


2020

Creating Dynamic Spaces: Exploring Student-Empowered Self-Expression through Art

Meghan E. Charest
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses>

 Part of the [Accessibility Commons](#), [Art Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [Educational Technology Commons](#), [Elementary Education Commons](#), and the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation

Charest, Meghan E., "Creating Dynamic Spaces: Exploring Student-Empowered Self-Expression through Art" (2020). *Honors Theses*. Paper 1286.
<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses/1286>

This Honors Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.

**Creating Dynamic Spaces: Exploring Student-Empowered Self-Expression
through Art**

Meghan Charest
Honors Thesis in Education
Colby College
May, 2020

Mark Tappan
Professor of Education
Advisor

Lyn Mikel Brown
Professor of Education
Reader

Copyright © 2020 Meghan Charest.
All Rights Reserved.

Contents

Abstract.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
Chapter One:	
Introduction.....	7
Empowered Through Art.....	7
TREE.....	9
Art Explorations.....	11
Chapter Two:	
Literature Review.....	13
Trauma and Trauma-Informedness.....	13
Emerging Themes.....	14
Equity and Equity Literacy.....	22
Chapter Three:	
Exploration Methods and Context.....	23
Community Context.....	23
Professional Influences on Trauma-Informedness.....	28
Kindergarten.....	30
Power Hour.....	39
Chapter Four:	
Results and Outcomes.....	44
Kindergarten.....	44
Power Hour.....	61
Chapter Five:	
Discussion and	
Conclusion.....	72
Challenges.....	72
Overall Findings.....	74
Conclusion.....	76
Appendices.....	82
References.....	92

Abstract

Research suggests that students living in rural areas may be more likely to face adversity and stress due to intersecting challenges present in their communities including poverty, substance abuse, addiction, poor health, reduced economic opportunity, and geographic isolation. I conducted an engaged scholarship project in partnership with students and staff at JES to explore ways that open-ended art activities that provide students with self-directed creative spaces can cultivate a student-centered environment built around strong relationships. This type of environment can mitigate the negative impacts of adverse childhood experiences potentially affecting rural Maine students and improve a culture of emotional wellness and a focus on student empowerment in school contexts. In two four-week pilots with two trial groups, I worked with students aged four to eight in art exploration activities designed to disrupt the power differentials of the traditional teacher-centered classroom by placing control over the environment with students. Over the course of the four sessions, students gained confidence and developed a sense of empowerment in their self-directed environments. Students in both groups demonstrated social-emotional learning through art and developed their relationships with peers and school staff in positive ways.

Acknowledgements

I am so grateful to so many people for their contributions and support throughout this project. In broad, subtle and so many in-between ways you have impacted me and what I continue to learn in ways that mean such a great deal to me. Thank you so very much. Thank you especially to the following people and organizations.

First, thank you Mark, an educator who changed my life and continues to. Thank you for everything you have done to help me during and before this project, for your thoughtfulness and wisdom, for your feedback, for giving me freedom to follow my interests in my own way, and for helping me figure out where to start and then where to start again, especially in some unexpected circumstances. I admire who you are as a teacher, and as a person. I am so grateful to learn from you.

Thank you to the TREE Team, Ashley, Brittany, Cat, Laura, Lyn, and Maggie for who you are and the important work that you do, and thank you for sharing it with me. I am inspired by the unique strength and ideological conviction you bring to your work and to the world. It is a privilege to work with you and learn from you. Thank you also to Lyn for being my second reader, for talking through my ideas from the very start, and for the many forwarded articles that always came at just the right time.

To the JES students and staff, especially Morgan, thank you so much for your partnership. The brilliance, wisdom, creativity, kindness, and joy you showed me and shared with me during our time together is such a needed light. I appreciate your generosity with your time, ideas, and stories so much, and I am honored to know each of you and to work with you.

Thank you to Sue Carroll Duffy and Bodhi Simpson for sharing your knowledge with me in interviews. I appreciate your time, how you approach your work, and the impact you are making.

Thank you to Jada for your help and collaboration in research and for the important and beautiful change you will bring the world as an educator. Natalie, thank you for all of your help documenting classes and taking observations—your kind approach to the world is something I admire so much.

Thank you to my amazing parents for your support with this project and for showing me the world in such loving ways. Emily, my wonderful sister, thank you for being you and for helping me make some pretty epic creative messes over the years. Thank you to my grandparents for all you've shared with me and for generally being terrific. I love and appreciate you all so deeply.

To my dear roommates, Alex, Dean, and Maggie, thanks for listening to my ideas and offering yours, for the many tea breaks that never failed to make my day, for taking it in stride when I covered our entire kitchen with homemade play dough, and for being such good friends. Maggie, thank you for writing with me and for sharing this process. Your mind for justice and wise passion stay with me when we're apart. I am so excited to cheer each other on in whatever comes next. Much love.

Finally, I am grateful for the funding support of Davis Connects that made this project possible.

Chapter One: Introduction

In this section, I will discuss the influences and experiences informing my project. I will introduce my primary goal of using art to support trauma-informed environments for students, and I will begin to explain my process for developing art explorations as a tool to work toward this goal.

Empowered through Art

When I talk about myself as someone in early childhood and elementary school, most people chuckle and say “Oh, you were *that kid*. ” Before I explain, I should preface what I am about to write by assuming that in your own experience you have either been or known a *that kid*. *That kid* is the one who hums in class and when asked to stop says “ok, sorry!” and immediately starts whistling. *That kid* is the kid who finds a million surfaces that are not paper to put paint on before being asked to clean up and choose a different activity. *That kid* is the student who always prefers to take the art class assignment in a *different direction*, whose page margins are filled with doodles, who occasionally gets busted for reading under his/her/their desk, and who sprinkles an entire jar of silver glitter over the basement so that when he/she/they roller skate, the floor looks like a frozen pond.

My heavy use of italics probably makes it obvious that I was the hypothetical individual behind these examples (except for the glitter “ice”--*THAT kid* was my little sister), but I know so many people who either did similar things during their childhoods or who are currently children engaging with their worlds in these ways. The typical school setting is not often conducive to the needs of students who do not interact with their environments or understand them in ways that fit

within the framework of the traditional school setting. I embarked on this project with the goal of considering ways to work child-centered contexts into the otherwise teacher-dominant context of the public elementary school setting. I chose to focus on art as a conduit for providing opportunities to challenge transmission frameworks. I chose art for its flexibility as a child-centered modality that students could use in many ways and because the storytelling and self-expressive power of art fascinates me.

My interest in art as a tool for providing children opportunities to express themselves and engage in storytelling comes in part from personal experience being a young person with an abundance of creative energy who struggled to adapt to the classroom setting that asked me to express ideas in a way that centered around direction from adults and methods that contradicted what felt natural in the ways I viewed the world. Until I was a proficient speaker, reader, and especially writer, I found it so frustrating to try and fail over and over again to *say* what I was thinking when *showing* it empowered me with a sense of clarity that I was not yet capable of with other verbal processes. Art was something I enjoyed doing, but more importantly it was a tool I could use to organize my thoughts and demonstrate what I was still learning to articulate.

In addition to personal experience, I believe that part of dismantling oppressive and marginalizing structures inherent in schools relies on rebuilding the classroom structure to promote radical empowerment among students. Prioritizing student voices--especially the voices of students facing institutionalized oppression--is essential in cultivating a just education system. Such an important part of this empowerment is creating an environment that places the student and their needs at the heart of the schooling process. Centering students requires listening, and listening requires valuing the way children express themselves as they garner new strategies for doing so and build communicative capacity.

I chose to study art because I believe art in the classroom becomes a method for listening. It is an invitation to process and share at one's own pace and on one's own terms. The absence of organized artistic conventions also makes it malleable and promises the protection of legitimacy. According to the minutely specific conventions of verbal language, there is a correct and an incorrect way to communicate. Grammatical and usage choices are labeled "right" or "wrong," and the ability to use language the "right" way often dictates whether or not an individual is taken seriously by those in power. There are many layers to this in American schools. Communicating in English is the "right" way at most schools. Communicating with a dialect of English that traces to white European settler colonialism is the "right" way to communicate (Finn, 1999). Communicating with "proper conventions" is the right; language labeled "slang," is wrong. All of these rules systematically silence student voices by dictating who is in and who is out, priming another generation to enter a white, cis-gendered, heteropatriarchy-privileging capitalist system that predetermines who will be advantaged with power and who will be forced down.

Art, in contrast, defies these rules and gains form through the vision of its creators. The creator controls the story fully. By existing, art is inherently legitimate. It is natural to children from the time they begin to develop motor capabilities, and it is accessible before children are capable of even the most basic verbal functions (Malachiodi, 2008). I believe art is an extraordinarily powerful means of connecting with children, their needs, and their visions in ways that the obedience-obsessed adult world fails to tap into because doing so would invite revolution where reproduction has always been normative.

TREE

My interest in art is preceded by my emerging understanding of the importance of youth environments themselves. Students do not share universal developmental circumstances or realities outside of the reality that their circumstances universally impact their development. A shocking two-thirds of people have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), and one in six adults have experienced four or more ACEs. ACEs are connected to lifelong adversity in the form of chronic mental and physical health challenges when they go without support and treatment (CDC, 2020). Lack of supportive, adequately-resourced environments also fuel the chasm-like opportunity gap that systematically prevents equitable education practices in the United States. And yet, when people at any age encounter unfavorable outcomes, it is the individual that is criticized, not the environment. By evaluating and questioning the humanity of people who experience trauma instead of working in coalition to reform the systems that create and perpetuate the trauma to begin with, harm and inequity are reproduced. This manufacture is magnified in schools and their policies, which work with individuals at the especially vulnerable time during which experiences and development happen that determine outcomes throughout the lifespan.

In the fall of my junior year, I learned about the importance and possibility of trauma-informed education practices through an organization called TREE, which stands for Transforming Rural Experiences in Education. TREE is a research-practice partnership that works to develop solutions to create school environments that serve the social-emotional needs of students in supportive, healing ways and that recognize and address the inequities in schools that further disadvantage and harm students who experience trauma (Mette et. al, 2018). TREE uses a four-domain approach to establishing trauma-informed environments. The four domains

include “Community Engagement,” “Meeting Basic Needs,” “Supporting the Whole Child,” and “Improving Instruction and Leadership” (Mette et. al, 2018). With focus on safety, equity literacy, connection, and student empowerment, TREE works to create a responsive environment that disrupts the cyclical and intergenerational natures of trauma to create community-based systemic change in experiences and outcomes. I worked with TREE in its partner schools to conduct this project and also designed my approach based on TREE’s core focuses and practices.

Art Explorations

Like TREE’s research-practice team and its connection with members of partner schools, I wanted to conduct a project about creative expression with an engaged scholarly approach. This project is primarily based in principles from SAMHSA’s (2014) *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, which outlines the factors requisite to foster a trauma-informed environment, and from the Transforming Rural Experiences in Education (TREE) Logic Model (Mette, et al., 2018). TREE’s approach to creating a trauma-informed environment highlights needs for responsiveness to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), foregrounds the power of focus on student voice (Brown & Flaumenhaft, 2019). Research finds that art methods are widely viewed as accessible ways for young children to communicate, create meaning, and develop social and verbal skills that empower their voices in school (Einarsdottir, 2008; Matthews, 2003). Additionally, art paired with interviewing useful in supporting youth in verbalizing their feelings about school climate in international research, indicating art as a useful tool to engage student voices (Einarsdottir et al, 2009).

However, in art classes that I experienced myself, that I observed in TREE partner schools, and that I read about, art is not maximized as a tool to empower students based on their developmental stages and expressive preferences. Rather, art is typically treated as another

academic subject with outsized emphasis on creating in a specific, end-product-focused manner that is achieved by following directions. I wanted to work with students to think about the process of doing art rather than the final product, and to learn from them and their processes about how best to connect with their voices and ideas to support a trauma-informed environment.

With my preliminary understanding of process art, I decided to develop two multi-week art exploration programs to pilot with students during a month-long internship at TREE partner schools. I conducted research and designed the art program to encourage student empowerment and voice while initiating relationship building through a student-directed classroom structure. I also designed the program to be trauma-informed by focusing on creating an equity-literate approach developed with information gathered through research and interviews with therapeutic professionals.

I conducted research in two classes for five consecutive weeks. Each week, I introduced a new invitation for students with different materials. While students worked, I conducted observations. The students I worked with ranged in age from four to eight. Activities varied in level of structure, materials offered, and status as independent or group activities. Students were asked to compare experiences and were invited to share about the work they created through storytelling each week. I conducted evaluations in the forms of observation, post-activity reflection, and post interviews, which offered me insight to the many unique ways that art acts as a powerful tool to improve the trauma-informedness and power structures of student environments for all types of learners. In the following chapters I will outline the theory and research that informs my project, offer context about the community I worked with, describe the art exploration trials in detail, and review my findings.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this section, I will discuss the theory and research relevant to my project.

Trauma and Trauma-Informedness

Students living in rural areas may be more likely to face adversity and stress due to intersecting challenges present in their communities including poverty, substance abuse, addiction, poor health, reduced economic opportunity, and geographic isolation (Mette et. al, 2018). The impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and trauma in children's ability to develop typically and succeed in school. The presence of ACEs and trauma negatively impact youth wellbeing on many dimensions including physical and neurological health, social health, executive functioning skills, and emotional health (Burke-Harris, 2014). These detrimental consequences of trauma impede immediate classroom success, but they also pose lifelong physical and mental health impairments, reduce longevity exponentially, and tend to generationally reproduce unless the effects of trauma are mitigated and the institutional processes that inadvertently feed the cycle of trauma are interrupted (Tough, 2012). A trauma-informed environment defined by relational support, mental health support, and safety can disrupt the effects of trauma and improve outcomes (Mette et. al, 2018).

Emerging Themes

My project is driven by an overarching goal of exploring how art can serve a role in improving trauma-informedness in schools to mitigate the impacts of ACEs for student in rural Washington County, Maine. Access to recovery services for students in Washington County is complicated by geographic distance and other challenges that I discuss in greater detail in

Chapter three (Washington County, 2018). I centered my research around TREE’s third domain, “Supporting the Whole Child,” looking for ways that art could work to “Empow[er] students” and “Promot[e] social emotional, ethical, and identity development” (Mette et al., 2018). Three primary themes emerged in my research that support my primary objective. These themes included the importance of empowering student voice and expression in equitable ways, focusing on building strong relationships that promote trust and healing, and changing the classroom environment students work in a way that increases student empowerment and educator responsiveness. In the following subsections, I address each of these focuses and their relevance.

Empowering Student Voice and Expression

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) identifies the provision of Empowerment, Voice, and Choice for clients of an organization as a requisite for creating a trauma-informed environment (SAMHSA, 2014). An environment that provides space for empowerment, voice, and choice recognizes clients, who in the school context are students, as the agents of their own progress. This environment also operates with the purpose of empowering clients by giving them agency over their own stories, how they share them, and how they advocate for themselves.

Art serves as one of the “languages of children” (Edwards et. al, 2012). Much of young children’s creative, social, and emotional development comes about most naturally through making art (Edwards et. al, 2012). Drawing, particularly, is widely viewed as a useful, comfortable, and accessible way for children, especially young children, to communicate, create meaning, and develop creative, social, spatial, and verbal skills (Einarsdottir, 2008). Art is a channel through which students develop rich communication skills, and it enables them to

express these visually in a manner that makes sense to them before they have the verbal capacity to share their thoughts with others (Vecchi, 2010).

Like verbal language, art is a process that exists with the central purpose of showing and helping others hear and see in new ways, making it an ideal method for connecting to youth voices (Malchiodi, 2008). Art is a direct line to youth voices in many cases (Coates & Coates, 2006). For students in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, drawing tends to be the most effective and accessible form of communication for children and can thus help them foster other, less developed communication strategies by merging the familiar motor function-based communicative skills like art, with the unfolding ones, providing an accessible form of self-expression that correspondingly aids in fostering still-developing verbal competencies (Coates & Coates, 2006). Though drawing is not a comfortable form of expression for all young people, it is the preferred and most accessible mode of expression for a vast majority of children even as old as nine (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011; Pease, 1986). Gentle (1985) also identifies drawing as a productive approach to drawing out children's shared and familiar experiences, providing an opportunity to articulate experiences to others who may share or have the ability to offer support based on lived and felt experiences.

Art can stand in when people are processing feelings they cannot yet name (B. Simpson, Personal Communication, October 16th, 2019). For people who have experienced trauma, the link between feelings and verbal language to name these feelings can be difficult to access because of a condition called alexithymia that occludes the ability to understand emotional feedback from the body and respond to needs (Van Der Kolk, 2014). People with alexithymia rationalize their personal need-meeting through languages of action, thinking about what they would do in a situation while grappling with how the situation would make them feel (Van Der

Kolk, 2014). Art offers slow processing that taps multiple brain channels, offers new ways to consider feelings, and generates a visual to reflect with, all of which can be helpful to students whose brain chemistry and psychological needs make verbal processing a less accessible pathway to voice (Malachiodi, 2008). Student voice is an essential component of creating trauma-informed, equitable environments for students (Brown & Flaumenhaft, 2019). However, in order to engage the student empowerment that an emphasis on student voice enables, educators need to consider the many channels, not all of them spoken or written, through which student voice emerges, and they need to respond to students' voices where they thrive most.

Responsiveness to student voice is also heavily influenced by attitudes to proper use of language that lead to inequity (Fecho, 1998). Verbal communication is complicated by the privileged position of formal English in United States classrooms (Fecho, 1998). Access to formal English and responsiveness to the explicit language practices that result from it are heavily influenced by student background, and students who do not come from white, middle-class households are typically disadvantaged because there is a decreased likelihood that they have been exposed to formal, explicit language from infancy (Finn, 1999). Teaching formal English language practices critically and valuing the dialects of all students creates a more equitable environment that recognizes that formal English is a "dialect of privilege," and not inherently superior to other manners of using language (Fecho, 1998, p.77). Art invites students to communicate without the pressures of speaking in a certain way (B. Simpson, Personal Communication, October 16th, 2019).

Young children are capable of making vital contributions, and discounting their ideas because children are variably capable of expressing them through adult channels constitutes a deficit perspective of youth (Lim & Lim, 2013). It is vital that educators connect with student

voices according to students' natural orientations because when students feel incapable of communicating through adult means or feel inadequate in their performance, they often withdraw entirely (Matthews, 2003). Students need to feel heard, and in order to hear students, especially young students, my research reflects that adult educators need to change the way they listen.

Relationship Building

In crisis, relational support is the single most essential component to survival (Hawkins, 2020). Strong relationships in the classroom informed by understanding of student experience lead to improved family-school relationships and in turn improved student outcomes (Gonzalez et al., 1993). SAMHSA's principle of peer support draws on the need for strong relationships among students and individuals with common or shared experiences who can build trust to establish environments centered around safety, and hope (SAMHSA, 2014).

Art offers opportunities to develop relationships between students that invite improved school climate and the development of relational support. Coates and Coates (2006) conducted a study to observe the outcomes of children drawing in pairs and found that during the drawing process, participating children studied over the course of preschool to the end of grade one were able, for the duration of the project, to converse with one another while drawing for fifteen to twenty minutes. The contents of drawings typically developed based on common experiences, often subject matter from the classroom or from recess activities. Sometimes, students worked through experiences from home and other non-school contexts and were able to introduce one another to differences in their experiences (Coates & Coates, 2006). Although it was not studied methodically, researchers also found that imaginative scenarios that emerged in drawing

practices transferred to games and social interactions after the conclusion of the activity (Coates & Coates, 2006).

Expanding beyond peers through shared or common experience, relational support in general, especially from adults in the school setting, is invaluable in mitigating the impacts of trauma, helping students feel safe and secure at school, and improving student outcomes (Tough, 2016). Students experiencing toxic stress who experienced close, supportive relationships experienced, on average, a nine-percentage point increase in test scores and significantly improved perceptions of their school climates (Tough, 2016). Before students can be successful at school, they need the safety of secure relationships that weather challenges and disruptions to normalcy (Hawkins, 2020). Furthermore, by building trusting relationships and engaging in sensorimotor activities like art simultaneously, students who deal with toxic stress can begin to practice feeling grounded and connected to spaces and experiences where toxic stress previously overwhelmed processing, thus connecting students more deeply with the physical and emotional sensations they feel (Van Der Kolk, 2014). This grounding allows students to be present emotionally and intellectually.

Art also allows children to show experiences to others in a way that is entirely theirs (Malachiodi, 2008). A risk to children's authority over their expression in the relationships between adults and children is the frequency through which adults with benevolent intentions shift the focus away from the child's needs and re-focus on adults' desired outcomes for children (Souers, 2016). Making art gives children a product that is unique to them and allows them to express themselves in their own way before engaging with someone else and that person's perspective. Listening should be a teacher's first action in engaging with a student who is trying

to express his/her/themself, and art provides students more ways to be heard and ensures that students are not interrupted in their initial processing (Souers, 2016; Malachiodi, 2008).

Cultivating a Student-Centered Environment

The transmission model of education is standard in United States public schools. The transmission model, also referred to as the “banking model,” places the teacher as the central, controlling figure in the classroom and positions students as the responsible party for practicing, replicating, and recalling information imparted by the teacher figure (Miller, 1996). There are many reasons to reject the transmission model in favor of a more progressive approach. The transmission model is inequitable because students do not have the same experiences or cultural capital and therefore have different needs in order to learn successfully (Dewey, 1934; Bourdieu, 1977). Students who come from white, middle class backgrounds arrive at school with the cultural capital to succeed and benefit from unearned advantages and assumed superiority (McIntosh, 1988; Gorski, 2011). Students who come to school dealing with challenges, trauma, and/or lack of cultural capital face the consequences of deficit perspectives that blame them for their lack of advantage, too often sending students in this situation the message that school is not a place for them (Gorski, 2011).

The transmission model fails to liberate students because it does not invite critical awareness or individual thinking (Freire, 1970). SAMHSA’s principle of Empowerment, Voice, and Choice emphasizes the importance of dismantling unjust and unempowering power differentials such as the teacher-student relationship present in the transmission model and cultivating freedom by empowering clients to direct their own decision-making, personal trajectory, and aspirations. Educators must offer students opportunities to interact with information in a manner that allows students to make sense of stimuli and understand its relation

to their lives and knowledge bases (Dewey, 1938). Creating art is a process at the core of how children connect with information and understand it (B. Simpson, Personal Communication, October 16th, 2019). Because art is such a natural processing tool for students, it is a valuable way for them to direct their learning and to bring in their experiences in a way they understand.

The progressive “transformational model” of education offers an empowering alternative to transmission (Johnson, 2010). A more holistic approach, transformational teaching emphasizes the social-emotional health of students and whole-person pedagogy centered on love (Narve, 2001). A pedagogy of love supports a classroom environment that nurtures students as individuals and sustains an environment of learning in community (hooks, 2003). Giving students agency in a classroom filled with supportive, equity-literate adults gives them an opportunity to direct how their learning looks and their process of approaching it in an environment that supports and respects their autonomy. Autonomy and a sense of control is particularly important for students who have experienced trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2014). Placing students at the control center of their working environment offers security and empowerment that increasing adult control in the setting cannot (Tough, 2016). Art provides space to practice assuming control over a situation in a fully child-centered way (Malchiodi, 2008). Creating art additionally provides a place to experience multi-leveled feelings of agency in determining how a creative process will take place, what materials will be used, what will be created, and what will happen with the finished product (Malchiodi, 2008).

The practice of active and intentional listening by adults supports the development of a student-centered space (Vecchi, 2010). Student centering offers a sense of control and empowerment that improves outcomes for students who experience toxic stress, making the classroom a safer place for them (Tough, 2016). Listening to students supports safety by

rejecting deficit perspectives and replacing them with openness to understanding and working together to meet student needs (Souers, 2016). Teachers often deal with feelings of fear, dysregulation, and concern at students' behavior by trying to command more control when in reality students' unwanted behavior is an attempt to feel they are capable of being heard and seen (Souers, 2016). By listening, and by placing students in charge of how they wish to be heard, students have the freedom to express themselves through regulated behaviors and creative forms when they feel able rather. This provides a productive and empowering alternative to the feeling that funneling energy into feeling noticed by the person "in charge" of them is the most direct way to achieve self-expression.

Equity and Equity Literacy

Although the demonstrable benefits of art education apply to both rural and urban students, rural schools are less likely to have adequate funding for art programming (Vargas, 2018). Rural areas make up an enormous portion of the United States, yet they are repeatedly under-resourced and the unique needs of rural students can be better understood through place-based research on rural areas (Biddle et. al, 2018). The purpose of this project is to look at ways to meet the needs of rural students through increased access to art programming, but in order to do so the art programming must be quality and serve student needs. In order to do this, the programming must be grounded in both the theory and practice of equity literacy. My primary goal of exploring how art can support trauma-informed environments for students and my supporting goals of empowering student voice and expression, supporting relationship building, and cultivating student-centered environments cannot succeed without adherence to equity literacy.

The presence of art as a tool for self-expression and student empowerment relies on the implementation of art as a method to scaffold and engender equity rather than as a detached supplement to inequitable systems. There is no substitute for equity, and, therefore, equity and a focus on justice must be the focus of all action in schools if programming in the form of art or other means is to be useful to students. Paul Gorski (2014) introduces the concept of Equity Literacy, which updates and expands prior movements toward cultural competence and proficiency to include and involve students in action-based, critical dialogues about representation and power in classroom materials as part of working to prevent the discrimination of any student in the classroom setting. Equity literacy intentionally assumes nothing about any students' needs based on one aspect of their identity and acts against bias in schools through responsive measures and higher-order pedagogies including advanced, even aspirational expectations for all students. This approach also acknowledges that there is more to equity achievement than cultural celebration and recognizes that culture is not the only element that students bring to the classroom setting. An equity-literate approach is a strengths-grounded way to address systemic and individual challenges that students may face such as heterosexism, ableism, racism, and classism. Because equity exists at the core of educational reform, I approached creative activities with students with the intention of using them to connect with needs and improve the communication and climate in schools. The goal of these activities was to consider additional ways to connect students to the support for emotional health and success that they are entitled to.

Chapter Three:

Exploration Methods and Context

In this section I will outline the thinking and design behind the art exploration activities I implemented with students at Jonesport Elementary School. This section includes discussion of community context in Jonesport, trauma-informed methods described by professionals involved in therapeutic practices that influenced my programming design and how these methods influenced me, and a description of my methods. Together, these factors explain my process and reasoning for developing and implementing this exploration with students.

Community Context

Even in the deep freeze of January, the days begin well before dawn in Jonesport, Maine, a beautiful coastal community located just south of the easternmost point in the United States. Nestled beside the ocean and amidst swaths of conifers and large, rolling blueberry barrens that peek out from under the snow in flaming patches of deep red, the community is rural, with a population density of only forty-eight people per square mile. Industry is largely focused around fishing, agriculture, and forestry, which, combined, are responsible for nearly twenty-five percent of the local economy and explain the community's early morning rising (Jonesport, ME). Living for a month in the Downeast community and working in partnership with students, families, and educators in the area was wonderful, and I am immensely grateful to everyone who welcomed me into their community and shared their time and experience with me for this project. Defined by a culture of strength, independence, and neighborly fellowship, the town is tightly-knit in a quintessentially Downeast Maine way.

Also significant is the manner in which the community's mettle is a stalwart force of resistance in the face of the adversity the community faces in multiple forms. Jonesport follows

the trends of Washington county as a whole, which encounters challenges with poverty and public health that have widespread, individualized effects on residents. Washington County as a whole has the lowest life expectancy in the state of Maine for men and a downward-trending life expectancy for women. Nearly sixty percent of youth ages zero to nineteen are enrolled in state-subsidized health insurance coverage plans through MaineCare, but limited access to medical care with extreme scarcities in primary care physicians means that barriers to medical access do not end with affordability. Washington County has a ratio of only thirty doctors per 100,000 people, over twelve percent of people still experience cost barriers to receiving healthcare, and nearly thirty-five percent of residents were unable to visit a primary care physician within the last year at the release time of the last Maine Shared Community Health Needs Assessment in 2018. Washington County is also heavily impacted by the Opioid Crisis, with overdose rates and drug-induced deaths at levels more than twice the state and national averages (Washington County, 2018).

One in four children in Washington County lives in poverty. This rate increases to three in five children in TREE Partner Schools. The 2018 Maine Shared Community Health Needs Assessment reported that 30.6 percent of Washington County residents had experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences to the effect of being a negative social determinant of health. The actual number of people who have experienced ACEs is likely far higher. Accessibility to mental health services to treat the effects of trauma is grim with a ratio of only 1.5 psychiatrists per 100,000 people in Washington County. The effects of this scarcity are demonstrable, with an outsized reliance on emergency services departments for mental health intervention at well over twice the state average. Additionally, 29.2 percent of high school students reported periods of feeling sad

and hopeless for two weeks or more in a calendar year, and one in four Washington County residents experience lifelong clinical depression (Washington County, 2018).

These statistics are significant to the community because with health and economic challenges inevitably comes trauma. Jonesport Elementary School (JES) serves 129 students in grades pre-kindergarten through eight who, to vastly varied capacities, bring their traumatic experiences with them to school. Despite good intentions, policies and limitations within schools, institutions repeatedly fail students carrying trauma and adversity. Additionally, JES' rural setting offers certain challenges to creating an educational environment that provides students equitable access to the opportunities that their peers in more developed areas are advantaged by. Among these opportunities, significantly, are those of the creative nature. Opportunities for expression through art and performance are not available to students in rural communities at the same frequency they are to students in developed areas both because of expense and availability of community organizations able to partner and support programming in schools (Vargas, 2018). Students in rural communities, and indeed those at JES, have access to art classes typically, but not to the breadth of creative enrichment opportunities available in areas with more structural and financial resources in place. One art teacher is shared between JES' pre-K through eight elementary school and the consolidated high school, which limits formal art opportunities.

Students from rural communities are also more likely to have more targeted experiences with language and expression (Finn, 1999). Lower-income students and rural students, especially those from small, tight, communities that encourage a sense common identity achieved by a degree of conformity to joint values, are more likely to be trained to use and respond to implicit language that centers on obedience to established values and norms and leaves little room for

negotiation or individual interpretation (Finn, 1999; Bernstein, 1973; Heath, 1986). Though there is nothing wrong with this style of language, in fact research shows it provides a sense of belonging and comfort among those in contexts that use it, implicit language tends to privilege adherence to collective values over individual narratives and storytelling. In the case of students experiencing adversity who need ways to vocalize their experiences, strategies for self-expression that hinge off of individual experience and interpretation can offer supplementation that allow students to hold the collective belonging aspects of language that are principal to the aspects of their identities that stem from culture and community while also feeling empowered to give breath to the experiences that are defining to their individuality (Heath, 1986).

Students everywhere need more social-emotional learning opportunities (Biddle et. al, 2018). The SEL lens also provides a logical framework to engage the principle of student voice. Especially in an art-based project, the agency to dictate one's own process and a relative sense of control over one's environment is essential to creating a space in which creativity and self-expression can flourish. Although art classes provide contact time with art materials and techniques, the classes rarely provide students the opportunity to explore their individual voice, emotions, and experience through open-ended, self-directed creative opportunities that center students. The art room, like most school contexts, is teacher-centered. My project design was informed by a concentration on the empowerment of student voice and a focus on cultivating a student-centered space.

With the goal of finding means of self-expression that held the multifaceted components of students' identities as a priority, I designed a four-week art exploration for two groups of early-elementary school-aged students and piloted the program as part of a month-long internship at JES. The program took place at two different class times in two different class

organization structures. In the first group, twelve kindergartners participated in the explorations during their regularly-scheduled forty-five minute Friday art class time. The second group, a multi-age “Power Hour” group comprised of ten to fifteen students depending on interest on the day of class met in the last hour of the school day for sixty minutes during an all-school student-driven activity period during which all students in grades pre-K through eight were able to choose an activity to participate in that most interested them. Students in this group self-selected, but no students in either group were required to participate in exploration activities if they did not want to or were not comfortable doing so. This project was conducted as a piece of engaged scholarship, and thus emphasizes partnership, collaboration, and focused communication with research participants. A large part of this process, both to achieve project goals and also to honor the goals of engaged scholarship was giving students the freedom to dictate the trajectory of their creative process once an activity was offered.

The nature, setup, and duration of activities varied between the two classes significantly. Kindergarten’s activities spanned the full forty-five minute duration of the class period, and the class worked in a full group on a single activity. In Power Hour I partnered with two other teachers who also wished to provide activities, so I provided one activity of three stations and worked with three to five students at a time on an activity for approximately twenty minutes. In two of the four weeks the schedule of the other teachers changed and I worked with students in a full group setting for the entire period. Kindergarten activities tended to be built around more structure because the time and traditional class period atmosphere geared student expectations toward a more scaffolded arrangement, while self-selected Power Hour students eager to simply gain more contact time with art materials to create preferred to simply work on their own terms with minimum of the interference that well-meaning adults would likely think of as instruction or

guidance. For the purpose of clarity, I will describe the processes of Kindergarten's exploration and the Power Hour exploration separately.

Professional Influences and Trauma-Informedness

As I considered the design of my project, I reviewed relevant literature and conducted two formal interviews with professionals who use art and storytelling in significant capacities in their professional work. I asked both interviewees the same five basic questions to frame our conversations, and from their initial answers we continued our conversations in greater detail related to their specific specialties. Asking the same questions provided a frame of reference from which to compare the similarities and differences in the ways the two women approached conducting creative therapeutic empowerment work with youth in their respective specializations. The five questions are listed in Appendix One. I first conducted a phone interview with Bodhi Simpson, an art therapist practicing in Waterville, Maine who works privately with individuals ranging in age from young children to adults to process experiences and mental health factors through artistic "directives," as Simpson describes them. Simpson explained that these directives are diverse and client-driven, but that particularly with children, art is a way to support the realization and exploration of one's consciousness and feelings. Simpson's approach to providing art both to initiate verbal processing and to offer the option of internal and sensory processing of experiences significantly influenced my research design and oriented me toward projects that would offer several different levels of verbal engagement. I chose some activities that encouraged lots of verbal exchange while others were designed with the goal of leaving room for dialogue but not requiring any in order for students to participate fully in activities.

Additionally, the perspective of an art therapist influenced my consideration of therapeutic approaches in the art explorations I piloted at JES. My work was driven by TREE's objectives of Trauma-Informedness and Student Empowerment. The flexibility of therapeutic art approaches meets these goals by providing flexibility and a supportive environment to work with materials and practices capable of mitigating the impacts of trauma while maintaining an environment that centers student voice and provides conditions necessary to implement SAMHSA's principles of Empowerment, Voice, and Choice requisite to fostering a trauma-informed environment.

My second interview was with Sue Carroll Duffy, the creator of the *Moving Stories* curriculum, a student voice-driven program that invites students to participate in a multi-leveled, reflective storytelling process individually and in groups. Duffy's structured approach to group creative work, the therapeutic and empowering traits of storytelling, and creative reflection components of her work coincided with my objectives of creating a trauma-sensitive space for artistic expression (Duffy, 2014). In our interview, Duffy commented on the importance of offering students multisensory experiences that engage many learning modalities in order to create an equitable learning environment with options for all types of learners. Additionally, such multisensory experiences, which in the case of Duffy's work includes verbal, motor, and auditory functions, involve the whole body in learning and reflection. This creates greater connectivity across processing systems (Duffy, 2014). This yoking of systems allows children to, as Duffy put it, "take what they need " from their creative processing, enabling them to direct their own exploration of materials and corresponding social emotional learning. With this in mind, I created activities that engaged different sensory functions each week, aiming to target at least two to three modes with each interaction. Some activities were more touch-focused, while

others took on auditory components. All of the interactions involved visual and motor operations. I planned activities to invoke different senses by offering multimedia projects, and I changed the setting of activities--working sometimes in small groups at tables, sometimes on the floor in a large, and sometimes independently. This design allowed students to experiment and compare different ways to use and consider their bodies in their self-expressive practice.

Kindergarten

I began the exploration with JES' Kindergarten class with a loosely-structured pre-measure to assess attitudes toward basic colors. Students were given a sheet of construction-weight paper and asked to split the sheet into two columns. One column was labeled with a smiley face to represent happy, positive feelings and the other labeled with a frowning face to represent sad, negative feelings. Students were then provided crayons in nine basic colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, pink, and black. Students were then asked to sort these colors into the "good" and "bad" categories they created. This process was the students' first introduction in the project to thinking about colors in terms of assigning value and meaning and gave me a cursory idea of trends in students' attitudes toward colors. The activity also gave me an initial read regarding students' comfort placing values on colors, eagerness to use materials, and interest in considering color through a social-emotional learning lens. The table in Appendix 2 shows the students' responses. Names reflected in the table and in the remaining discussion are pseudonyms, chosen by the students, to de-identify them. One student was absent during this initial color-sorting process. All classes in Kindergarten were audio-recorded for field note-taking purposes.

Several distinct trends from this initial survey informed the way I approached color in the following weeks. Almost across the board, students had negative associations with brown and

black. About half of the students also had negative feelings toward orange, and many also disliked yellow. All but one of the students had positive feelings toward red, and many also liked purple. Distinct splits between students of different genders did not emerge in my data collection. I used this information to inform the colors I included in explorations repeatedly. In each interaction I used a palette of different colors and the number and presentation of colors depended on the type of project being done each week (For example, painting and play dough involved presenting colors in vastly different manners), but I made sure to include colors that trended as preferred and non-preferred in each interaction to make observation of the impacts of repeated exposure to colors and the impact of this on tendencies around self-expression possible.

This introductory data collection was also important in beginning to develop a relationship with students in the class, which was an important part of developing a sense of mutual trust that was essential to instituting a safe and comfortable environment for creative work and self-expression. The creation of this environment was also advanced by my presence in the students' school environment over four weeks. During the month I spent at JES, during which I split my time about two-thirds at JES and one-third at the other school, I spent significant time observing students in their classrooms, joining them at recess, participating in school events, and leading after school outdoor enrichment activities. Through this additional time with students, I had more time to build relational trust and to learn about students, how they spend their time at school, and what they are interested in. This helped me to tailor art explorations and individual support to students more appropriately.

Exploration One: Play dough

The first exploration we worked through together after the initial data collection was a play dough activity designed to offer choice in materials used, sensory engagement, and a platform for storytelling if students chose to do so. The class period on this particular day was shortened to thirty-five minutes, reducing our typical time together by ten minutes. Before students arrived, materials were set at stools for each student. Materials for week one can be viewed in Appendix Six. Each student was given a small ball of purple homemade play dough, which had a slightly grainier consistency than store-bought dough as well as a milder odor, subtler color, and slightly crumblier pliability. Materials also included five flat, wooden sticks in assorted colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, a muffin liner filled with pieces of patterned, red paper straws cut into half-inch lengths, a muffin liner filled with plastic beads of assorted colors including purple, black, red, orange, yellow, green, pink, and blue, and a muffin liner filled with natural-finished brown wooden letters. Students were also provided a pair of latex-free gloves to use if they chose in an attempt to create conditions that also allowed students who may have sensory processing differences to engage in creative work in a space that felt safe and comfortable to them as well.

When students arrived, I asked them to choose where they would like to sit. After self-selected seating arrangements, I explained that the materials in front of the students were available for them to use however they liked in the thirty minutes we had to work together. We then had a conversation as a full group for about three minutes during which the group of students determined their own norms and expectations for the activity. This step of the process was intended to initiate mindfulness of boundaries as an important part of holding creative space and to empower students to think about what they need from a space in order to feel comfortable,

safe, and respected. By framing this as a group conversation, students were able to communicate these needs to their peers while taking time to listen to ways in which they can work in coalition to create such a space for everyone participating.

I started the conversation by asking students “What do you think will make our time together using play dough safe and fun?” When I asked this, students immediately raised their hands to share insights about how to use materials, such as “keep the play dough on the table,” and “Use your stuff[] and not other people’s.” The students also had thoughts on how to inhabit space in a safe and respectful way. One student declared “everyone’s body needs its own space so you gotta keep your body in your own area.” Another student raised the issue of “us[ing] walking feet” in the art room to ensure everyone’s safety and the wellbeing of surrounding art projects. Students also raised points regarding the social health of the room such as “be nice to other people,” and “ask before you take stuff from other people or touch their things.” Through this conversation we established a working list of student-generated guidelines that stood in place for imposed rules. This set a climate that encouraged and valued meeting everyone’s needs based on what was expressed rather than foisting restrictions on student autonomy.

Once a joint set of norms was established, students began to work independently. I assumed an active observer role, responding to students who asked for more materials or wished to show me what they made, but I intentionally did not initiate interaction with students during work time in an effort to avoid disrupting students’ creative processes. During the course of the remaining thirty minutes, I walked around and responded to student requests and conversed with students who solicited narratives about their work. Students were free to work independently or to converse with others, and during my observations I also paid attention to tendencies toward collaboration or individual work among groups of students and across gender differences.

Students also self-directed their consumption of materials. I provided enough play dough that students could use up to two times the amount they were initially offered, if they chose to.

Additional play dough was only offered when students asked if more was available. I did this in an effort to encourage students to discern for themselves if they needed additional resources to do their work rather than offering too many choices as the adult in the room in a way that might disrupt the students' processes. I paid attention to how many students asked for more material. Additional components such as sticks and beads were distributed in the quantities available from the beginning of the activity, so if students needed more materials they had to obtain them through sharing and borrowing with classmates.

When five minutes remained in the class period, I asked students to finish working on the step they were working on and then to help me clean up by separating additional materials from dough, returning additional materials to muffin containers, throwing away gloves, and putting dough back in its re-sealable container for another group to use. My methodology behind asking students to help with cleanup was to share accountability for the creative space with students at every step of the process, including cleaning up the space and facilitating the natural, identifiable conclusion of our time together. My logic for creative process accountability, the practice by which I intended to maintain healthy, safe space for expression by coalition maintenance is detailed in Appendix 5. I also hoped to observe how students reacted to the impermanence of the sensory art experience. As we cleaned up we reflected as a group, and I asked the students what it was like to take apart what they made and made note of their responses.

Exploration Two: Group Painting

The second week of art exploration was designed to support students in using painting as a tool for student-empowered social emotional learning. I prepared for the activity by covering a

large space in the middle of the room typically covered by a rug with white roll paper. I taped the paper to the floor to avoid movement and then placed thirteen three-inch pieces of tape in a variety of colors in a circle around the edges of the paper to create seating places for all of the students. I then filled thirteen laundry detergent caps with warm water and placed the cups and thirteen large paint brushes on the table, taking one set to use myself and leaving the other twelve for the students. When students arrived, I sat down on the paper area and asked students to take a cup of water and a brush and to find a place where they wanted to sit on the paper. Once everyone was seated, I explained what we were doing with the paper and took out two sets of tempera cake paints. The paint palettes included two black paints, one red, two dark blues, one light blue, one orange, one pink, one yellow, one green, one purple, and one white paint. I brought only two palettes to work with, which meant I asked much more material sharing of students in the second week than I did the first. Students had autonomy over their own brush and water, but relied on communication and mindfulness of group norm agreements of sharing to access paint.

When I introduced the activity, I first explained that this activity involved more structure than the one we did during the previous week, and that we would spend much of the class working together. I then promised that we would save at least ten minutes at the end of the class to free paint, acknowledging that students would have time to create on their own agenda during the work period. I then laid out the premise of the activity. I asked each student to use the paint to show “what color you are feeling today” and invited them to say a little about why they felt that color if they wished to. I then asked students to pass the paint to the neighbor next to them and say a color they needed a little more of in their day. When they said this color, I asked the student receiving the paint to start with the color the student expressed needing more of before

sharing their own color of the day and what they needed more of. We then discussed group norms again the way we had the previous session. Students brainstormed what they needed to create a safe, comfortable space to work together with paint in, and I repeated what they said back to demonstrate understanding and provide clarity. Once students identified norms, I demonstrated the activity, painting a blue swirl and saying a sentence about what I felt, and then passed the paint to the next student, who painted a big circle of the purple I mentioned needing more of and then took his own turn.

While students painted I observed the levels of attention with which they listened to one another, the colors they used and requested, the shapes and designs they created with paint, their comments on what they created, and their general interest in the activity as a whole. The group painted for a thirty minute duration. When the structured part of the activity ended, I invited the students to free paint for ten minutes. During free painting I observed how students shared materials, what they painted, where on the paper they painted, whether they painted alone or in groups, and which colors they chose. I also listened for storytelling and dialogue between students. The activity concluded with a brief reflection during which I asked the students what it felt like to paint on the big paper, what it was like to talk to each other while they painted, and whether they liked the activity. We then concluded the activity with cleanup, during which each student dumped out their cup of water and placed their brush in the sink.

Exploration Three: Multimedia

The third exploration was designed to build on confidence with materials and personal capabilities that students developed in prior weeks. Due to student absence and unforeseen circumstances, only five students were present during this class meeting, which meant fewer students participated in this experience. I observed how the room dynamic changed as a result of

the group's smaller size. Materials for this exploration were distributed to each student equally and in a uniform style. Unlike the previous explorations, the activity involved no sharing of space or materials. Students were provided a piece of white, heavy-weight paper, a set of oil pastels containing twelve different colors, a pan of watercolors with a small paint brush, and a cup of water. As usual, we followed the routine of having a conversation about group norms, and then I explained that the students were free to use materials however they wished for the class period.

While students painted and colored with the pastels, I observed how they responded to the increased independence the activity provided in comparison to slightly more structured activities previously offered. I also observed the creative methods students employed, their attention spans and engagement levels, and the ways in which they worked collaboratively, if they chose to do so. In the last ten minutes of the class period, I asked students to help with clean-up per the at that point established routine, and we reflected on the experience and what it felt like to paint on a table after painting on the floor, what it felt like to use multiple materials at once, and what it was like to do different kinds of art and how that felt. To conclude, I asked the students to vote for one of the activities we did to repeat for our final exploration. The students voted, and we ended the period.

Exploration Four: Play Dough--Second Interaction

The students in attendance during the third exploration selected play dough as the activity they wished to repeat for our final meeting. I set up the activity with an expanded array of items to use with the play dough. I did this with the intention that after several weeks of practice using materials in a self-directed manner, that they would be equipped to challenge themselves with more options to use. Students were provided with one ball of red play dough scented with

lavender essential oil. I included the oil to add an additional level of sensory engagement to the activity. Materials were given to students in empty plastic egg containers. Materials included the paper straw pieces, colored sticks, beads, and letters that students were provided in the initial interaction. Additionally, students were offered flat, blue marbles, multicolored buttons in assorted sizes, small mirror squares, mini natural finish sticks, plastic gemstones, and small acrylic heart shapes in red and pink. I also offered students gloves again in case of sensory processing sensitivities.

When students arrived, we discussed the activity for the day. We also discussed the group norms for the day. I explained that while students worked in the full group setting, I would interview students individually about their experience with the art exploration. I emphasized that doing an interview was completely optional, and then broke off with the first student volunteer while the rest of the class began working with play dough. Because I conducted interviews during the final class period, I did not observe the students work extensively during the final interaction. I made several observations during transitions between interviews and gathered some information from what students told me during interviews, but my primary focus during this class period was talking with students one-on-one.

My goals entering the interview process were to gather information directly from students to contextualize the information I gathered in my observations and to include students in the engaged scholarship research process as much as possible. I began interviews by asking for verbal consent and explaining generally what I would ask students about and what I would be using their answers for. I then asked students to select a pseudonym. The interview consisted of a more extensive series of *yes*, *no*, or *sometimes* questions and a short series of narrative answer questions. These questions are detailed in Appendix 4. To conclude the interview, students were

offered all of the materials we used throughout the art explorations and were invited to share any other thoughts or to tell me a story using the materials in any way they liked. Some but not all students chose to participate in this portion of the interview. All ten students present in class on the final day of the exploration elected to give interviews. We concluded by cleaning up, and then, due to time constraints, in lieu of full-group reflection, I thanked all of the students for doing art with me, being thoughtful and creative, and helping me with my research. We said goodbyes, and students left for their next activity.

All interviews were conducted in the forty-five minute class period. After collecting interviews, I de-identified subjects and transcribed interviews and narratives using art materials. I then developed qualitative codes into which I categorized responses. Responses were coded based on relatedness to project objectives. Responses that supported objectives were coded within their given category with a positive designation. Responses that were related to objectives but did not support intended outcomes were coded with a negative designation. The codes I used are outlined in Appendix 3.

Power Hour

Power hour activities were less structured than those done in Kindergarten. The nature of the Power Hour group as a multi-age, self-selecting cohort participating in a period scheduled to honor student voice and choice. Up to thirteen students attended Power Hour on a weekly basis. I met with the group four times in total. For two of these meetings, I worked with the full group on a single activity for the entire time. During the other two sessions, I worked with smaller groups for twenty minute periods. I observed Power Hour more loosely, using no pre or post measures. I observed how students responded to a longer period of time during which to create self-directed

art and how this impacted a demonstrable sense of voice and choice rather than working from an intentionally Social-Emotional Learning frame.

Week One: Tempera Paint

The first week, I met with twelve students ranging in ages from four to eight. I set up four egg cartons with red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, white, black tempera paint, and distributed these around the table. Each student was set up with a large-tipped plastic paintbrush, a small cup of water, and a paper towel. I covered three connected tables with black roll paper and drew several large squares with white crayon on each table to provide an enclosed space for students who might be overwhelmed by a larger space. When students arrived with three assistant teachers, teachers asked them to sit in order of age, so the youngest students sat at the far end of the tables and older students.

Next, we had a quick conversation about boundaries with using paint and the students generated their own community expectations for the activity. This conversation was less structured than the group norm setting I did with Kindergarten. After discussing a loose set of expectations, we turned to the activity. I gave very few instructions other than asking that the group follow the norms they brainstormed. The students free-painted for the next 25-45 minutes. I observed how students used materials, how they interacted with each other and with teachers in the room, how they handled sharing materials and workspace, and general engagement with the activity. Students self-determined when they felt finished with the activity and could then move on to a craft set up by another teacher. This arrangement meant that students controlled both how they used materials and how long they participated.

Week Two: Collage

In the second week, I worked with students in small groups of three to five while several other teachers worked on other projects related to an upcoming school event with small groups of similar sizes. My setup work for this activity involved cutting a variety of colored construction paper sheets into small, mosaic-sized pieces. I also cut several sheets of painted paper into small pieces and set out several handfuls of foam shapes in a variety of colors. The art teacher saw the setup and suggested adding a container of rainbow-dyed macaroni pasta for students to glue for an additional 3-dimensional element. I then set out bottles of clear gel glue for students to use, providing enough that each student had their own bottle of glue. I also set out 13-by-9 inch sheets of black construction paper for students to use for gluing bases. This setup, unlike the previous arrangement, involved only partial sharing. Students shared glueable material, but had their own independent workspaces and personal sources of glue so they could work continuously without having to wait for someone else to finish working with materials they needed to use.

The first group I worked with were pre-kindergarten students ages four and five. The next two groups were mixed-age with several older students. Again, I observed how students used materials, how they interacted with each other and with teachers in the room, how they handled sharing materials and workspace, and general engagement with the activity. Due to the organization of the room in stations, students had reduced autonomy over their determination of participation timing. Students could elect to finish early if they wished, but had to sit and wait if they chose to do so because other activities were not open on a flexible time basis. Students were also not permitted to work beyond the twenty-minute station time allotment because other teachers wanted all students to participate in all three available stations. I observed how students

used materials, which materials they used, whether they told stories or worked quietly, how and if they engaged with others while they worked, and their general engagement level.

Week 3: Floor Painting

This activity built on a pre-existing painting space previously used by the Kindergarten class in the class period before. The paper was very gently used with plenty of empty space to fill, and offered an opportunity to experiment with both group art and inter-group art between classes. Again, in week three, I worked in a smaller group with three to five students at a time as students cycled through stations, though several students came and went throughout the class when they completed other projects. I set the area up with brushes, a paper towel, and water for each of the students to use individually, and set out the two pans of tempera cake paints used in the previous section on a table next to the large paper rolled out and taped down on the floor. I also left out a large container of crayon pieces to provide an additional medium option and to offer a choice for students who may feel overwhelmed by the messier aspects of painting. Students were invited to paint freely for about fifteen minutes during their turn at the station. While students painted, I observed whether they worked alone or together, how they responded to a shared space, how they used materials, general engagement levels, and whether or not demonstrable examples of self-efficacy or self-expression emerged as students worked.

Week 4: Drawing and Gluing

Due to unforeseen circumstances at the school, only two students were in attendance during the final week of the exploration with power hour students. Both students were female--one in Pre-K and one in Kindergarten. Because circumstances were unusual and stressful for students, the art teacher and I decided to do a simple activity with the two students and rolled white paper across three tables so students could experiment with using as much or as little space

as they wished. We then set out a large class pack of crayons, which the art teacher reported both students loved to use. This provided the opportunity to observe students using new materials and the impact of unlimited quality materials and their impact on students' creative processing. Part of the way through the period, we offered items to glue and individual bottles of glue for each student, introducing a second medium for the students to experiment with.

When students arrived, they began working and I observed how they interacted with one another, how they interacted with materials, how they interacted with myself and other teachers in the room, and their general engagement with the activity. I also listened to stories that the students told me as they drew and observed when they brought outside objects into their work such as toys and jewelry.

Chapter Four:

In this chapter I present the results of my evaluation for each group, in turn. Focusing on each group separately allows the consideration of trends and deviations in outcomes of the two trials while organizing information in a manner that recognizes the differences in classroom context, test group composition, and program application in the two groups.

Results and Outcomes

I developed the art exploration programs with the JES Kindergarten class and Art Power Hour group with three targeted goals in mind. These goals, as outlined in Chapter two, are to empower student voice through open invitations for expression, to facilitate the development of trusting relationships and peer support, and to center students in the traditionally teacher-centered classroom environment. I evaluated the outcomes of the art explorations in the Kindergarten group and the Power Hour group guided by these goals.

In the next two sections, I will detail the outcomes of the Kindergarten and Power Hour groups, respectively. I will also describe challenges I encountered during the two pilots. To conclude, I will provide a brief summary of common emergent trends between the two groups in my findings based on the three primary goals of this project.

Kindergarten

In my evaluation of the program with Kindergarten students, I was able to conduct ten interviews with students present during the last day of the project trial period to record their experiences with the project and gauge the successful completion of project goals in addition to my own observations throughout the project and student feedback collected in end-of-class reflection periods. The class was participating during regularly scheduled art class time and arrived with an understanding of the period as a class that was part of their normal, expected

school day routine with limited expectations of choice and self-election for participation. All of the students were essentially the same age and worked together in their classroom all day, meaning they brought existing interpersonal relationships, friendships, and dynamics from outside the art class context into it. Each class period, we worked together on a single activity in a large group for the duration of the class period. This allowed a greater amount of time for me to conduct observations and interact with students and provided students a larger arc of time to engage with activities and each other than was possible in the trial with the Power Hour group. My findings surrounding my three primary project goals are shaped by ample time to collect information from this group in three different ways.

Empowering Student Voice and Expression

As I argued in Chapter two, individuals, especially young individuals, have developing capacity and mastery of verbal language. The development of this control of language is impacted by additional situational factors that show up in exceptional ways in the school context such as differences in first language, trauma history, socialization to language, learning styles, and more. In order to consider student voice in an equitable manner that recognizes and takes all student perspectives and experiences seriously because of their unique backgrounds and needs, I intentionally value all forms of student expression equally as examples of student voice. I tried to gather information and feedback through multiple channels of expression in order to not advantage the expression of students adept at spoken or written language over those who found greater success in expression through other channels. To demonstrate this, I intentionally only address outcomes relevant to student voice and expression that are demonstrable through diverse expressive modalities. For example, if a student describes a feeling of empowerment through an interview, another student expressed a similar experience through body language, and another

student illustrated this work in their artistic creation, I consider this outcome significant, and I weigh all three expressions equally. I have not included discussion of trends in outcomes observable only through verbal reports because I do not believe that this is adequately inclusive of all students' expressive abilities.

Student expression and voice was visible in a number of ways throughout the duration of the project. I first observed voice and expression in each class meeting when students outlined their shared group norms. This portion of the program did emphasize verbal communication to an outsized degree in comparison to the other parts of the class, but students found ways to express their needs in the classroom in multiple ways. "I need people to keep their hands to themselves," said *Detective Clifton*, a student who was consistently comfortable communicating verbally, when I asked what students would need to feel safe and comfortable to do art on the first day. *Lillie*, a student more inclined to non-verbal communication who showed visible signs of anxiety when asked to speak on the spot in other situations, demonstrated her need for a low noise level with body language by putting a finger on her lips to make a "quiet" sign, and smiled when I acknowledged her communication by writing "not too loud" on our list of community norms. Developing community norms provided an opportunity to practice advocating for individual needs and empowered students by recognizing these needs through the creation of a list that valued each need equally regardless of how it was expressed.

Student voice also emerged in the ways students used materials. We did not make specific projects during art explorations but rather experimented with how various materials could be used to convey whatever students wanted. Student voice and expression is closely related to another project goal of centering students in the classroom which was particularly evident when students were actively creating. Students universally demonstrated confidence as

they managed full control of their setting. Students determined what they needed from a given activity and practiced using activities in ways that served them.

During the two play dough explorations, two female students, *Sparkles* and *Poppy*, created characters and built a little world for their constructions to play together in. When I walked by, the students showed no interest in sharing what they made with me, but demonstrated intense focus on acting out a recess conflict with their characters very similar to a situation I observed earlier in the day on the playground. These students used the materials available to them to recreate a social scenario that they needed support in processing. Through the open-ended and self-directed setting, *Sparkles* and *Poppy* were able to determine what they would use the materials to create. Then, through both physical modeling with the dough and accoutrements involved in the activity and through verbal dialogue with one another they were able to work through unresolved social conflict.

As Kindergartners, social skills and interpersonal relationships are very much areas of learning that are in process. The students expressed their interpretation of a situation they were learning to navigate and practiced addressing it in a way they understood without outside influences shaping their responses in a way that could disrupt their understanding of the situation as they experienced it. If the students had talked through the scenario with a teacher, they would have to remember and describe the scenario using their developing vocabularies, which particularly in Kindergarten are heavily impacted by language exposure opportunities in early childhood (Finn, 1999). With art materials, the students could recall their experiences at their own pace and supplement their verbal processing with visible and tangible implements to aid their recall and communication in the ways they needed.

Many students also engaged in visual storytelling. This was particularly evident in painting and drawing activities during which students illustrated the actions of their stories subjects in real-time rather than creating static depictions and then telling stories from them. *Goofy* illustrated this in his final interview.

I'm making a snake roller coaster with green. The green is the track. [*Draws a long, twisting line with green.*] Red means it is going faster. [*Quickly moves a paintbrush dipped in red across the paper and over the green line.*] Yellow means it is going slow now. [*Slowly illustrates a deceleration with yellow.*] Now I'm painting backwards to show the slow the orange means we are going backwards on the rollercoaster. This blue is little because that is where the roller coaster stops. It is the end.

The open-ended opportunity to create enabled *Goofy* to tell and demonstrate how the rollercoaster he envisioned worked. Art oriented more toward a final product which is common both at JES based on my observations and in art classrooms across the United States does not provide the same opportunity to show thinking. Rather, it demands that students show a singular snapshot of multi-leveled thinking in the most attractive way. Open-ended, process-based approaches allow students to think through each level of what they wish to express and places emphasis on thinking over conclusions by allowing others to better understand the intellectual course a student follows as they make things. I also saw the power of illustrating thinking when students expressed their emotions by choosing colors that represented them and painting on the floor. Expressions of "I'm angry" were emboldened by fast, sweeping strokes of black and red, while students who felt calm tended toward slow, winding designs. Illustrating process repeatedly offered a greater number of avenues to communicate, expanding the individual's

toolbox for expression to include visual elements like speed, boldness, color concentration, and noise and texture making that help clarify what they meant.

Self-directed art also provided students opportunities to challenge the boundaries they felt limited by in the normal classroom setting. *Phillingtonbuttface* had a special interest in the medical field that he described repeatedly through an interest in death and corpses. I noticed *Phillington* processing bodies and death for at least a little while each class. It stood out to me that at the beginning of the four-week exploration, he typically became very quiet and shielded his work from others when he drew injured figures or molded bodies out of dough and slowly took limbs off of them while making sawing and whirring sound effects under his breath. As the weeks progressed, *Phillington* became more open about his creations, sometimes pulling me or peers aside to show off “dead guys” and “a pile of guts” he made. In his final interview, I asked him what his favorite part of the four-week project was and *Phillington* replied,

I like play dough. I get to make dead bodies. I’m not allowed to make dead bodies in my class but I want to learn about surgery and stuff because that is my dream.

I’m not going to be able to do that unless I have dead bodies so it’s good I can make them in art so I can learn those stuffs and save people someday.

Phillington understood being comfortable with death and injury as essential to becoming a doctor and used his creative space to process these realities and reflect on his understanding of them. He also, as demonstrated by his hiding his work, had come to understand this curiosity as inappropriate for the regular classroom setting. In the normal classroom environment, *Phillington’s* interest in “blood stuff” and “dead bodies” was dismissed as inappropriately morose, and Kindergarten science lacked a place to channel his interests in medicine. The self-directed creative setting allowed his voice to come through because he could choose a specific

personal interest to direct his learning around and because it allowed him to process and draw connections between the interests that others found startling or taboo and the wider picture and broader goals they connected to. The result of this was a feeling, as *Phillington* reported in his interview, that he was doing important work and contributing actively to his personal vision and aspirations.

The multi-sensory component of art was also useful to students. *Detective Clifton*, a student whose communicative preferences tended toward verbal processing, was immediately comfortable expressing himself by speaking, but could do so with less hesitation and with a greater level of detail when he could physically manipulate materials like play dough or scribble with a crayon while he spoke. Having someone listen intently was very important to *Detective Clifton*, and when he had my undivided attention or the attention of a classmate, he often got so excited that he was unable to speak because he began moving quickly and waving his arms. When he could squeeze dough or move crayons or paint, the excess energy as a result of excitement had a place to go and *Clifton* was able to express what he wished to verbally. A combination of sensory grounding in the way he used art materials and affirmation that he would be listened to as long as he needed was what *Detective Clifton* needed to feel secure and confident in his self-expression.

Other students simply needed multi-sensory engagement in order to feel confident using materials. “I can’t make anything with this unless I know what it tastes like,” said *Phillingtonbuttface* as he took a small bite of (taste-safe) play dough. “It’s yucky,” he said. I think I will make a snake. On another day, a group of students asked if they could paint their hands. “I want to know what the paper feels when I paint on it” said one of the students. “I just want to know if it tickles,” said another. Young students do not simply understand materials

through descriptors or visual inputs such as how the material looks. When students were able to engage multiple sensory channels in their creative work, I noticed they participated with more depth and focus than when less sensory input was available. They also demonstrated more free and relaxed body language, smiled and laughed more, and were more inclined to share their work with myself and others. Multisensory engagement allowed a deeper level of processing and more understanding of how students could use materials to express themselves. Multisensory exploration was also an expression in and of itself as it allowed students to process curiosities and questions about materials and the inherent consequences that came with them. Play dough smelled good, but it tasted bad. With this information, *Phillington* decided to make a snake. Painting hands “tickles and feels like so much fun,” according to *Oopabuckakale*, but came with the consequence of blue-stained hands and a sticky sensation that *Oopabuckakale* found unpleasant. This sensory exploration invited student voice by allowing students to use materials as they wanted to explore what they wanted to know about the way they worked and felt while working.

Throughout the explorations, I observed Kindergarten students benefiting from opportunities to express their needs in a vast number of ways. Students showed and reported increased security, comfort, and interest in creative expression when they were involved in the process of determining classroom norms. In an environment that they felt valued in, the students were able to focus more directly on the materials they were offered, and they found original ways to connect with what was going on with themselves and one another and to communicate in new ways. As students engaged their voices through art, I watched them build confidence in advocating for themselves, discovering new ways to practice understanding themselves and their needs, and a collective sense of increased agency over the space. By the fourth week, the novelty

of students understanding their voices as the principal element of the classroom space developed into observable confidence in their selfhood. Through the students' practice expressing their voices, they achieved the ability to find their own paths to rich and vibrant storytelling, intent experimentation with materials, and individual choices and preferences.

In the final interviews, all ten students who I interviewed reported that making art made them feel good, and all but two interviewees affirmed that their ideas were important. "Art makes me feel good because I get to have a lot of fun and I get to do a lot of stuff I never knew I could do before," reported *Tyler the Red Power Ranger*. *Oopabuckakale* painted a sheet of paper pink when I asked her how she felt doing art. "Pink is my favorite," she said, "and [when I make art] I get pink power. That means I get to make the whole world be pink." Whether through questioning the purpose of rules, processing social dynamics, working toward ambitions for the future, using the sensory components of art to strengthen their voice, unlocking previously unrealized capacity, or taking ownership for a new vision of the world, art was a powerful tool for the students to practice hearing themselves and their peers in vivid relief.

Building Relationships

Relationship building is linked to student expression because listening to understand students is a key part of fostering strong and meaningful connections with young people that support trust and healing. Art proved a meaningful way to listen to the Kindergartners and for them to understand each other. When interviewed, nine out of ten students reported that art helped adults understand them, and seven out of ten confirmed that art helped their classmates understand them. Seven out of ten interviewees also said that they felt they could say things with art that they did not know how to say in any other ways.

Students picked up on how it felt to engage with those around them through art and described feelings reflecting empowerment and meaningful interpersonal connections. “My favorite part of all of this was when we painted on the floor because we got to say how we feel and then talk about what colors we need with other people and show them,” reported *Lobster* when I asked him which part of doing art explorations was his favorite in a concluding interview. This surprised me because *Lobster* whispered to himself when his turn came during the activity period, murmuring about feeling angry and wishing his day had more yellow in it as he swept long strokes of black paint across the section of paper in front of him. Although he was observably uncomfortable, *Lobster*’s strong emotions were evident as he moved the brush across the paper over and over again. When the student sitting next to *Lobster* took the brush, he placed a hand on *Lobster*’s shoulder and drew a large yellow swirl next to *Lobster*’s knee. As soon as the yellow paint touched the paper, I watched *Lobster*’s body relax and his face change from a distressed grimace to a soft smile.

The two students successfully communicated with one another through art--one expressing painful feelings and a need for support, and another communicating a desire to help and using resources available through art to attempt to provide relief. Describing his experiences through colors to his peers provided a new way for *Lobster* to express himself and enabled a meaningful connection with a peer that *Lobster* recalled as a favorite moment several weeks later. Although it was the part most observably difficult for him, *Lobster* reported enjoying the talking component of the activity in particular and reported affirmatively when I asked him if colors helped him show his feelings.

Color in general was a useful way for students to rationalize their feelings. One hundred percent of interviewees affirmed that they could use color to express how they felt. During the

floor painting activity, all students participated in some capacity whether mostly relying on verbal expression, primarily focusing on expression through painting, or falling somewhere in between, and all of the students listened attentively while other students shared. One student, *Sparkles*, asked to do a painting activity again during her final interview. When she started painting, she naturally described the colors she used in terms of her associations with them.

Blue is sad. Blue makes me feel sad because sometimes I miss my mom and dad and it reminds me of that. Red makes me feel mad and sometimes my sister makes me feel mad. Orange makes me feel kinda happy. Yellow makes me feel happy. Green makes me feel sad because sometimes my Dad stays on the boat and it makes me feel sad. But the yellow makes me feel happy because I always have my Dad's Teddy Bear that he used to have when I miss him. Purple makes me feel mad because sometimes my dog gets on my back and when he gets on my back outside I fall in a big, muddy puddle. Brown makes me feel a little bit happy and a little bit sad. Black makes me feel SUPER mad. It is way more mad than the other ones.

Even multiple weeks after the initial exploration, *Sparkles* still found painting and identifying feelings through colors was a helpful way to express her feelings and to reflect on how her relationships with her family made her feel. Normally very quiet and not eager to talk to adults, she also felt comfortable sharing these feelings with me and another student waiting to be interviewed, which contributed to the building of trust between myself and *Sparkles* and the other student and *Sparkles* because we were able to listen to her in the way she felt comfortable and empowered to express herself.

Relationship building through collaboration was also common throughout the explorations. Collaborative relationship building is evident in the aforementioned example of

Sparkles and *Poppy* processing a recess conflict together with play dough. It is also present in numerous instances in every activity during which students elected to pair off or worked in small groups to make shared creations or tell stories together. Students sometimes included me in telling stories or making things. As they did this, they practiced feeling listened to and expressing themselves to others while they showed me and/or their peers what to do or told their stories. I experienced a particularly clear example of this with *Detective Clifton* during our final interview, during which he wanted to show me how he was using play dough.

This is play dough. You can use it to make different stuff and I liked that. I can use it to tell different stories if I want to--I will show you. Can you help me? We will make a spider. These sticks will work for the legs. And this long one is where the spider web comes out of his butt to make the web. I will stick it under his belly. When spiders want to do something they shoot out their web.

Detective Clifton recognized that he could tell stories using art materials, and took this a step further by sharing the story and the building process with me. Creating shared experiences through art in this way offers points of connection that can bolster relationships between both students and educators.

Students also used art to forge their own paths to connection. During the multi-media activity, *Tyler the Red Power Ranger*, typically a quieter, more reserved student who in past activities participated independently and for a short duration of time or not at all immediately got to work creating a series of circles and small squares on his paper with oil pastels. He filled the shapes in with different colored watercolor paints and used colored masking tape to affix his painting to his shirt. *Tyler the Red Power Ranger* then turned to a classmate sitting next to him and whispered “turn me on,” pointing to one of the circles on the paper. When the classmate

touched the circle, *Tyler* sprang out of his seat and began mechanically walking around the classroom, pretending to be a robot. As a robot, *Tyler*'s reserved personality transformed as he spoke with all of his classmates and began asking me questions. "Beep bop! Do you like my gears?" he asked me before approaching a group of boys who had eagerly begun creating their own robot drawings and taping them to their shirts. When the group finished their "robot boards" and started walking around the room laughing together and pressing buttons to make each other do things, I saw *Tyler* interacting with his male peers with a sense of ease and visible inclusion that I had not yet observed in the art setting or in any other school contexts. With art, *Tyler* developed a role to play that made it feel safe for him to try different social approaches and connect with peers over shared interest in an activity that allowed them to do imaginary play together. The role playing also made *Tyler* feel confident enough to talk with me and ask me (albeit mostly silly) questions, which he was not previously comfortable doing. In his final interview, *Tyler* spoke to relationship building. "It felt good because sometimes I need help," *Tyler* said, "and when I do art people can help me."

I saw many other examples of students connecting with one another through imaginative play scaffolded by access to art materials. In one instance during the first play dough exploration, I watched two male students connect over a shared aspiration to become bakers. "I want to be a cupcake maker when I'm a grownup," said *Little Dude* and he handed *Tyler the Red Power Ranger* a "cupcake" he molded out of dough and decorated with beads and popsicle sticks. "Yum!" said *Tyler* as he pretended to eat the cupcake, "Now I'm giving you one of these cookies I made." The two boys spent the rest of the class period working together to make different baked items. They set up an imaginary store and prepared for customers. In doing so, they worked together on a shared interest and built confidence in their collaborative abilities,

preemptively solving problems they anticipated in their store. “We are out of flour and I have to make more cupcakes! I need your help!” *Tyler* shouted at one point. *Little Dude* replied, “here, you can have some of mine!” and broke off a chunk of his dough to share with *Tyler*. Working with art materials provided a way for the students to create a scenario to practice collaborative problem solving. This practice then builds competence in problem solving and interpersonal conflict resolution with applications to non-imagined scenarios that students may face, and builds the students’ relationships by cultivating their confidence in their shared ability to work through situations together.

The students involved remembered feelings of connection weeks later in their concluding interviews. Both *Tyler the Red Power Ranger* and *Little Dude* mentioned their play dough bakery as a favorite moment of the art explorations in their final interviews, specifically mentioning how much they liked doing the activity together. *Little Dude* also connected with me using play dough and past positive experience using it as a tool for connecting.

This is when I get to make cupcakes. I do it with my friend and we have fun together and I think you will have fun too. Smell it--it smells like a cupcake. First you make it like this and then you add stuff to the top. I’m using the straw pieces and I’m putting candles in it. I picked a G letter for the top. Here is the one I made earlier. It has an M for Meg because that is your name and it is your cupcake. Now you have two cupcakes to eat.

Little Dude recognized that exploring his interest in baking by acting it out with play dough was a way to connect with his peers and saw it as something to continue sharing. This outcome was particularly promising because in addition to a one-time connection through art with a peer that had potential to grow in the future, *Little Dude* transferred something that led to positive feelings

of connection in one scenario to another context, demonstrating that he saw creative processing as a tool to use for connection in a more generalized setting.

The outcomes related to this goal, which I have outlined above with relevant examples that illustrate the outcomes, succeeded in working toward my objective of providing support for relationship building between students and their peers and between students and adults in the school community. I saw productive outcomes in several patterns which included finding connection with others through creative measures that helped students communicate their feelings and ideas in accessible ways, connection through teaching others and showing ideas using art materials, connection through imaginative collaboration using art materials, and connection by using strategies practiced with art materials to engage with others in new ways. Each of these outcomes is supported by student reports of increased feelings of closeness with others and feelings of empowerment as well as observations that support these reports. These outcomes, when sustained by continued opportunities for students to work with open-ended creative invitations for coalition can improve school climate by strengthening students' bonds to one another, and can create a trauma-informed space by building opportunities for peer to student and adult to student support into the framework of the school day. As outlined before, these relationships disrupt the impacts of trauma on students and their individual trajectories.

Cultivating a Student-Centered Environment

In efforts to facilitate a trauma-informed creative space, I worked to center students as the agents of the classroom and the creative functions happening within it. Though art explorations were not a directed therapeutic approach to trauma, the same principles of prioritizing the needs of affected individuals by challenging ingrained orders of power in spaces like the classroom that are meant to serve students apply. Though student centering was not always comfortable or

intuitive for other adult figures in the classroom, particularly with very young students, I observed tremendous benefits for student creativity, engagement, and empowerment when the social climate of the room shifted from a lateral focus on instruction and obedience to a dynamic approach to active listening, mutual respect, and individualized approaches to learning and expression.

Student voice and student centeredness are inextricably joined as one cannot truly exist without the other. This shines through in the following examples of the outcomes I observed in the student-centered creative space in which art explorations took place. The previously described practices through which Kindergarten students determined classroom norms contributed to the cultivation of a student-centered space in addition to promoting student voice. Once students established norms for the space in which they worked, they also had the final say in whether or not they participated. Unlike the regular classroom setting, which typically demands student attention and participation, art explorations were entirely optional because the benefits of creative expression are moot if students do not wish to take part. Electing not to participate was the chosen form of engagement for two students on two separate occasions. The word “no” is such an important part of protecting personal agency and respecting personal boundaries and needs. The adult sector of the world struggles with the idea that “no means no,” and perhaps this is a consequence of the reality of very few circumstances in which children get to practice refusal in the school setting. Creating a student-centered environment, for me, required recognizing students’ communications of ‘no’ and ‘I don’t want to’ as valid responses and the end of a conversation.

In the first week of art explorations, student *Big Moose* put his head on the table next to his play dough and remained there for the full class. When I checked in with him, he said “I’m

tired, and I wish it was still lunch, and I don't want to do this." *Big Moose* communicated that the space he was in was not meeting his needs or wants. In the student-centered environment, *Big Moose* was allowed to prioritize what his body told him he needed in the way he was most able to with the resources available to him. In this outcome, *Big Moose* practiced creating personal boundaries, taking time for self-care, and self-advocacy, expressing himself without a creative process but in a way that was equally valid and real. Creative work requires deep processing that can feel genuinely exhausting, can ask a lot of individuals, or can just not be what feels right at a given time, and a student-centered environment comes about when students have the power to determine what feels right for them and to participate, or abstain, in the way that fulfills their needs at a given time.

Part of creating the student-centered environment involved disrupting the ways that the classroom was often structured to focus on adult control. Students chose where they sat and with whom. We tried sitting and moving in new ways, painting on the floor one week instead of at our seats, and moving freely through the room at any point during class. By the third week, I noticed students making more diverse choices with their flexible seating. *Big Moose* started doing his painting under the table, and *Little Dude* found the individual space he needed at a separate supply table. Mostly, students used flexible seating to talk to and collaborate with many different students throughout the class period, whereas previously they could only work with one or two. This shift also allowed adults in the room to join students in a more direct way, sitting among them so they were easier for students to approach.

Students directing their own work in addition to their choices around participation yielded positive impacts as well. During art explorations, students had full control in making decisions around when they were done working, if they wished to share their work with others,

and who, if anyone, they worked with. At first, I noticed students were unfamiliar with the invitation to use the classroom time and space however they chose and frequently asked what they were supposed to do or if they were allowed to do what they were planning. Some students even assumed they had missed directions. However, as class periods progressed, students gained confidence. I observed happy expressions and laughter, deep focus, and detailed work more and more as the weeks progressed. Students repeatedly responded positively to opportunities for independence during end-of-class reflection time and in final interviews. “It felt good because there were lots of choices for what to do like paint and color,” reported *Lillie* in her final interview. Another student, *Doodles*, reported “I liked that I got to try everything my way, and it was ok that they were different because sometimes things are different. Doing all the different arts felt AMAZING. That means good.” Nine out of ten final interviews emphasized opportunities to make choices as one of students’ favorite parts of doing art, demonstrating positive responses to a student-centered environment among students.

Power Hour

The Power Hour group offered a trial of the explorations with more variables at play. Because students worked in three stations most classes and the students present varied greatly from week to week, interviews were an untenable approach to data collection. The continuity from week to week and the amount of time I worked with each student in the station system was insufficient to lay the groundwork for attempting the interview process. The station system in which I worked with the Power Hour students also meant that formal reflection opportunities with students were limited. I was able to speak casually with small groups of students on occasion, but the formal, reflection rituals that were a natural part of the Kindergarten group’s

routine were not possible with the Power Hour group. Because these additional sources of evaluative information were unavailable for research purposes in the Power Hour group, my evaluations are based exclusively on informal feedback from students during activities and my observations of students working.

Additional differences between the groups that resulted in differences in my approaches to the two groups were the mixed ages of the Power Hour group and their self-election to participate in art enrichment. The mixed-age group offered the opportunity to observe how students of different ages interacted with open-ended art and with their peers during the process. The self-elected status of students offered an interesting perspective because the Power Hour setting was supposed to prioritize student voice by allowing students to select their own electives for one hour on several consecutive Friday afternoons. This meant that students arrived at the class with an established interest in creating art. The setup of Power Hour centered student choice in a way that already focused on students' preferences, at least in theory, more than the typical classroom setting by allowing them to choose what to participate in. I quickly noticed that the amount of control and choice students had in which activities they wanted to do tended to end with picking a classroom to spend their time in, but students still had more initial input into the way they spent their time than they typically would during academic time. For the purpose of my evaluation of art explorations as a tool for student voice and disrupting the adult-controlled dynamics of traditional classroom settings, this was interesting because it offered a graded scale of classroom control dynamics to observe. With Kindergarten, I could observe how students expecting a completely adult-controlled environment responded to open-ended art. The Power Hour group offered an opportunity to observe an environment that was intended to be more student-centered and to look at how existing student choice measures already in place

approached student empowerment. In observing this, I could look at how and where these measures were already resulting in successful outcomes, and where room for significant growth persisted.

Empowering Student Voice and Expression

Students in Power Hour demonstrated significant comfort using art to tell stories and express themselves. *Ellie*, a second grader, told me a story about the dogs hunting for treasure she collaged during the gluing activity. *Rowan*, a pre-K student, was excited by the opportunity to choose his own methods and made up a story about a caterpillar he was creating. “I can make anything I want and I can use any of these stuffs,” *Rowan* told me. “It feels really fun and really good...I made a caterpillar! His name is Borkus, and he is gonna eat you!!” *Rowan’s* story continued and developed as he glued pieces to his collage. Students thrived when they felt they could choose how to use materials that typically came with directions and limits, reporting excitement at possibilities and the chance to choose what to do. Students’ storytelling demonstrated a deep level of engagement with what they were creating.

Student expression also came through in the act of making art itself. *Ethan*, age 6, considered gender identity and gender norms when he painted. About ten minutes after he started painting, *Ethan* called me over to his spot and told me

I really like to paint. Painting is for girls, but I think boys can paint too, and I like doing it so I picked it for Power Hour. I want to use pink, but if I get it on my shirt my dad will get mad at me because it is a girl color and I am a boy, so I am just going to be very careful.

Painting offered this student an opportunity to enjoy an activity that he learned was contrary to his gender role and taught him to question the arbitrations of gender at an early age. Painting also

gave him an opportunity to experiment with colors that the construction of gender relevant to the student in his experience deemed off-limits. *Ethan* illustrates one of many reasons that students need space where they are allowed to try experiences and explore aspects of themselves that for a variety of reasons and situational factors may be off-limits in other settings.

The student-centered environment, detailed more below, also promoted student voice. Students were able to use materials however they wanted within their space, which meant they had full control over how they connected with their voice. They could paint a realistic image, or they could experiment with color, texture, and technique. One of the assistant teachers told me the class typically chose a famous artist to copy. She reported that typically students were high-energy, distracted, and tended to misuse materials, sometimes eating them or making large messes. The art exploration lacked a product, focusing instead on the process of independent exploration of painting and focusing on letting students use materials in the way they wanted to or needed to on the particular day. Students also helped develop the expectations for how the materials would be used, determining sharing practices, the noise level of the station, whether or not they wanted to share their work and/or a story with others, and when they were finished. I noticed that as students developed a sense of ownership for the space, they felt more comfortable asking for more or different materials, increased ability to resolve conflicts independently, and more frequent and vivid storytelling.

Relationship Building

Relationship building during power hour developed much in the same way it did in the Kindergarten group. As students worked creatively, they became increasingly comfortable using their art to interact with peers and adults in the room. Generally in the Power Hour group, art

worked as a jumping-off point for verbal expression, as students in the group all tended toward verbal expression as their preference over other modes.

During the collage activity, talking about her art helped *Doodles* start a conversation with me that evolved into a discussion about topics beyond art. Our conversation began with *Doodles* explaining how she glued the pieces she was working with three-dimensionally, and how she chose which items she wanted to glue. “This one is pink! I’m using it because it’s my favorite color,” she began. As she continued to work, conversation topics shifted from the structure she created to her life outside school. *Doodles* told me about her changing life at home and how the changes made her feel.

You know, I have a new baby and a new daddy at my house. It is fun but I miss when my mumma had time to be with me more. Now she is just with my baby brother ‘cause he needs milk all the time. I get it that he is a baby but sometimes I am all lonely. I like doing this because when I come to art I can talk and you and my friends are here and we make cool stuff like with this pasta.

For *Doodles*, art provided a time to connect with people and verbalize what was going on in her life and what she was feeling. The process of doing art helped her feel connected to people and helped her feel comfortable sharing. Art was not so much her means of expressing her story, but rather provided a context in which she felt safe, comfortable, and supported in sharing her experience verbally.

Relationship building also took place between students as they resolved disagreements and interpersonal conflicts brought about by collaborative creative work. An example of this came up when students painted together on the large paper covering the floor. During the activity, *Doodles* spent much of her time painting a large section of the paper with broad strokes

of black paint. “I LOVE black!” she said, “I love it but a lot of people think black is ugly. I think they are wrong and now people can see how beautiful it can be with all of the other paint they are using.” For *Doodles*, the collaborative environment provided an opportunity to share her love of a specific color with her peers, to express her own preference, and to challenge presumptions and judgments that she experienced as widely-held and arbitrary. Shortly then after, *Sparkles* expressed concern about *Doodles*’ color choices and application.

“I want to use pink, but your black is where I want my pink and I don’t want mine to be ugly.”

Doodles replied, “Black doesn’t make your pink ugly. The colors can just be pretty together because they are what we both like.”

Sparkles agreed, and the two began painting together, talking about favorite colors and experimenting with different ways to mix new shades.

In another activity using crayons, two students connected over shared interest in a subject they both chose to draw. *Doodles* began the class murmuring to herself as she drew on her own section of paper, before coming over to Bea and complimenting her work. The two then began working together and created a drawing game. After playing together for several minutes, *Bea* and *Doodles* asked the teachers in the room and I to draw with them. This began a positive relationship building experience between the students and the adults in the room. While the students drew, they carried conversations with the teachers. After several minutes, the students taught the teachers their drawing game, offering an opportunity to disrupt traditional power differentials by students teaching their teachers something related to the students’ interest, and they practiced teaching a skill they developed to others, building their confidence.

Cultivating a Student-Centered Environment

The Power Hour environment was designed to be more student-centered because students were allowed to pick their activities and the activities they chose were intended to specifically cater to their interests. This meant that teachers and students came to the space with more expectations of student-centeredness in the space and were more comfortable experimenting with ways to try letting students lead their work. I still noticed hesitations and challenges as teachers and students learned what it looked like to place primary control with students, but overall I noticed a much greater flexibility around experiencing trial and error with student leadership. One teaching assistant remarked that she loved this time because it “provide[d] the kids an opportunity to pick a place where they can be successful and just get a break from all of the evaluations and assessments that we normally have to deal with.” The intentionality of student choice during Power Hour meant that the student-centering practice we worked on was targeted around pushing an environment with existing measures to promote student empowerment even further to increase student freedom and staff responsiveness. This differed from the Kindergarten classroom in which we focused on disrupting the traditional classroom power differentials entirely.

Student-centeredness through choice in activities looked different in Power Hour than it did in Kindergarten because students typically had more than one art activity to choose from in the classroom setting and could choose where to spend their time from several different options. When there were other options, the room was divided in three stations, of which open-ended art was one. The other two stations were project-based and involved painting decorations for the cafeteria and step-by-step painting projects, respectively. Typically, all students elected to split their time evenly between three available stations, moving freely as they completed what they

wished to at each station. Several students, including two kindergartners who were coming from art class to Power Hour and were usually already in the middle of a creative process, chose to spend most of their time at my free-explore station working with materials.

As weeks progressed, teachers in the art room became increasingly eager to let students run the show and provided less and less instruction and more free exploration. This demonstrated significant paradigmatic change from the first weeks when several of the teachers who became the most eager to encourage student self-direction insisted on assigned seats and expressed doubt that students would use materials appropriately. In the first week, before the painting activity, a teacher pulled me aside and told me that she did not want one of the preschoolers, a female student, *Bea*, to participate in the painting activity that the rest of the class was doing. “We did painted landscapes last week,” the teacher told me, “and she gets distracted, and then she puts the paint right in her mouth.” The teacher and I discussed this for a bit and she agreed to let *Bea* try the activity. “So they don’t paint anything? They just do whatever?” the teacher asked, skeptical, as we set up the activity. “I think they are going to make a huge mess and you should be prepared because they will get out of control pretty quickly.”

Our compromise for *Bea*’s participation was assigned seating so the teacher could sit near the student in case she needed support. When students arrived with three assistant teachers, teachers asked them to sit in order of age, so the youngest students sat at the far end of the tables and older students. We then had a quick conversation about boundaries with using paint and the students generated their own community expectations for the activity. A kindergartener suggested only painting on paper, another suggested respecting our space, and a third student brought up not running or throwing anything. Student-generated expectations included awareness of safety in the space by not running or spreading slippery materials in places where

people might get hurt as well as respect for materials and other people's space. I gave very few instructions other than asking that they group follow the norms they brainstormed and then the students free-painted for the next twenty-five to forty-five minutes. *Bea* required no support, and painted intently the entire time, looking up from the paper only to ask for more paint or clean water to wash her brush. The teacher who worried *Bea* would have safety challenges with paint and would be fighting distraction and boredom was impressed by her focus and even more so by the joy *Bea* expressed as she painted. "Wow she is just smiling ear to ear," the teacher said before turning to *Bea*. "[*Bea*]," she said to her, smiling, "it looks like you really like to paint at school!"

"Painting is my favorite," said *Bea*, "and I picked all my own colors for the paper."

"We'll have to tell Mumma to do this with you at home!" the teacher mused.

"I don't have any paints. I am not allowed to paint at home because Mumma thinks I would be too messy and get it everywhere," *Bea* answered.

In the environment she controlled, *Bea* managed the responsibility of using materials she had previously faced challenges using in safe and/or appropriate ways beautifully. In a setting that she had control over, *Bea* could explore different sensory components of paint that she was curious about, easing the overwhelming curiosity that resulted in the temptation to transgress boundaries by putting paint in her mouth. She was also able to create in a way she determined, which led her to express excitement at finding her own approaches to color mixing, using water, and trying different brush techniques. Engaging with these different approaches to painting in her own way was especially important for *Bea* because, as she told her teacher, she had limited access to materials. As she worked, *Bea* gained confidence in her ability, telling a teacher "look, I am getting real good at this. And I'm not even making a mess!" Although making a mess

would have been a perfectly acceptable avenue during the open-ended painting time, *Bea* saw avoiding this mess as a personal success and expressed pride and a sense of accomplishment when she was able to independently build skills and enjoy herself without the consequence of a resulting mess.

A sense of accomplishment as a result of a self-directed creative initiative was also significant for *Oliver*, a third-grade student who told me directly that he was “not a paint guy.” Because of absences, the week we painted on the floor was the first week that *Oliver* used paint during Power Hour. At first, *Oliver* chose not to partake in painting, cycling through one of the other stations and then choosing to sit alone by a window. However, after observing other students for a few minutes, *Oliver* came over to me and told me “I’m thinking maybe I try this after all,” as he took a brush. *Oliver* chose a blank space on the shared paper away from other students and began mixing different warm colors together. After a few minutes, he yelled “Holy smokes! Come look at this!” Another teacher joined me in going to look and *Oliver* proudly showed us an intense, vibrant pink. “I made the actual color of the sun setting,” *Oliver* explained.

“It’s nice to see you participating, *Oliver*,” the teacher told him.

“I just never knew I could do this all by myself; I never thought I could paint,” *Oliver* replied, smiling widely.

When he could participate in his own way and at his own speed, *Oliver* felt accomplished and capable because he could use materials in a way that felt comfortable to him. This sense of comfort and control also led him to try additional combinations of colors and to invite younger students to practice mixing with him. By the end of the period, the opportunity to direct his own learning supported *Oliver* in moving from a fixed mindset of incapability, to developing an expansive experimentation-oriented creative process that he felt confident teaching to others.

Teachers noticed that the student-centered model for creative work encouraged more student success, commenting on the quality of student focus, excitement, independence, collaboration, and skill development and how these grew noticeably each week in ways they had not previously observed. By the last week, students worked independent of teacher instruction, and teachers actually joined students in making art. “It’s just so fun to watch what they come up with,” a teaching assistant told me, “I see kids starting their own stuff and being successful in here in ways they aren’t successful anywhere else. It’s all them and that is just great to see.”

Student-centeredness came from an increased transfer of control to students, however the maintenance of a responsive environment for students to engage with also hinged on ensuring that the environment met the needs of students in the multi-age space. For example, at first, students were significantly worried about scarcity, telling each other not to use too much paint or there wouldn’t be enough for everyone. I noted the following expressions of anxiety over running out of materials or not having individual needs for materials met on the first day of class from students across age levels.

“I want to use red too. you are using all of it, and I want some. There will not be enough for me!”

“You are hogging the white!”

“[Doodles] is using all of the pink and there is none for me!”

Once students understood that I could refill the colors and that there was enough for everyone, the activity quickly caught stride, and the students happily shared, demonstrating that in order to share and feel free to express themselves through art and create space for peers to express themselves through art, students needed to feel that there was enough material to meet their needs. Once this need was met, students demonstrated eagerness to share freely without having

to compromise their own need for certain materials or the expressive capacity tied up in those materials.

Chapter Five:

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I will conclude by discussing challenges present in the project as a whole, identifying general findings between the two groups I worked with, and discussing the wider significance of this work in the context of current events and circumstances.

Challenges

First and foremost, I would like to once again recognize and thank the school staff at JES for their generosity with their time, resources, and classroom spaces in supporting my project. Without them, piloting art explorations would not have been possible, and I am immensely grateful to them. I also want to emphasize that challenges related to art explorations that involve school personnel were, in my experience, entirely related to structural problems in the wider realm of education. My acknowledgement of these challenges and barriers is a recognition of these systemic issues and not a criticism of teachers as individuals or their efforts as educators.

The principal challenge I encountered in piloting the art explorations was challenging the tradition of an adult-driven classroom space. Students and adults alike expect adults to engage in “classroom management” and instruction in the classroom setting. Giving maximum control to students to dictate use of materials, creation of messes, seating arrangements, noise levels, and participation was foreign to everyone, particularly adults, who expressed discomfort with the arrangement to me in the first two weeks. Concerns of “they will be distracted,” and “they will make a huge mess,” and “they will get wound up” were initially common. I believe this discomfort, which eventually eased as students demonstrated remarkable ability to take the helm, stemmed from a desire to maintain the type of safe, calm environment that is traditionally regarded as an ideal learning space. The problem with this traditional ideal classroom style is that

it falsely conflates student safety with docility, assuming that adults are inherently more aware of students' needs than students are, and that the only way to protect students is to make sure they unquestioningly follow adult directives. Being fully in-tune with every students' individual needs while remaining literate of their own needs is impossible, even for the most committed teachers. As comfort increased with a student-directed space, I noticed that such a space invites a responsive environment rather than one focused on controlled calm.

Ensuring that students' basic needs were met was also a challenge because this is a broad objective that spans beyond the art space. Students' needs being visibly met during art-making time did not mean that the impacts of outstanding needs beyond the classroom were resolved. Teachers told me that Friday afternoon, the meeting time for both groups, could be a high-anxiety time for students with insecure circumstances over the weekend. After lunch, some students reported feeling tired or still hungry, and the time of day or extenuating circumstances of a students' lives could at times make creative work feel overwhelming, difficult, or unappealing. For these reasons, the activities during class were not equally accessible to all students because students' different needs showed up in different ways and were being met to varying degrees outside of class and outside of school.

Awareness of students' potential trauma and other experiential factors had to be worked into the design of activities. This process was imperfect, especially in one particular circumstance. During the Power Hour collage activity, I was invited by the art teacher to set up some multi-colored dyed pasta for students to glue in addition to paper and shapes. The inclusion of food as an art material was not responsive to the probability of student food insecurity, and I observed several students trying to quietly eat the uncooked noodles or asking to take some home to make for dinner. Using food as an art material was potentially harmful for food insecure

students, and it was universally confusing for participating students. This activity was a needed reminder to be mindful and critical in deciding which materials to provide and to consider their potential impacts. Student responses to using food in creative spaces reminded me that not all materials are art materials, and that not all materials are beneficial to student expression.

Finding time to do art explorations was also somewhat challenging. Friday afternoons, the time dedicated to Kindergarten art classes and Power Hour, was also a popular time for scheduled assemblies and enrichment activities, which meant time was often cut short. This disrupted students' freedom to choose their own time frame for doing creative work and often meant classes had to be shortened to half of the originally allotted time frame, which required especially time-flexible activities. The general challenges of doing a project in Downeast Maine in January are also worth noting. Snow-related cancellations created obstacles to working with students every week without missing sessions, resulting in a delay between the third and fourth meetings. Additionally, student absence meant varying numbers of participants each week.

Overall Findings

The purpose of art explorations was not to force expression through creative processes, but rather to generate an expansive model for student expression that recognizes that listening to students should be an intentional practice. With repeated opportunities for practice, students from pre-K to third grade flourished both socially and creatively in a self-directed space. Students processed issues they were dealing with, built strong interpersonal relationships with peers and adults in the classroom through self-directed art, demonstrated increasing self-confidence and self-efficacy during creative processing, and chose their own paths to communicating their experiences.

Relationships between students and relationships between students and adults in the classroom flourished when students had a greater say in classroom functioning. I observed

mutual benefits as students could freely advocate for their needs and wishes, and teachers could actively listen and connect with students when their roles as educators were separated from pressures to control classroom dynamics and student interactions through management and evaluation. Teachers in both Kindergarten and Power Hour settings reported positive feelings about how students worked creatively, engaged with one another, and demonstrated emotional literacy around their needs and the needs of their classmates. Students, through diverse channels including artwork, body language, informal feedback, and (in Kindergarten) exit interviews, overwhelmingly reported feelings of empowerment through creative processing, enjoyment of working with others creatively, and excitement to try new experiences with art. Many students across age groups turned to storytelling when asked about their artwork. Students of all involved ages also became increasingly aware and communicative about sensory experiences as weeks progressed, paying attention to textures, colors, sounds and noise levels, and smells more and more each week. As sensory awareness progressed, so did the levels of detail in many students' storytelling when they chose to practice it.

I found that art supported the whole student, and it allowed students to dictate the support they needed. Students and teachers alike described appreciation for art as a tool for self-expression. In the course of the art exploration pilot, I observed students practicing valuable skills in their own ways. Students made connections in a variety of ways with their peers, and, when they chose to, engaged with adults in meaningful ways through creative processing. Open-ended art supported a student-centered environment by offering choices to students and by catering to their developmental needs in a way that offered more options for communicating and processing. Overall, art proved to be a promising tool to promote trauma-informed environments for students.

Conclusion

Something I never anticipated learning from this project is how disaster acts as the ultimate litmus test of what is and is not. When I began thinking about this project in the spring of 2019, I imagined the world would be a very similar place a year later when I anticipated completing my work. When I began working more directly in the fall, there was still no indication that a global pandemic would change the day-to-day lives of everyone I know and billions of people globally. And then the world changed. It changed in ways I could not have imagined when I began to think about why art and student voice and student empowerment were important, and it changed the way I understood what a classroom is. I realized that the classroom serves as an equity measure, ensuring that students have access to the same resources during the time they are at school, even if their lives and personal situations are drastically different when they go home for the day. Although the COVID-19 pandemic highlights stark inequities through remote schooling, it also showed me that the relationships forged at school maintained their sustaining power when schools closed for the year in March.

I suppose I should begin by asking a question that seems obvious. It is the question I have asked myself during the time-warped, terrifying past several weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the question that remains in the back of my head as I and everyone around me grasp aimlessly at bits of news and CDC recommendations trying to figure out when a semblance of safety and normalcy might return to us. The question that pertains to this project, one of a multitude of questions and uncertainties on parade in my brain on any given day, is *does this even still matter?*

After all, students aren't even in school right now, so is an art-focused classroom dynamic reform at all relevant? Inside or beyond the circumstances of life during a pandemic, in

the model of need-meeting, the kind of empowerment and voice that self-directed art provides falls near the top of the pyramid in terms of essential needs. The expressive capacity that art offers is not particularly useful if needs around physical safety and biological needs are lacking. This is true regardless of whether the threats to those needs come from trauma related to COVID-19 or from trauma that affects children in their previously “normal” situations. But what is important to remember is that the model is not grading needs based on importance--it is ordering them to show what needs to happen in order to meet all needs relevant to the full picture. *All* needs are essential when we take the whole person seriously, and art offers a way to hold the whole person in focused regard. Just because biological needs must be met in order to initiate empowerment-related needs does not mean that empowerment is less important or that it is optional. It simply fits in a different way and its cultivation has prerequisites.

The COVID-19 pandemic has violently revealed the weaknesses and injustices in social structures that have always been corrupt and inequitable. Like me, you have probably both heard and said that when this is over we cannot return to “normal” in a way that normalizes and accepts the violence of social systems and hierarchies that violently oppress millions of people when this ends. Though collective trauma, we arrive at a crossroads. Whether it is an individual traumatic experience or a universal one like a global pandemic, nothing is the same as before after trauma happens. Trauma changes people--whether by forcing a change in living situation or daily circumstances, altering brain chemistry, or impacting the individual in any number of other ways, trauma leaves us different and invites resilience. Healing changes us too. In terms of *how* healing from trauma changes us, especially for the young people among us, I once again make a case for art.

I make this case because the classroom is not the whole picture when it comes to empowering the voices of youth. Classrooms are not child-centered, but the reason they are so is a consequence of what they reproduce. We do not have child-centered classrooms because we do not live in a child-centered world. In so many parts of daily life, and especially in dealing with trauma, children are all too often treated as small adults, expected to comply with the decisions of the actual adults in their lives, and to “mature” by learning to accept their positions in the social systems that often harmed them and created trauma in the first place. The life of many children during the pandemic is no different. Whether children are excluded by being sheltered from the reality of the present world or overly involved as a result of increased danger, whether endangered by direct contact with illness, or let down by systemic failure, children’s experiences are such a significant part of the traumatic experiences happening right now. The way that children are treated is by and large the same too. They have to listen to the adults who keep them safe, they have to try to understand threats to safety, and they have to continue to rise to the challenges of everyday responsibilities like schoolwork and interpersonal relationship navigation while they work to cope with terrifyingly extraordinary circumstances.

When children are invited to be part of a conversation or a decision-making process, they are expected to do so in adult mediums that they are still mastering, and their opinions are viewed as secondary or less important because children do not yet have the expressive capacity of adults who have practiced expressing themselves through speech and writing for much longer. Ultimately, we know collective actions will determine what reality looks like when the pandemic ends, and children will be part of that reality. They will have all of the ideas, and questions, and stories that they have always had, and they will have been through this experience too. Children need a voice in finding the new normal when the time comes to discern that, and they need

opportunities to feel valued and to make a shift into a world that does a better job valuing and meeting their needs. For this, I have witnessed art as an invaluable tool. Children know what they need. Art offers opportunities to practice discerning this. As I watched students engage in art projects, I saw them develop visions of what they wanted to express and then use the materials available to them that helped create those visions, leaving the rest behind. This is practice for advocating on behalf of their needs in other areas of their lives. Children have stories to tell. Art provides another way for them to tell these stories. We will need to remember the feelings this experience gave us, especially if we want to see change as a result. Art offers children another way to express the emotional side of experiences, and it is a way for them to do this that is proven to be more comfortable and natural for many of them than writing or speaking as these verbal competencies continue to develop.

I reiterate, children have such incredibly important perspectives. They are just figuring out the world, who they are in it, and what they want it to be. They have wisdom to share, but tapping into that wisdom and welcoming their perspectives means listening to them in a way that honors their unique needs. Art offers another way to listen by inviting children to express themselves in a way they control, rather than expecting them to master the conventions of adult expressive measures that they are just learning to harness. As we collectively reflect on the shared environments we will be returning to when the pandemic eases and consider the reforms to be made, we need all of the voices, and who better to listen to as we consider how to nurture something that is growing, changing, and developing than the young individuals who are most immediately growing, changing, and developing alongside it?

The purpose of an education is to support students as they determine who they are and how to think about how they wish to move in the world they share with others. Support is the

operative term here; students' senses of identity, self-efficacy, and aspiration are amorphous and do not evolve through instruction the way academics might. Rather, as students gain academic skills, they find success in doing so and in putting these skills to meaningful use when their social-emotional wellness is prioritized. This wellness comes from continued engagement with all aspects of the student as an individual. Students do not just begin to have a fully formed sense of self, purpose, or ambition when they are deemed academically proficient. Children are complete people with complex needs from the start, and as they learn to express this and operate academic functions to facilitate doing so, it is the responsibility of educators supporting them to listen to and affirm the devices students already possess to sort out their selfhood. Art is one of these tools, and too often it is dismissed as frivolous when, in fact, it can serve as a direct line for connection with students.

Again, children know what they need. Whether it is choosing the colors they will use to express how they are feeling on a given Friday afternoon, asking for more dough in order to experiment with the boundaries between imagination and physical reality, or verbally expressing a need for certain group norms to create a safe creative space for themselves, over and over again I watched art provide empowering opportunities for students to take and ask for what they needed to. The art space was a place to be creative and have fun as a group, but it was also a place where students practiced self-advocacy, relationships to boundaries, and confidence in communication. The art space was a place to take what they needed, but it was also a place to test out what it feels like to leave behind the rest. I watched students find empowerment by declining to participate when aspects of a given activity did not serve them, I saw students determine that certain colors were not useful to the art they were creating and choose not to include them, and I saw students elect to work independently when working collaboratively

became overwhelming to them. When I watched students practice these skills, I watched them in the classroom context. I watched how students' authority over how they wanted to learn helped them learn to prioritize their social-emotional wellness.

I did not expect that a global pandemic would, two months later, challenge this social-emotional health and eliminate the classroom context altogether. Now, the classroom is remote and students connect in very different ways based on their living situations. As these changes alter what school looks like for students and how and if they are able to access it, I think the importance of measures like art that enable interpersonal connection and encourage practicing social-emotional health becomes particularly clear. The practice and scaffolding of social-emotional health is not erased by radical changes in situation. I do not know if art is serving students during presently uncertain times, but I do know that I watched them practice what it felt like to tell their stories, to say yes and to say no, to use creativity to process their lives and feel good, and to understand each other and feel understood. Even if that practice is not continuing in the same way, I think there is power in hard times for students in knowing what these things feel like and to have the confidence to know that, with their creative tools, they can achieve a sense of empowerment, or at least find hope in knowing that they have been capable of such feelings in the past. And, as the new ways of the world coalesce in coming weeks and months, it gives me great hope to know that through means like art, students who might receive the message in a variety of ways that they are not mature or educated enough to warrant being listened to can harness the power of their voices to share their brilliance with a world that needs it now more than ever.

Appendix One:

Interview Questions for Bodhi Simpson and Sue Carroll Duffy

Question
Can you please tell me a bit about your practice? What brought or inspired you to enter this type of work?
Can you take me through an experience you might do with someone you do work with? How do the components and the way they interact impact the overall experience?
How do you approach dimensions of equity in your work?
What draws you to art and storytelling as tools for children? Why are they important to you?
Anything else you want to tell me about your work? Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix Two:

Kindergarten Pre-Measure: Attitudes Toward Colors

Student	:) (Positive emotion)	:((Negative emotion)
Goofy	Red, Yellow, Green, Blue, Purple, Brown, Black, Pink	Orange
Sparkles	Pink, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple	Red, brown, black
Lillie	Pink, Purple, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red	Blue, Brown, Black
Doodles	Red, Pink, Green, Blue	Brown, Black, Yellow, Orange
Lobster	Red/Pink, Brown	Black, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple
Tyler the Red Power Ranger	Red, yellow, brown	Black, pink, green, orange, blue, yellow
Little Dude	Red	Brown, blue, orange, purple, yellow, green
Detective Clifton	Red, yellow, blue, brown	Orange, green, purple, black

Big Moose	Purple, green, pink, red, yellow, blue, black	Pink, yellow
Phillingtonbuttface	Red, black, orange, purple	Black, green, yellow, blue, brown
Poppy	Red, pink, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple	Black, brown

Appendix Three:
Qualitative Codes Used With Kindergarten Interviews

Qualitative Codes
Social Emotional Learning and Color
Competency Building
Confidence Building
Positive Environment for Students
Relationship Building
Repeated Exposure
Sensory Engagement
Student Empowered Social Emotional Learning (SESEL)
Student Voice

Appendix Four:
Kindergarten Exit Interview Questions and Responses

Question	Response
I feel good when I am making art	Yes: 9 Sometimes: 1 No: 0
Making art is a way for me to show what I am thinking	Yes: 6 Sometimes: 2 No: 2
I can use colors to show how I feel	Yes: 10 Sometimes: 0 No: 0
My ideas are important	Yes: 8 Sometimes: 1 No: 1
Art helps my friends and classmates understand me	Yes: 7 Sometimes: 1 No: 2
Art helps adults at school understand me	Yes: 8 Sometimes: 1 No: 1
Art helps me say and show things I can't say or show in other ways	Yes: 7 Sometimes: 1 No: 2

Appendix Five:

Steps to Creating Safe, Creative Space through Classroom Coalition

Creating an inviting space makes students feel valued and creates a sense of possibility for students that makes the space feel worth preserving is important. An inviting space is made by maintaining a comfortable temperature and lighting as much as possible, by offering quality materials in a manner that looks enticing and scaffold student work, and by demonstrating that adult members of the classroom community take students seriously, respect student rights, autonomy, and needs in the classroom setting. An inviting space is also just that--an invitation--not a requirement. Student participation in creative work should be a choice that students opt in to in order to meet their personal

2) Inviting students to dictate norms for activities empowers them to express their own needs in the space and provides an opportunity for them to listen to and reflect upon the needs of other people with whom they share the space. This shifts power to students, creates a democratic environment, and mitigates the arbitrariness of imposed classroom rules. This also disrupts the inherent imbalance of power between children in the classroom and adults in the classroom and allows students to be experts on their own needs around comfort and safety.

3) Allowing students to do their creative processing in as completely a self-directed a manner as possible recognizes that artistic creation is their work and that they need space to think, collaborate with peers, and experiment without the interference of questions or comments from adult observers.

Creating room for self-directed work demonstrates respect for student initiative and expertise. It also opens opportunities to foster instances of peer support--one of the components that the SAMHSA identifies as essential to creating a trauma-informed space.

4) Share accountability for cleanup and space maintenance provides closure to the creative process by providing a natural stop with paired a dependable practice to mark this end. Space maintenance also includes providing space for reflection, which makes the practice thinking back on work and what one felt during a work exercise a distinct part of the creative environment. Reflection, like norm-setting provides space to voice and listen to needs.

Appendix Six:

Photographs



Materials for Kindergarten, Week One



Materials For Kindergarten, Week 2



Kindergarten Student Painting on Class' Floor Painting, Week 2



Pre-K Student Painting, Power Hour Week 1



Pre-K Students Telling Stories with Collage, Power Hour Week 2

References

- Babcock, E. (2014). *Using brain science to design new pathways out of poverty*. Boston: Crittenton Women's Union.
- Bernstein, B. (1971). *Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Biddle, C., Mette, I., & Mercado, A. (2018) Partnering with schools for community development: Power imbalances in rural community collaboratives addressing childhood adversity, *Community Development*, 49:2, 191-210, DOI: [10.1080/15575330.2018.1429001](https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2018.1429001)
- Brechet, C. (2013). Children's gender stereotypes through drawings of emotional faces: Do boys draw angrier faces than girls? *Sex Roles*, 68(5-6), 378-389.
- Brechet, C. , Baldy, R. and Picard, D. (2009), How does Sam feel?: Children's labelling and drawing of basic emotions. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 27: 587-606.
- Brown, L.M. & Flaumenhaft, J. (2019). Student-empowered curricular change. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100 (6), 13-19.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1974). Scholastic excellence and the values of the educational system. *Contemporary research in the sociology of education*, ed. J. Eggleston, London, pp. 338-71.
- Burke-Harris, N. (2014). How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime. TedTalk.
- Clapp, Edward P., et al. *Maker-Centered Learning : Empowering Young People to Shape Their Worlds*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Coates, Elizabeth & Coates, Andrew. (2006). Young children talking and drawing. *International Journal of Early Years Education*. 14. 221-241.

- Crawford, E. , Gross, J. , Patterson, T. and Hayne, H. (2012). Does Children's Colour Use Reflect the Emotional Content of their Drawings?. *Inf. Child. Dev.*, 21: 198-215.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & Education*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Duffy, S. (2014). *Moving Stories*, Volume 1. Perry, ME: By the Sea Seminars.
- Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D. and Schellinger, K.B. (2011), The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. *Child Development*, 82: 405-432.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., Forman, G., (2012). *The Hundred Languages of Children*. Santa Barbara, CA,: Praeger.
- Einarsdottir, J., Dockett, S., & Perry, B.(2009) Making meaning: children's perspectives expressed through drawings,*Early Child Development and Care*,179:2,217-232.
- Fattal, I. (2017, October 30). The Hidden Meaning of Kids' Shapes and Scribbles.
- Farokhi, Masoumeh, Hashemi, Masoud. (2011), The Analysis of Children's Drawings: Social, Emotional, Physical, and Psychological aspects. *Procedia--Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 30: 2219-2224.
- Fecho, B. (1998). *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Feletti, V., et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Volume 14, Issue 4, 245–258.
- Finn, P.J. (1999). *Literacy with an Attitude*. Albany, NY: SUNY.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Verlag Herder.
- Gentle, K. (1985) *Children and art teaching*. London: Croom Helm.

- Gonzalez, N. et al. (Jan. 1995). Funds of Knowledge For Teaching in Latino Households. *Urban Education* , vol. 29, no. 4.
- Hawkins, B. (2020, April 19). Using Distance to Grow Closer: How One School Is Leaning on Its Student Relationships to Create Community in a Pandemic.
- Heath, S.B. (1986). “Separating ‘Things of the Imagination’ from Life: Learning to Read and Write.” In *Emergent Literacy*. Ed. W.H. Teale and E. Sulzby. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: a pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gorski, P. (2011). Unlearning Deficit Ideology and the Scornful Gaze: Thoughts on Authenticating the Class Discourse in Education.
- Jonesport, Maine. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2019, from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Jonesport-Maine.html>.
- Tay-Lim, J., & Lim, S. (2013). Privileging Younger Children’s Voices in Research: Use of Drawings and a Co-Construction Process. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 65–83.
- Lowenfeld, V. & Brittain, W .L. (1987). *Creative and mental growth*. New York: Macmillan.
- Malachiodi, C. (2008). *Creative interventions with traumatized children*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Mette, I., Biddle, C., Brown, L.M., et al. (2018). The TREE project: How school-community partnerships can drive rural reform efforts. *Journal of Maine Education*, 34, 55-67.
- Matthews, J. (2003). *Drawing and painting: Children and visual representation*.
- McIntosh, P, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” (1988). Wellesley: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.
- Miller, J.P. (1996) *The Holistic Curriculum*. Toronto: OISE Press.

Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC. (2020, April 3).

Souers, K. (2016) *Fostering resilient learners: strategies for creating a trauma-sensitive classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*) HHS Publication No. 14-4884). Rockville, MD: Author.

Tough, P. (2016). *Helping children succeed: What works and why*. New York, NY: Houghton-Mifflin.

Tough, P. (2012). *How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*. Boston, MA, : Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Viking.

Vargas, Annette M, "Arts Education Programming in Urban vs. Rural Public Schools" (2018). ETD collection for University of Nebraska - Lincoln. AAI13418869.

Vecchi, V. (2010). *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia*. New York, NY, : Routledge.

Washington County Community Health Profile 2018. (2018). Retrieved October 2019, from <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/phdata/MaineCHNA/documents/Washington-County-Health-Profile-2018.pdf>

