating experiences was necessary if the expressive therapist was to foster creativity in groups or individuals.

Supporting Rogers’ statements, McNiff (2004) wrote in “Art Heals: How Creativity Cures the Soul” that the importance of creating a safe and nonjudgmental space was paramount to the facilitation of creativity in groups or individuals, emphasizing the importance of leadership in the creation of a “sanctuary” through shaping the group consciousness or, the “strongest force in creating safety” (McNiff, 2004, p. 30). While there is evidence of some consensus within the canon of the expressive arts literature, highlighting qualities that the therapist can embody to create a sense of safety for participants; I found the details around the nature of participation with regards to quantitative data into specific motivations and barriers was limited. By piecing together literature from other schools of thought, and research outside of the expressive therapies, I was able to locate more precise client concerns, motivations, and barriers to art-making.

Artist’s Self-Concept, Motivations, and Barriers to Participation

Fancourt, et al. (2020) concluded in, “Barriers and Enablers to Engagement in Participatory Arts Activities Amongst Individuals with Depression and Anxiety: Quantitative Analyses Using a Behaviour Change Framework” that findings suggested individuals with anxiety and depression felt certain barriers to arts participation more strongly than those without. They found that activities that focused on increasing perceived capabilities, provided social opportunities, and reinforced automatic and reflective motivations to engage had the potential to

address the imbalances among those with symptoms of anxiety and depression with regards to arts participation. Researchers used an 18-item scale based on the COM-B (The Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation Model of Behaviour) Self-Evaluation Questionnaire, with subscales for assessing psychological and physical capabilities, social and physical opportunities, and automatic and reflective motivations to poll participants who reported infrequent engagement with the performing arts, visual arts, design and crafts, literature-related activities, and online, digital and electronic arts. Researchers used logistic regression analysis to identify that individuals with depression or anxiety reported greater barriers across domains than individuals with no reported mental health problems; in the case of discrepancies, researchers calculated the percentage of protective associations explained by various demographic, socio-economic, social, and, physical, or geographic factors. This research would suggest that in order to encourage arts participation among individuals experiencing depression and anxiety, the facilitator must devise experientials and directives that make participants feel comfortable in their abilities, provide the opportunity to work socially, and reinforce automatic motivations (emotions, reinforcement, rewards, and incentives) and reflective motivations (beliefs about capabilities and consequences, roles, identity, intentions, goals, and optimism) (McDonagh, et al. 2018).

Researchers Mansour, et al. (2018), also found connections between arts participation and arts self-concept in “Young People's Creative and Performing Arts Participation and Arts Self-concept: A Longitudinal Study of Reciprocal Effects.” Researchers determined that there was sufficient evidence to suggest that beyond the effects of socio-demographics and prior achievement, there exists longitudinal associations (and reciprocal effects) between a variety of arts-based participation and arts self-concept. Self-concept, or an individual’s perception of their capacity in a particular context “is the precursor of achievement and adaptive behavior (e.g.,

participation). The skill development dynamic is that achievement and adaptive behavior (or, skill in a domain) are the determinants of self-concept" (Mansour, et al. 2018, p. 240). This informs what was determined by the researchers Fancourt, et al. (2020) which concluded that an individual's view of themselves as having a certain level of artistic capability was an indicator of their willingness to participate in art making, and goes further by suggesting the reciprocal effect of having skills within that specific domain of art-making has an effect on a participants self-concept.

Fancourt et al. (2020) used a reciprocal effects framework to investigate three models: arts self-concept leading to creative and performing arts participation (self-enhancement model), creative and performing arts participation leading to arts self-concept (skill development model), and arts self-concept and creative and performing arts participation mutually reinforcing each other (REM). The study showed that there were associations (including reciprocal effects) between arts self-concept and a variety of different forms of arts participation. This study informed my method's development by reinforcing previous literature that suggested a barrier to entry in the arts could be created by a lack of arts self-concept.

Heather Malin (2015) published a study on arts participation and youth purpose that investigated the ways in which young people make meaning differently prior to adolescence than they do when at employment seeking age. The researcher interviewed young people who participated in art-making and found evidence to suggest that young people derive meaning from art-making through relational skills building. The researchers used qualitative content analysis in coding interviews with students. Malin (2015) postulate in "Arts Participation as a Context for Youth Purpose," that the relational component of artistic expression is of greater value from the point of view of adolescents' than technical skill building, or artistic mastery learned through

traditional arts curriculum. The study interviewed students two years later and found that interest in participation in the arts correlated to whether or not work in the arts was seen as a viable option for the students' career aspirations. It found that the purpose development in students as it related to arts participation correlates directly to whether or not the arts are seen as a professionally viable option as students enter the workforce.

Not only did Malin's (2015) study provide further evidence of the importance of the social aspects of art-making with regard to how students derived value from participation, but also provided a possible explanation for waning enthusiasm towards arts participation as students grew closer to adulthood or an age when they could join the workforce. C.H. Christiansen (1999) presented a view of occupation as the way in which people develop and express their identities. Proposing that identity provides a context to derive meaning from daily experiences in order to interpret life chronologically. The author proposed that identity guides the individual towards goal-setting and motivation, that competence in the performance of tasks contributes to identity-shaping, and that the realization of identity contributes to the individual's sense of well-being.

In "Motivational Processes That Support Arts Participation: An Examination of Goal Orientations and Aspirations" researchers from University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, and Nanyang Technological University worked together to study the relationship between students' growth goal orientation and arts aspirations (Burns, et al., 2019). The researchers found data to suggest that growth goal orientations and arts aspirations form a motivational process that supports increased curriculum-related active, and receptive arts participation. Researchers in this study took the perspective that a measurement of arts aspirations correlates to a person's understanding of possible selves, and growth goal orientation, or motivation towards self-mastery (Burns, et al., 2019). This research shed further light on the

complicated entanglement of arts participation and adolescent development particularly with regards to growth goal orientation and self-concept outside of art-making.

Relationship Building and The Therapeutic Alliance

The power of the therapeutic alliance cannot be overstated. Regarding participation in the expressive therapies, the relationship between the therapist and the people they are working with holds the very important responsibility of creating a container of safety for the group or individual (McNiff, 2004) as they work in the physical domain in addition to the social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual domains (Knill, et al. 2004). This work differentiates the role of expressive therapists working within their specific modalities. Research has shown evidence to suggest that the quality of the therapeutic alliance predicted self-esteem changes during treatment, and that self-esteem changes predicted follow-up depression severity. Aafies-Van Doorn, et al. (2019), in their article entitled “Improving Self-Esteem Through Integrative Group Therapy for Personality Dysfunction: Investigating the Role of the Therapeutic Alliance and Quality of Object Relations” detailed changes in self-esteem through intensive group treatment for personality dysfunction. Researchers explored the relationship between patients’ experience of therapeutic alliance and improvement in self-esteem during treatment, including their quality of object-relations as a possible moderator. Researchers also looked at associations between self-esteem during treatment and depressive symptoms 9 months later. Using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), Edmonton Therapeutic Alliance Scale, and The Quality of Object Relations Scale (QORS) across a module-based treatment program, researchers determined that quality of the therapeutic alliance could have an influence on an individual’s self-esteem and prove valuable in the treatment of people with personality dysfunction. This reinforces the importance of the therapeutic alliance with regards

to arts participation because of the established relationship between self- esteem, perceived capabilities, and art making.

In another study focusing on the role of therapeutic alliance and the prediction of youth outcomes, Hurley, et al. (2017), found evidence to suggest that both youth ratings of therapeutic alliance and the ratio of positive to negative staff interactions showed associations with improved emotional and behavioral functioning. Using the Therapeutic Alliance Quality Scale (TAQS) and Youth Home Survey (YHS) researchers studied associations between the quality of the therapeutic alliance, overall implementation quality, and improved emotional and behavioral functioning of residents. It found that positive interactions with staff as well as the quality of therapeutic alliances had noticeable impact on emotional and behavioral outcomes for youth. The study focused on 400 young people in 70 family-style group homes in a large midwestern city. The participants were between ten and seventeen years old and had all received a disruptive behavior diagnosis. This study is particularly meaningful to my work because it suggests that beyond the importance of the therapeutic alliance, that simple positive staff interactions showed marked emotional and behavioral outcomes within the context of the residential setting.

O'Keefe, et al. (2020) presented findings in, "When Adolescents Stop Psychological Therapy: Rupture–Repair in the Therapeutic Alliance and Association with Therapy Ending," that suggested that there were three main ways in which therapists contributed to rupture within the therapeutic alliance:

1) The therapist's minimal response; the therapist was perceived as passive, unresponsive, or silent.
2) The therapist's persistence with a specific activity; the therapist continued with an activity against the wishes of the adolescent.

3) The therapist focused on risk issues which conflicted with the adolescent's overt wishes.

Researchers looked at three categories of adolescents, randomly allocated to receive psychosocial intervention, cognitive behavior therapy, or short-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy. The adolescents were categorized as either completing their treatment, having dropped out (according to their therapist), or "got-what-they-needed" based on interviews with adolescent and therapist. Researchers used recordings of therapy sessions that were rated with the Rupture Resolution Rating System (3RS) and Working Alliance Inventory (WAI- observer version) and found evidence to suggest that rupture, especially unresolved, could be warning signs of disengagement and drop out. This study suggested that the therapeutic alliance could be put at risk if the therapist was perceived as too rigid, disengaged, or persistent in their ways of working; or not contributing through meaningful back-and-forth interaction. This research further illustrated the need to expand the range of what is considered as participation in the arts, the importance of improvisation and modification of activities to suit individual needs in real time, and the development of meaningful dialogue and exchange between the therapist and an individual.

In the dissertation, "Essential Music Therapist Attributes for Relationship-Building with Children: Does our Profession Train Personal Abilities?" Nemeth (2014) used a sequential mixed method investigation to explore the personal attributes employed by music therapists in building therapeutic relationships with children to study the music therapy profession's attempts at fostering these qualities in music therapy students. Results revealed that there was strong participant agreement on essential personal attributes and relationship building skills that music therapists and educators must possess in order to effectively do their work. Respect for the child

was the most common response, clinicians reported that their relational skills were equally or more important than their theoretical and technical competence, and that they felt rigidity and dominance were ineffective attributes.

Summary of Literature

The literature surrounding arts participation in a clinical setting, while currently sparse, substantiated several observations made during the initial period of introduction to the expressive arts groups. Research can be divided into two unified halves: the internal, or the artistic experience of the clients, their personal motivations, barriers, self-concept, growth orientation, career aspirations, desire for socialization; and the external, or strength of the therapeutic alliance, career opportunities within the arts, conduct of the therapist, and access to resources. Four specific domains for the facilitation of participation in art-making were made clear through the investigation of research: 1) increased arts self-concept, 2) the opportunity for socialization, 3)the prospect of stimulating and challenging art experiences, and 4) the importance of the therapeutic relationship in creating a sense of comfort and safety.

The Method

The work here pertains to the development of a method that reexamines the therapists roll in the facilitation of arts participation. This method differs from the development of other methods in that it was not designed to treat a diagnosable symptom or specific population, rather it is developed to address the client's lack of interest with art that may be commonly identified as resistance. The following section documents the work done in the development this method by which the expressive therapist may work towards designing more inclusive experientials while expanding the scope of our practice through encouraging a culture of participation in the arts.

Method Design

In approaching the development of a method for encouraging arts participation, I first looked to research that suggested confident self-concept and the artists perception of proficiency played an important role in participation. The literature informed my decision to create experientials with fewer barriers to entry. I decided that the most efficient way of accomplishing this was through expansion of the scope of art within the art therapy space by encouraging non-traditional art-making and allowing students to restructure their views of art-making to include their natural imaginative inclinations. I felt that by creating more inclusive arts experiences, that it might be possible to utilize the reciprocal effect (Mansour, et al. 2018) of greater arts self-concept that could lead to a deeper involvement in the arts on a general level; bypassing the need for the uncomfortable period of developing perceived mastery that can be a barrier for some individuals.

The second area of importance was identified as the need to create opportunity for socialization and student interaction within the work. The research described the value students placed on the opportunities that the arts created for social skills development (Malin, 2015). Additionally, it described how the community aspect of art-making was seen as an encouraging factor with regards to participation (Fancourt, et al. 2020) It made sense to me that groups who already wanted to interact with one another could be successfully engaged in collaborative work. Conversation and other forms of non-verbal communication are largely improvisational; they contain both principles of acting and reacting which indicates a skills domain mastery that could be tapped into through promoting communication within the work strengthening their arts self-concept and perceived artistic capacity.

The third principle informed by research was the importance of separating the art from the perception of triviality through the creation of challenging and stimulating experiences

(Rogers, 1993). Malin (2015) suggested that students were more likely to disengage with art making the closer they were to career seeking age which illustrates the complicated relationship between human development and arts participation. I sought to develop a method by which students could either find the imaginative within their perceptions of growth orientation, or that would shift their perceptions of art making in such a way that it was not associated with internalized art experiences.

The final principle that guided my methods development was the relational component. Numerous observations by individuals working within counseling and in counseling-adjacent professions have noted the importance of the relationship between individuals and their therapists or teachers (Nemeth, 2014). Unrepaired ruptures caused by certain actions on the part of the therapist have been shown to encourage drop-out and disengagement. Specific causes such as a therapist's minimal responses, persistence in a specific activity, and focusing too heavily on risk issues (O'Keefe, 2020) were related to higher drop-out and disengagement in the therapeutic space.

Where this method deviates from many others, is that it is not an experiential or activity designed to be presented to clients, but a process by which the expressive therapist can expand their view of experiential design to include participation as a goal. The method is the integration of the four principles of participation, as previously outlined, in the creation of experientials or activities. By looking at activity design through these four principles, I was able to scaffold and implement two separate activities by which to experientially assess the efficacy of the method.

The Participants and Space

The participants of the capstone thesis included students at my internship at a special education collaborative. The participants were a diverse group of middle to high school-aged

students in suburban/semi-rural Massachusetts living with a wide range of circumstances that prevented them from typical achievement in a traditional public school setting. Participants experienced childhood adversity, trauma, depression, anxiety, as well as behavioral and communication challenges. Many of the students in this setting entered the art therapy space claiming to be disinterested in art-making and maintain their claims of disinterest when presented with a wide variety of options and materials to express artistically.

Minimal expectations are placed upon students within the collaborative's art therapy space. Students are able to choose whether to participate or not and they are not graded on their participation in art-making or lack thereof. Expressive therapies interns provide weekly directives in which students can choose their level of engagement and are also free to use the materials in the space to work on self-directed projects. The art therapy space is open during free blocks to the high school program who can come and go as they please, and a segment of the population take advantage of that time to work on a variety of projects.

During class blocks, the art therapy space is visited by students who come from several different programs. Program criteria include middle and high school-aged students facing adversity in their personal lives that display challenging behaviors which interfere with their education. There is also a smaller program that is more focused on students both at the middle and high school level who are working through symptoms of depression and anxiety and an additional program for students with developmental disabilities, differences, and communicative challenges.

The demographics of our programs are diverse and match closely to the demographics of the surrounding area. The majority of students are White and there are several Latinx students, and a smaller proportion of Black non-Hispanic students.

The Group

The group that participated in both of the following experientials was made up of four 13-14-year-old boys, all White, mostly lower-middle class. One lived away from his parents at a program while the others lived with their parents or grandparents (some were nonspecific on their housing situation). They all attended the collaborative because they have exhibited behaviors that have interfered with their success in traditional public schools.

Procedure

I designed two distinct arts activities based around the four principles of participation in order to assess the efficacy of the method, and to better understand it experientially. The results of the first activity augmented the design of the second. Using my method in their creation, these activities were designed to 1) elevate arts self-concept, 2) provide the opportunity for socialization, and 3) separate art from triviality through stimulating experience. My relationship with the group allowed me the opportunity to cater the activities to specific group interests and work towards the creation of a culture of safety, and containment.

The first experiential was designed as an opportunity for students to participate in a simulated campfire storytelling session. Using a lantern, speaker, and book of stories this experiential made use of light and sound to create ambiance within the space. The expectations were minimal; the only expectation placed upon the students was that they would listen to a story read by the facilitator. Scrap paper was provided, and participants were encouraged to draw while they listened.

The second experiential was augmented by observations from the first. Students were given the opportunity to create their own podcast with little interference on the part of the facilitator. I provided them with recording equipment and headphones and encouraged them to

record a podcast. I offered support when necessary and encouraged them to take ownership of the process by giving them the space to make their own decisions about content.

Results

The purpose of this work was to develop a method by which it may be possible for the expressive therapist to design more inclusive experientials with regards to improving participatory outcomes. Two experientials were designed as a result of focusing on four distinct domains of participation.

1) Reduce barriers to participation by expanding the scope of art and improving arts self-concept through reframing preconceived notions of art in the space.
2) Create opportunity for socialization and social skills development through art.
3) Separate art from perceived triviality and internalized notions of its scope.
4) Attempt to develop strong relationships and rapport with students, allow them to take ownership of activities, and engage them in their interests.

Results were gathered through narrative description of the sessions in which the method driven experientials were presented to students.

Experiential One: The Forest Trip

I wondered how many students in my class had ever been camping or gathered around a campfire to tell folktales, they were all highly skilled storytellers and comedians. When the students entered the classroom the next day for their regularly scheduled block, there was a cacophony of shouts and laughter; giddy excitement. The lights were all turned low, and in the center of our large table, I had placed a large LED camping lantern. The chirp of crickets and the hoot of the occasional owl filled the room, emanating from a Bluetooth speaker I had hidden under the table.

“Why are the lights off?” one student asked.

“Because I thought we would do something different today, is everyone ok with the low light? Come sit down at the table and join me” I said.

The students all took their normal seats around the table, there were looks of wonder and curiosity on their faces, their excitement would ebb and flow, there were tiny outbursts, and then eventually they all settled and were surprisingly quiet. The ambience of the space was soothing and in complete contradiction to its normal, loud, colorful, and high activity self. I asked the students about their feelings on the changing weather, and their experience with the outdoors, we made small talk, and then I told them, “today we’re going to the forest, I thought I could read some stories, and while I read, you could draw or just listen, whichever you prefer.” I then, knowing that one of the students was particularly interested in cryptozoology and the paranormal, began reading about bigfoot encounters from a book I had brought with me to class. I was particular about my choice, not wanting to choose anything I thought would be too scary or activating; the relationship I had cultivated with the group allowed me to pick something that I suspected they would all enjoy. As I read, a couple of boys, particularly the one that enjoys the paranormal, paid close attention, choosing not to draw. Another, who shows a particularly strong aversion to art-making, sat quietly listening, he seemed happy to have this time with no expectations, offering the occasional comment about what I had read. The other two boys scribbled away on their paper listening, one working on abstract art; the other drawing people, characters, and animals. They would comment, I would stop reading, we would have short discussions or laugh, then the quiet dim ambience would take the room back and we would continue.

When I finished the room was very still for a moment, and I sensed the group starting to get antsy, I decided to sit in the silence and observe. The student that had been drawing characters stood after a moment and asked if he could have the lantern. I asked him why, and he said that he had a story to tell. I said, “by all means, go ahead.” He stood with the lantern held close to his face and improvised a hilarious and extremely complex non sequitur story complete with voice acting. The other students and I laughed, paying close attention, having never seen this side of this particular student. The student who generally shows a strong aversion to art-making and who typically presents with a flat affect was in stitches, grinning from ear to ear. Just as the student telling the story finished spinning his 15-minute yarn it was time for the block to end, and I bid them farewell, praising them for joining me in the experience.

I was shocked with the response of the students, this group was particularly hard to motivate to make art; they usually curse loudly and spend the block making jokes, sometimes jabbing at one another with pencils or their fingers, and they turn a large percentage of activities down. There was something about changing the energy of the space that seemed to change their behavior; they were much calmer than usual, they huddled around the lantern like moths to a flame, they listened to what was being said to them with minimal interruption, and when they grew comfortable, took ownership of the process through their own storytelling, taking on roles of audience and performer.

After the experience, in which I was actively engaged with the students, I took detailed notes attempting to be as specific as possible in writing down any behaviors that felt out of the ordinary based upon earlier interactions with each individual and the group. Later that evening, while the experience was still fresh, I wrote narratively about what I had experienced with the group and created lists of the typical behaviors I had expected, compared against what I had seen

that day. While the day felt successful, I knew there was still work that could be done to develop the experiential further. The students were contained and engaged, but the most beautiful and unexpected thing was when they took ownership of the process and I was able to see their interactions with one another as they were able to improvise, listen, and attune.

Following the "forest trip" experiential it became apparent that the group had lowered the barrier to entry (merely being in the space was participation), we had shared in opportunities to socialize, and it was all possible because of the relationships I had cultivated and the students' level of comfort with me as a facilitator. I decided after this to tweak the activity in an attempt to encourage more *active* participation and ownership within the same group.

Experiential Two: The Podcast

Many of the students have YouTube channels and spend a lot of their time watching YouTube; I have been involved in multiple discussions about YouTube, TikTok, and various other social media platforms with students and students spoke with me about their desires to be internet celebrities. I was reminded of the research that suggested young people were more likely to become disengaged with art-making as they approached an age when they begin to start thinking about career aspirations. I offered the opportunity to try podcasting to the same group of middle school boys. I felt there were certain similarities shared with the initial experiential: storytelling, the chance to socialize, improvisation, and a low barrier to entry. This new podcasting experiential would also tease at possible career opportunities as many students saw the internet as a viable path towards a job in the future.

I brought a high-quality portable recorder, a 4-way headphone splitter, and borrowed several pairs of headphones from the school's computer lab. The students showed up that day and I showed them what I had. Initially they just looked at me funny, one asked, "what is that

even for?" I explained that they could use it to record a podcast, they just kind of laughed, seemingly disinterested. I turned the recorder on and offered it to one of the students, he put the headphones on and his expression changed. The microphone in this recorder is very sensitive and you can hear extremely small sounds amplified all around you; things like air conditioners, computer keyboards, and whispers become extremely close. The moment his expression changed, the other students wanted to experience what he was experiencing and grabbed for the recorder, I explained the headphone splitter and showed them how to use it so they could all share in hearing what was coming through the microphone. For the first few minutes there was a lot of yelling into the microphone (one student attempting to put it fully into his mouth); then there was a period of exploring tiny sounds, like cellophane crinkling and pencils writing on paper.

When the initial excitement of hearing their own voices and the amplified world died down, I again offered them the opportunity to produce a podcast. They started off slowly, laughing awkwardly, not knowing what to say to one another; the student who enjoys folklore and the paranormal eventually choosing to ask the others questions in feigned accents and character voices. Eventually the other students wanted turns asking questions as well and there was some bickering and tug of war over the microphone. I explained to them that it was a delicate piece of equipment and that they could break it if they didn't take turns, I established the rule that they needed to leave it lying flat on the table or else it would ruin the quality of their sound. They respected my wishes, complied with the guidelines, and began taking turns, I acted as time keeper occasionally saying, "time to switch hosts." Every so often I would interject, steering conversation that I felt could be too activating for some students and encouraging respectful dialogue. Some of the dialogue that came out of the conversation surprised me, they

asked, “what’s it like to be at school here?” “Tell me about a typical day for you.” And, “What’s something you’re looking forward to?” While these all might seem like benign, and even generic topics of conversation, they are shocking in that they are *extremely* out of place for this group of students in comparison to their typical harsh treatment of one another. Eventually the class came to an end and I wished them farewell, praising them for their podcasting abilities.

While much louder and higher energy than the “forest trip”, the second “podcasting” experiential was also more active with far more conversational engagement, improvisation from multiple students, more affect rich communication, and deeper negotiation of roles. I followed the same process with regards to writing down detailed notes, and later creating a narrative record of the process with a comparison of expectations and realities. While totally different activities, there were subtle similarities to both; both the lantern and the headphones had a holding quality, where containment was found embedded in the materials used, there was a low barrier to entry as all that was required was to talk or listen (something all participants show mastery in), and there was the audience/performer exchange and negotiation of roles.

Summary

Though seemingly uncomplicated, I found that utilizing the four principles when thinking about experiential design drastically altered the participatory energy within the space. Students that had, in the past, shown signs of difficulty in participation found a way to actively engage with their imaginations and others when the barriers for entry had been lowered. By reducing the pressure on the individual to work in a traditional means I saw evidence that artist self-concept became more inconsequential with regards to participation (If there is no established way of working there is no risk of failure). The expectation was that students would create in ways that they were already comfortable working, and this was accomplished by challenging their views

with respect to the arts and what constituted participation. By building on the reciprocal quality of arts self-concept, increased perceived successful participation should beget more participation (Mansour, et al. 2018).

Offering the opportunity for students to socialize and co-create included the students in the process of creating their own therapeutic experience, it allowed them to introduce their desire to connect with one another into the work they were doing in the space. This was encouraged through facilitation and limit setting; students had to find ways to accomplish their goals through respectful communication otherwise the group goals could not be achieved. Many times, students had to be reminded of energy levels as they would begin to impact other students. I viewed this as an indicator that they were engaged though sometimes simultaneously dysregulated; this could be seen as beneficial or detrimental depending on whether the student has the resources to regulate. I believe there is a good case to be made for the need for more research into the arts and their effect on behavioral regulation with individuals who do not often participate in art making. In contrast to typical dysregulated behavior where the focus could be seen as nonproductive or “off task”, dysregulation while *hyper-focused* on the task at hand could also be considered an interesting cause for inquiry.

I found that working towards shifting group and individual views of art is directly tied to the relational component of therapy. The expressive arts therapist in the classroom setting can be viewed by students as an authority; not only in maintaining school rules, but also through their acceptance or denial of art in its multitude of forms. Students showed signs that they had generalized expectations for art-making which they rejected, but when those rules were subverted by the authority (the facilitator) in the space, it expanded the scope of acceptable practice and opened unforeseen possibilities for students to engage with their imaginations and

the arts. By subverting preconceived notions of what is and is not art, I found that students were more open to forming deeper relationships with me, perhaps because I showed that I was not rigid in my thinking, and that there was no punishment for making mistakes in art.

Relationship and rapport building proved to be the bedrock of this work, because from there all other components of the method were made possible. If not for the relationships I developed with the students, I believe there would have been no opportunity for any of the other work to take place. The relationships allowed for me to attune to the student's individual interests and the common interests that develop within a group. I was able to develop experientials specific to the groups based around what I believed they would be receptive to.

Discussion

The goal of this work was to attempt to understand what motivators and barriers contributed to arts participation, particularly with arts averse adolescents, while seeking a means by which those barriers and motivators can be subverted to create a stronger culture of arts participation in a special education middle and high school. Four guiding principles were developed using research into participation and relational skills. The method acts as a guideline by which the expressive arts therapist can design more inclusive experientials and bring more people into a relationship with art. The method was put to the test through two experientials designed to expand the participants view of the arts to include domains in which they already have a perceived mastery. Evidence of increased participation was witnessed when preconceived notions of art were challenged and comfort in art-making was created through the elevation of arts self-concept.

The literature provided pertinent guidance in the development of this method and as such the outcomes of the work show indications that application of the research to the creation of arts

experientials could show promise in encouraging participation. Research by Fancourt, et al. (2020) and Mansour, et al. (2018) identified similarities in how arts self-concept had a positive effect on adolescent arts participation and Fancourt, et al. (2020) and Malin (2015) expounded on the importance of socialization and social skills building within arts participation, both through their positive impact on participation and the desires of the adolescents participating. Malin (2015) suggested that students show signs of disinterest in arts participation the closer to an age in which they feel pressure to choose a career, illustrating the entanglement of participation in the arts, human development, and societal/occupational expectations. O'Keefe, et al. (2020), Hurley, et al. (2017), and Nemeth (2014) all spoke to the importance of relationship building and the therapeutic alliance within therapy, and its effects on satisfaction, rupture, and drop-out; reaffirming the importance of the therapeutic alliance and its ability to encourage participation in the therapeutic process.

While the experientials designed for the purpose of assessing the method appeared to be largely fruitful in fostering participation, it is impossible to determine if the participatory outcomes were a product of the method used to devise the experientials, or another unnamed factor. Perhaps students were simply in the mood to participate that day, or perhaps the content of the experientials was particularly activating; and then there is always the possibility that the materials used in the activities inspired the students to get involved.

It is also important to recognize that the participants I worked with during this project were all white cisgender teen boys and the possibility that outcomes could be different dependent on the identities of participants. There are noted racial and ethnic disparities in traditional arts access and participation. The National Endowment for The Arts has found that the numbers and proportions of all race and ethnic groups that participate in the arts has been declining over time,

and that the proportion of the arts audiences that are white are not declining, despite the fact that the proportion of the national population that is white is declining. (Welch, Kim, 2010) Despite the data, which ultimately pointed more towards access over interest, I saw no evidence that the students at our school who chose to participate in art-making aligned with any specific ethnic or racial demographic more than another, or that housing or socioeconomic status played a substantial role in who chose to make art or not within the context of the classroom. I noticed that students who identified as women or girls, though a smaller sampling, were more likely to participate more regularly; and I believe there is evidence to suggest that the students attending the more developmental and communication-oriented programs were also more likely to engage with art materials when facilitated. Further research into the topic of participation is necessary if we are to more specifically determine the root of positive participatory outcomes.

This work can be seen as an invitation to the expressive therapist, to expand their view of the arts and participation. Its clinical value can be judged by its illustration of the importance of flexibility within our work; (if we are to be inclusive of the most clients possible using our preferred methods). It indicates the connections between self-esteem, art, relationships, identity, occupation, and notions of acceptable practice. Those wishing to study this topic should understand that the relational component of the work is of the utmost importance as it is what all other aspects of participation rest upon, the development of experientials for the purpose of fostering arts engagement must grow out of an interest in the individuals artistic predispositions and finding a means of facilitating activities in a way that the individual can experience perceived competency. Participation is predicated on the choice of the group or individual; not the therapist. The therapist’s role in encouraging participation is in increasing the options for meaningful arts involvement for the group or individual.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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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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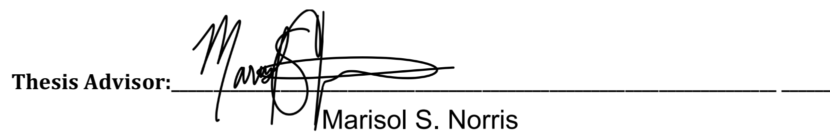

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