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Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Dance Movement Therapy

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Abstract

Middle school students are faced with many challenges related to their mental health and school. During the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, additional mental health concerns and challenges related to school were escalated. In a population that is pre-occupied with peer interactions and perceptions, being in quarantine left students without a sense of connection to their peers. The goal of the community engagement project presented was to utilize the creative arts to aid in building a sense of community and connection amongst 15 middle school students. During a creative arts enrichment course, the students were asked to select two art forms and a topic related to their school community. The students were divided into three groups to creatively answer the questions provided related to passions within their school through sketching and creating memes. Through this process, students were able to collaborate with one another, while being challenged to think abstractly about their community. The community engagement project highlighted the challenges of this population while attempting to bridge these gaps through collaboration. It is my recommendation that future research continue to expand upon the structure of art forms utilized and how future research may provide clarity into long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in community building of the middle school population.

Keywords: middle school students, community engagement project, community arts, creative arts, Covid-19 pandemic

Building Connections Through Community Art With Middle School Students: A

Community Engagement Project

"On a global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the largest disruption of children's education in history, with over 90% of the world's students being forced out of the classroom at its peak" (Stewart et al., 2021, p. 7). In hopes of preventing the spread of the virus, many schools switched to virtual learning as lockdowns began around the world. Meanwhile, research emerged on how the lockdowns were impacting children's emotional and social engagement. A qualitative study found that 86% of parents reported their child experienced greater amounts of loneliness, irritability, and worry during the lockdown (Capurso, 2020, p. 65). Additionally, a study conducted in Ontario, Canada, reported an increase in anxiety, depression, and stress in middle school children (Stewart et al., 2021). As the world and its businesses started to reopen, children were asked to re-enter their schools under the new reality of post-lockdown life.

While children were learning to adapt to the new regulations put into place, they were also learning how to re-connect with one another. For this project, I was able to work with a group of middle school children during their first full year of in-person classes following the lock-down of 2020 and 2021. The project focused on the question, how can the creative arts be utilized to build community and connections among a community of 16 middle school children, ranging from 4th to 8th grade? Four times a week, volunteers are asked to come to the school to teach an enrichment course. After making initial contact with the school through personal connections, I was given the opportunity to facilitate a creative arts enrichment.

Each student was able to select the enrichment they wanted to engage in, thus the students had a shared interest in artmaking. During the first course, the students were given a survey to define their expectations and interests over the next 4 months. In this project, 2 weeks

of these 4 months are highlighted. During the 2 weeks, the students worked together to create and implement a creative arts activity that allowed them to collaborate and support one another through a shared idea. As the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown had left the middle school population vulnerable to challenges with peer connections, the need for community engagement is ever prominent. Through the creative arts, it was anticipated that the students would be able to connect with one another through working collaboratively in artmaking and discussions. The anticipated outcome was that the creative arts could aid in building connections through collaboration amongst a group of middle school students.

Literature Review

Middle school children are in a unique position, beginning the transition into adolescence with physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes occurring (Sun & Cao, 2021). In education, the students are moving beyond learning the fundamentals of math and English and are beginning to put these fundamentals to use. They are learning how to use their reading and writing skills to process how to learn. Alongside the shift in the structure of education that occurs at this time in life, middle school children place much attention on their interactions with and impressions of their peers (Khursheed et al., 2020). The level of importance of social perceptions and peer relationships can leave this population vulnerable to school bullying and social anxiety.

Bullying and Social Anxiety

Bullying is defined as peer-on-peer aggressive behavior that is repetitive, intentional, and capitalizes on a power imbalance by the bully (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). Despite the various anti-bullying programs that have been implemented across the world, bullying continues to be a problem. An international study reported that "approximately 13% of kids ages 11 years across the world reported that they were bullied at least twice in the past 2 months and 8% admitted to

bullying others" (Sun & Cao, 2021, p. 1). Bullying can take place in many different forms and can also be done directly or indirectly.

Direct bullying is correlated to aggressive behaviors (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). These behaviors include name calling, verbal threats of physical abuse, physical fights, and social embarrassment. Indirect bullying is bullying that is not conducted face-to-face and is intended to diminish someone's reputation. Examples of these behaviors include spreading rumors, gossiping, and isolating someone from other students (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). Both direct and indirect forms of bullying are still prevalent in schools today. To further understand bullying for middle school students, interviews with 20 middle school principals in Mersin occurred (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). The qualitative researchers concluded that the most prevalent forms of bullying were physical, verbal, cyber, and sexual bullying (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021, p. 305).

The addition of cyber and sexual bullying has expanded the definition of bullying and its effects beyond the premise of school. Cyber bullying is a form of indirect bullying in which rumors and attempts to ruin someone's reputation are done online (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). While cyber bullying can be isolated to the *cyber world*, it is common for cyber bullying to occur simultaneously with verbal and physical bullying. Sexual bullying, also referred to as sexual harassment, can occur in school or online (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). Some examples of this form of bullying include, sharing of sexual images, visual messages, undesired sexualized behaviors, and undesired sexual comments. The impact of bullying has been observed as low self-esteem, loneliness, depression, anxiety, headaches, stomach pain, suicidal thoughts, and difficulties sleeping (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021).

While bullying begins with one student targeting another at its core, other factors outside of the school can influence a middle school student's susceptibility to different behavioral and

emotional challenges. One of these challenges is social anxiety, which is defined as a distinct and obstinate fear of one or more social or performance situations involving exposure to unacquainted people or a possible inspection by others (Khursheed et al., 2020, p. 1). In a study conducted by Khursheed et al. (2020), it was found that parental over-control, family environment, school, and personal characteristics of the child were all factors that contributed to social anxiety.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, the state of the world dramatically shifted and so did the structure of day-to-day life. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the structure and stability of routine worldwide was disrupted by nation-wide lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus. Although during times of uncertainty, routine provides children with feelings of safety (Segre et al., 2021), the lockdowns left children to transition from in-person school to online, virtual learning, disrupting their sense of routine. During this time research and literature began to surface on the impact the pandemic, lockdown, and virtual learning were having onto children. A study consisting of interviews from 82 children living in Milan, Italy found that in addition to changes to online learning, children reported changes to their eating habits and sleep habits (Segre et al., 2021). The changes of routine were also met with pandemic-related parental stressors (e.g., financial instability or illness in the family), social isolation from friends and extended family members, and lack of access to social and structural supports (Stewart, 2021, p. 1).

Relative to family concerns, Segre et al. (2021), reported that approximately 18% of the children feared the idea of being hospitalized and 75.6% were fearful of their family members becoming ill (p. 5). The concern for the health of others in addition to the disruption of daily structure, has left this population vulnerable to various mental health challenges such as anxiety,

stress, and depression (Stewart et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). While self-reporting of anxiety (Segre et al., 2021) was increasing, parents were also noticing changes in the emotions and behaviors of their children. A study was conducted in Italy and Spain that found that 86% of the parents interviewed noticed changes in their child's ability to concentrate, displayed an increase in irritability, loneliness, and uneasiness (Capurso et al., 2020, p. 65). While the literature related to the Covid-19 pandemic rose quickly, limitations of these studies surround the short-term findings (Segre et al, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). This is a result of the literature available concentrating on the experiences and effects during the lockdowns. Since the end of lockdown, the literature on middle school children following initial re-entry to in-person learning is minimal. Additionally, as the Covid-19 pandemic is still occurring as a part of daily life, the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are not currently available.

Like the literature, I have found that the participants at the charter middle school are facing difficulties with bullying and an increase in psychological challenges. While I can only speak to what I have observed, direct verbal bullying is primarily occurring for these students. Working in community engagement can bring about social change, which is "the transformation in the formal and informal systems of society that lead to positive outcomes such as greater openness, equality, and appreciation among people" (Washington, 2011, p. 269).

Community Arts

In the creative arts, the community can come together to create social change amongst themselves. From 2013 to 2015, the Ebola virus, lead to an epidemic in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone (Decosimo et al., 2019). During 2019, data was collected on the impact community arts programs had on 870 children that participated in the activities. These supports were put in place to help the children work through the community and individual trauma that was a part of

their daily lives. The researchers expressed that "art and expression provide a portal for children to give meaning to confusion and fear. The sensory aspect of art and play provide a space for a child to explore relationships, symbolism, and emotions" (Decosimo et al., 2019, p. 10).

Within a community, one can find their own social identity, build relationships, and understand their connections to other individuals. Through the sharing of art and stories, participants of community projects can bridge the gap between previously isolated individuals and groups. It is through the collective participation of creating new art that new relationships can form within a community (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2010). School communities in beginning school re-entry were faced with the challenges of reconnecting with one another. Capurso et al. (2020) identified different creative activities to re-establish connections, structure, and process the experiences of the lockdown. As children are often more comfortable using the arts to express their feelings, the authors created arts-based activities to assist in the re-entry process. These activities included creating vignette characters and drawing the Covid-19 virus. The activities create a space for the past experiences to be processed and help to develop coping skills to build resilience (Capurso et al., 2020).

Collaborative artmaking can be utilized to promote empowerment, a sense of connection, and belonging. A study conducted by Katwky and Seko (2019) consisted of clay sculpture workshops in which the participants collaborated with one another. The goal of the study was to create art that would be displayed to the community following the engagement in the workshops. The participants found that they were able to connect through the collective storytelling and collaboration in making art (Katwky & Seko, 2019). Another study that was conducted in the City of Jyväskylä, utilized film, writing, and visual arts workshops to create art about the topic of belonging (Hiltunen et al., 2020). The participants of the study identified different stances of

belonging which included "positive belonging, searching for belonging, struggling to belong, [and] skepticism toward belonging" (Hiltunen et al., 2020, para. 69). The participants that took a positive stance on belonging, found that "the process of making art also created spaces of belonging" (Hiltunen et al., 2019, para. 36).

The relationship between the arts and building connections is also highlighted in a study about community dance (Buck & Snook, 2020). In community dance, there is a focus on the participants, collaborative relationships, inclusive practices, opportunities for positive experiences, and celebration of diversity (Buck & Snook, 2020). In the study conducted by Buck and Snook (2020), the authors aimed to have their movement classes to be creative and enjoyable. In completing the study, they found that "by moving together, bonds were formed" (p. 294). In working creatively and in collaboration within a community, its members can not only connect but have feelings of safety in the sharing of storytelling and expression of their artmaking. It is through collaboration in the creative arts that I hope the middle school students would engage and build connections with one another in a positive manner.

Methods

While completing an internship at a partial hospitalization program (PHP) for children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 18, a few trends emerged. A majority were referred to the PHP due to anxiety, depression, suicidality, and self-harm. These symptoms were also paired with school refusal, challenges with peers, and verbal bullying. I was captivated by the trend I was seeing of children and adolescents faced with challenges of school refusal.

Around the same time, an opportunity to teach an enrichment course at a middle school was brought to my attention. The opportunity allowed me to witness the interactions of students in a middle school environment. In witnessing and conducting a study, I aimed to observe

potential contributions of behaviors of the students that may lead to students' refusal to attend school. The choice to facilitate a creative arts enrichment was made to encourage a creative environment to support building connections and community.

The community engagement project took place at a charter middle school in Massachusetts. The school aims to foster a sense of community while empowering their students to think creatively and critically. The population consists of students in 4th to 8th grade who reside in the local surrounding towns. The lower school within the middle school, consists of the 4th and 5th grade and the upper school consists of 6th through 8th grade. Most of the staff and students are White with more of the students representing Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities. A variety of socioeconomic backgrounds are represented in the school as well as different learning challenges. Approximately a third of the students receive accommodations through 504 plans or individualized education programs for autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disabilities, and mental health challenges.

Initial contact for the community engagement project was made via email through personal connections I have with staff members at the school. As part of the school's curriculum, students engage in different enrichment courses that take place once a week over the course of a trimester. Each trimester lasts approximately 4 months in total. The enrichment courses include a variety of topics of interest to the facilitator and students. Volunteers to facilitate enrichment courses include students in collaboration with teachers, parents, staff members, and volunteers within the community. In my initial contact, I proposed to facilitate a creative arts enrichment course and provided a brief description that would be provided to the students when choosing which enrichment, they wanted to participate in during the upcoming trimester. The description

provided was "utilizing different forms of creative expression through collaboration and creative thinking."

After receiving approval from the head of school, a group of 16 students were assigned to the enrichment, as well as a staff member. While each participant chose to participate in the enrichment course, many were also selected intentionally by staff because of the potential benefits they felt students might be able to receive. The group consisted of at least one student from each grade level in the school. The group included four students in the 4th grade, four students in the 5th grade, one student from the 6th grade, five students from the 7th grade, and two students from the 8th grade. Approximately 56% of the students identified as female and 44% identified as male.

The staff member chosen to assist with the enrichment and community engagement project was the speech pathologist. She was specifically chosen to assist in the enrichment due to her interest in research and the work she does with several of the students. As I was someone coming in from the local community, it felt important to have a staff member present to assist with the disciplinary actions that may occur. As the group continued another staff member participated in the group and acted as another disciplinary figure. The inclusion of this staff member occurred organically as the location of the enrichment course was in his classroom. As finding himself having a genuine interest in the activities and materials discussed he naturally found himself participating and providing redirection of students as needed.

Within the 4 months of the enrichment course, 2 weeks were dedicated to this community engagement project. To provide me, as the facilitator, with a scope of interest, during the 1st week, the participants were asked to fill out a survey. Included in the survey were questions related to favorite forms of art, activities they might be interested in, some questions they might

have about the enrichment, and a few questions to get to know the students. Additionally, during the 1st week, the group collaborated to create a set of shared agreements and establish group norms. During the 4th week, students were asked once again to draw their attention to the shared agreements and contributed additional elements to the list. Each week these shared agreements were hung up on the whiteboard as a reminder to the participants to ensure a safe environment for all the students.

During the weeks to follow, students were guided through various expressive art activities guided by the interests communicated in the surveys. In doing so, I was able to provide the participants with examples and a clear understanding of what the creative arts are and can look like. Each week the activities were documented via email between the staff members and me. Additionally, I utilized a research journal to log written and artistic reflections following each week.

In the first 6 weeks, the participants were guided through various creative arts activities. These activities we're all chosen based on the interest of the participants and the literature gathered. The activities included sharing names and gestures, creating artwork based off a poem, creating their own rage monsters, creating superhero power poses, and creating their own planet. These activities were all either conducted individually, in small groups, or conducted together as a group. The various themes were chosen due to the various psychological challenges middle school children are facing (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021; Segre et al., 2021). When a child is the victim of bullying, they are susceptible to negative psychological effects such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). Specifically unique to children living through the COVID-19 lockdowns, a survey of parents found that their children had difficulties concentrating, had an increased sense of irritability, worry, and nervousness

(Capurso et al., 2020; Segre et al., 2021). Thus, the creative arts activities chosen concentrated on understanding feelings related to irritability, increasing self-esteem, building peer connections, and encouraged the use of collaboration.

Following the first 6 weeks, the participants were given 2 weeks to choose and implement a topic they could engage in for the community engagement project. The 1st week of the project was dedicated to the community members working together to collectively decide on a topic as well as art forms they would like to utilize in expressing the chosen topic. The participants were given a prompt to think about what are some topics or challenges that they could make art about that might be helpful for themselves and their peers. These students were instructed to raise their hand when they had an idea, and all ideas were written on the whiteboard in the classroom. This provided all the students to feel heard and actively be part of the process.

Next the students were asked what forms of art they might be interested in utilizing to express some of the topic ideas shared. After generating ideas of challenges and topics as well as different art forms, the participants were guided through narrowing down the different ideas. The group was instructed to select one of the listed topics as well as two art forms they would want to engage in during the following week.

After eliminating some topics due to their incompatibility with the prompt, the participants were asked to raise their hands to eliminate topics they were not interested in. Following the shortening of the list, the students were asked to share which of the topics remaining they were very passionate about. Once the list of topics was initially consolidated, the group was additionally asked to do the same with the art forms listed. After several rounds of going back and forth, the group was able to agree on a topic and two art forms.

I instructed the group members work in small groups to collaborative create art with one another (Buck & Snook, 2020; Decosimo et al., 2019; Katwyk & Seko, 2019; Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011; Washington, 2011). I specifically chose to have the group members work in small groups based on their participation in previous weeks. Predominantly this choice was made based on the positive responses of this students working together for the build your own planet activity. Additionally, the group members would have the opportunity to work together in the sharing of the collaborative artmaking. During the 2nd week of the community engagement project, the students were given a group to work in based on their artistic preferences and interests. Other than the preferred art form, the groups were randomly selected. The aim of random selection was to encourage a sense of community building by working with students they may be less familiar with. Through the sharing and working creatively with one another the group members would be able to connect and create a sense of safety in sharing, empowerment, and belonging (Buck & Snook, 2020; Katwky & Seko, 2019; Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011).

Each group was assigned a question to answer based on the overarching theme decided by the group members the week prior. Each question was connected back to the school community in a way that also connected with the chosen topic. The two staff members and I each provided guidance for the groups to encourage collaboration, abstract thinking, and creativity. As a formal presentation was not available within the school community, the students were given the opportunity to present and share their creative art pieces with the other small groups. In the presentation of the artmaking, the students were asked to share their questions and how they chose to represent it creatively. The question of the art relating to the community and working collaborative was also addressed.

Results

The establishment of group norms served two purposes over the course of the enrichment. The first was to establish a sense of safety for the group members and the second was to foster examples of community related topics. When generating the list of group norms, I emphasized the idea of creating a space in which everyone felt safe to express themselves and share openly with the group. Most items included on the list, were related to positivity, kindness, respect, and providing constructive criticism to another group member's art. As discussed by Saldiraner and Gizir (2021), verbal and indirect bullying is commonly demonstrated by students as "name calling, teasing, insults, intimidation, socially isolating the victim, and spreading distressing rumors" (p. 299). Understanding that bullying may be a concern for these students lead me to recognize the need to address some of these fears that may be prevalent to the group members in the community engagement project.

The 1st week of the community engagement project was dedicated to selecting a topic idea and art forms for the students to work with in the following week. The students were given the prompt, "What are some topics or challenges you could make art about that might be helpful for you and your peers?" A few of the initial responses to the prompt included topics such as Harry Potter, kindness, the superiority of short people, overstimulation, and the seven deadly sins. From the initial responses to the prompt, I observed the students were only concentrated on the generation of ideas. In aims to redirect back to the original prompt, the two staff members and I emphasized the components of the prompt that connected to community, challenges, and helping other peers. The students were encouraged to include broader topics and topics related to feelings and emotions. Additionally, the inclusion of themes based on the list of group norms was brought to the attention of the students to provide support and possible guidance. Following the clarification of the prompt, the students shared topic ideas including respect, passions,

desires, jobs, the future, the past, fears, grief, pride, learning styles, magic, and ethics. Each idea was written on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom to provide the students with a visual representation of each idea shared.

Once the group came to a natural stopping point of topic ideas, I facilitated the group to begin thinking of potential art forms to utilize. The group was prompted to include art forms that were of interest to them and that could be used to represent some of the topic ideas generated. The art forms shared included photography, memes, sketching, dance, animation, painting, poetry, 3D drawing, shading, songwriting, and fashion. Once the formulation of ideas was completed, the process of narrowing down began. The group was reminded that they were aiming to collectively decide on one topic and two art forms.

The process of elimination began with removing specific topics that no longer related once the prompt was reframed. These topics included, Harry Potter, the seven deadly sins, and the superiority of short people. With the remaining topics, students were given the opportunity to share what topics were not of interest to them that would be crossed out on the whiteboard. Once some ideas were eliminated, the students were asked what of the remaining topics they greatly desired to keep as an option. A star was placed next each topic listed to indicate at least one student was very interested in the topic. A similar process of elimination was conducted with the art forms listed. The students were given the choice to remove art forms they were uninterested in or uncomfortable doing from the list. Following this students were also given the opportunity to share art forms they were very interested in. As there was a limit to the resources available, some art forms were eliminated such as painting, 3D drawing, and fashion designing.

After a few rounds of adding and subtracting topics and art forms, the group concluded. The students decided to either sketch or create a meme based on the topic of passions. The

conclusion to sketch and create memes received the most enthusiasm from group members as well as received the greatest number of supports. The conclusion of the topic of passion was a result of a compromise. The final three topics were passions, fears, respect, and overstimulation. In the end, the compromise was made to focus on passions as it was the topic that had the most potential to be the broadest.

During the 2nd week, the group members were divided into three small groups, and each assigned questions under the underlining theme of passions. As there was more of an interest in sketching than creating memes, the students who were interested in creating memes were put into their own group consisting of three students. The remaining students who were interested in sketching were randomly selected into two groups. A random selection was utilized to see how collaborative creating art together could help to connect students less familiar with one another. The generation of randomized groups was implemented to inquire how the collaborative, community artmaking could provide the students with a feeling of connection to other another.

Each group was provided with a question to respond to utilizing the group's chosen form of art. The questions were based on three different synonyms of the word "passion," which were "dedication," "intensity," and "sentiment" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.d). The decision of which synonyms to be included was based on the definition of each of the words and how it may relate to the community engagement project. The use of synonyms was also included as a result of reframing the original prompt and idea formulation during the prior week. These words were chosen to provide the students with some helpful guidance.

The group of students who chose to create memes were given the word of "intensity." A meme is "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) of items that is spread widely online especially through social media" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.c, Definition 1).

While this is traditionally created digitally, the students were given the option to create their own representation of a meme through drawing or through acting one out. The group members chose to create their meme in the form of drawing. The decision to keep it analog was to minimize distractions for the students, keep them engaged in the activity, and minimize any inappropriate computer use. This was informed by the experiences of the students in prior weeks of the enrichment course.

Intensity is defined as "the quality or state of being intense, especially extreme degree of strength, force, energy, or feeling" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b, Definition 1). Based off this definition and potential connection to community, the group was prompted with the question, "How is extreme strength, energy, or feelings show or presented in the school?" The first sketching group was given the word *dedication*, defined as "devotion and loyalty" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a, Definition 4) with the prompt "How is dedication shown or represented in the school?" Lastly, the second sketching group was given the word *sentiment,* defined as "a specific view or notion" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.e, Definition 1b) in the form of the question "What is a specific view you think the school has taught your group?" To complete the prompts, each group was given a large piece of white roll out paper, pencils, colored pencils, and markers. As the groups began to brainstorm, myself and the other staff members went around to all the groups to provide support as needed.

During the brainstorming stage, the small groups were all faced with feelings of uncertainty and hesitation. The students initially were stuck on the idea that the only values that school holds are related to learning math, science, and humanities. It was not until being guided to think more deeply were the students open to generating ideas related to values within the school. For the group creating memes about intensity, the group members thought of re-creating

a popular meme referred to as the "doge" as it is a meme that can represent a variety of intense feelings while keeping the same facial expression the whole time (Behind the Meme, 2016). Around the image of the dog, the words related to the different emotions experienced are present. The feelings the small group of students chose to include were related to negative feelings such as boredom, sadness, and hangry. They also created their own combination of words such as sad and angry combined together to include around the drawing of the dog. The group made a connection between how students in their school can be expressing a lot of different emotions but with the use of masks in the school, every expression appears the same on their faces.

The first sketch group who created sketches based on dedication was also challenged by diving in deeper than learning school subjects for their question. In having the opportunity to participate and ask guiding questions, the group members were able to quickly identify that the teachers at the school show dedication to their students. Although they identified this theme, they were hesitant that it was not a correct answer. The second sketch group created a sketch based on sentiment. In this small group, the students were hesitant due to not being able to decide between the two themes of motivation and growth. It was challenging for them to feel confident in providing an open-ended answer.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

Although the study of children and adolescence in Milan discussed how many students missed their peers (Segre et al., 2021), limited studies have provided insight into how the socialization of middle school students has been impacted. I was initially inspired to conduct this project due to the presenting problem of school refusal common of the children and adolescents being admitted into my internship site. At the PHP, children, and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 18 years old receive services to stabilize their mental health in order to return to their

daily routines and learn skills to help manage their symptoms. Many of the children were coming to my internship with a history of being bullied and not liking the students in their schools. I was inspired to understand what the environment of a middle school might look like following the Covid-19 pandemic. I was curious what aspects of peer relationships may have changed following a few years of inconsistently being around their peers. I initially hypothesized that this would be a result of challenges in understanding what socialization is like and an increase in verbal bullying such as name-calling and rudeness (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021) potentially from increases in irritability of middle school students based on prior studies' findings.

Throughout the duration of the creative arts enrichment course, the students were guided through different creative arts activities. Of the 4 months of the enrichment, 2 of these weeks concentrated on a collaboration of the 16 class members on a topic and two art forms of their choosing. The purpose of this community engagement project was for the students to build connections and have a sense of community through collaborative artmaking and discussion. As expressed previously in literature, the arts are an outline that connect individuals together through the sharing of stories (Buck & Snook, 2020; Katwky & Seko, 2019; Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2010). In the sharing of stories, participants in previous studies felt more connected with one another following creating art together and communicating their stories.

In creating artwork together from the basis of their own ideas and art forms, the anticipated outcome was that the students would feel a sense of connection with one another as they would be creating their own stories together through artmaking. The main approach to artmaking was through sketching and meme making. In reflecting back on the process, my observations aligned with the literature conducted about children during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The children demonstrated difficulties concentrating, experience low-esteem, and face challenges with social anxiety.

During the first few minutes of formulating ideas, the students had a challenging time moving beyond the idea that school teaches students information beyond the academic subjects of math, science, and humanities. Collaboration beyond the initial thought of school subjects was limited. Without the presence of a staff member, the students who were less familiar with one another wouldn't interact or participate in conversation with one another. When asked to share some ideas they have thought of the students would speak to the adult directly. The facilitator continued to guide the students through discussions about their questions and how they wanted to express them creatively. In each group there were one or two students who would generate an idea and share with an adult in the room.

When students were encouraged to think more abstractly, it was met with hesitation, resistance, irritability, complexity, and confusion. One of the 7th grade students shared how she didn't believe that school taught anything besides traditional school subjects and pushed back at different guiding supporting. She was very stuck in one way of thinking and unable to see past their initial thought. After being provided with some support, many of the students were able to determine some ideas that matched the abstraction of the prompt. Once, the group was able to identify an idea or two they were met with a new sense of frustration when attempting to illustrate the idea generated. The group of students working on the word dedication identified this as a challenge. After conceptualizing that their school has a few philosophies they teach the students during their morning meetings, they were then faced with the challenge of illustrating the philosophies.

A study conducted in Italy and Spain, reported parents noticing an increase in the concentration levels of their children (Capurso et al., 2020). As the students began to work in their small groups, the need for continuous re-direction occurred. The re-direction was related to changing attention back to the task at hand. Without re-direction by myself and the other staff members, the students would divide themselves into smaller groups and begin working on their own independent art. Although the groups were randomized, there were still a few group members who were close friends that were assigned the same group. When given space to work on their own as a group, individuals that knew one another would begin to chat and make their own art rather than focusing on the prompts in front of them. Low self-esteem and social anxiety were also demonstrated in the students. This was demonstrated through a lack of participation. There was one 7th grade student and two 4th grade students who would ask their friends to speak for them if they had an idea. Additionally, these students were challenging to encourage to participate in the artistic representation of their ideas.

While each of the groups were able to engage in artmaking based on the same topic of passions and subtopics of sentiment, dedication, and intensity, the sense of collaboration was not as present. The distribution of the artwork on the paper captured the lack of collaboration of the students. Each group was given a large piece of paper to sketch on that was approximately the length of a large classroom table. A feature of all the artworks was the distribution of isolated clumps of art. The distribution documented how each student decided to work on their own individual representation of the prompt rather than creating one cohesive design.

The lack of cohesion in the artmaking spoke to the individualized mindset the students approach to continue to exhibit. Collaboration in knowing one another's stories providing a connection to aid in a comfort of safety in creating with one another (Buck & Snook, 2020;

Katwky & Seko, 2019; Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011). In contrast with the students in the

enrichment course, Buck and Snook (2020), Katwky and Seko (2019), and Madyaningrum and

Sonn (2011) conducted their studies with populations of individuals before the Covid-19

pandemic. These factors may have contributed to the difference in outcomes between their

studies and my investigation. While students often learn socialization skills through interacting

with other children in school, students during the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic were not

as exposed to this socialization. Additionally, once the lockdowns were lifted, students were still

practicing social distancing until the end of March 2022. In other words, students were not

allowed to be close enough to create collaborative projects. Thus, it is likely that while

collaboration in the sense of having a shared, collective, artmaking piece, the students were

doing so in a way that was present to what they were aware of.

Limitations

Limitations to the project included limited resources and inconsistency of participants.

The limitation of limited resources is in the nature of the enrichment course. The students and

myself were limited to the resources provided by the school and anything that I was able to pay

out of pocket. Due to this, I was only able to provide the students will three sets of Crayola

markers and a set of Crayola colored pencils. Another limited resource was time each week and

the amount of time between the two sessions. Each of the enrichment courses are approximately

45 minutes in length with little wiggle room to fluctuate the end time due to the school day

ending at the end of the day. The time restriction also impacted the forms of art available due to

preparation and clean up time other art forms such as oil paints and clay.

The number of participants is also a limitation. The project was based on the direct

interests of the students in the enrichment course. The current participant population was very

engaged in creating visual art, whereas another group of students may have preferred an art form such as dance, movement, drama, and music. In future research studies, the interests of the student's art form, and topics of interest may influence the findings of the facilitator. The time between the two sessions may be a limitation of this project as the two sessions were 2 weeks apart. Future researchers are encouraged to note how the duration between the first and section sessions would impact the collaboration of students in creative artmaking. The impact of time between sessions may have increased length of interest and excitement for engaging in the prompts if they were conducted within 1 week of another or 2 days in a row.

While the community engagement project consisted of a few limitations, it contributes to the field as its community-based research conducted following the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020. This project provides insight into the environment of a charter middle school in Massachusetts during its first full year of in-person classes since the 2020-2021 school year. While many studies were conducted during the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are still a limited number of studies following the current effects on the middle school population. This investigation opens the door into the environment and challenges of the students during the unique time around the world. While the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are still to be determined as time continues and the years past, the immediate effects can begin to be discovered to provide insight during this time. Although beyond the scope of this study, I believe it would be insightful to repeat similar studies with the same children over the course of several years to see how their interactions, connections, and collaboration differ over the years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the students were able to generate ideas and creative art making with the assistance of an adult. The presence of collaboration in the community engagement project was

limited as evidenced by the artwork of the students being very individualized. The project provided insight into the interactions and challenges middle school students are facing amongst their daily routines in school following the Covid-19 pandemic. The potential implication of this project is the contribution to the emerging research in the field. As time continues, this project will provide an outline for how schools can utilize the creative arts to form collaborative groups of students in the future to encourage a sense of community engagement.

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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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