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The Influence of Identity on Art and How it Can Connect Us to Our Community

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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**The Influence of Identity on Art and
How it Can Connect Us to Our Community**

by

Christina Aguila

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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Abstract

Art is often marginalized in academic environments while student mental health and academic achievement gaps are highlighted as areas of priority and concern. This research is situated in a theoretical framework that identifies how middle school is a critical time for adolescent development (Hetrick, 2018), conscientization (Mernick, 2021), community-based art as a practice for social-emotional learning (Farrington & Shewfelt, 2020), and resilience as a way to help promote adolescent social-emotional health (Giselly et al., 2018). This study focused on ten students that participated in a multi-week identity based sculptural project inclusive of qualitative surveys and interviews. In addition, two administrators and an art teacher were interviewed on how identity influences art and how that helps us connect with one another and also can help with resilience within the student population. The research resulted in three major findings centered around how identity-formation in art creates connections between inner and outer worlds, how flow and creative process develop stabilizing presence for learning, and the emergence of actionable relationships with community from classroom experience as a way to help promote adolescent social emotional health. This research has important implications in how art teachers might contextualize their work as bridge-building between students and the larger world, ways in which administrators and districts might help facilitate art as an academically integrative and publicly facing core discipline, and as a call for policy makers to prioritize arts as central to the academic development of engaged citizens.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since I have been teaching art in the middle school level there have been a few things that I have noticed that I would like to learn more about and how I can support my students in the art process. Many times students copy or create something that has little meaning other than it just looks good or they even have just recreated something that already exists. I am interested in learning about each student through their art and how to bring out their thoughts that art is important to them in order to create meaningful, unique art that shares their voice about the world and who they are. In the classroom, I find that many times students do not have the opportunity to connect with one another and think about each other's art. Students talked to each other informally during class time. Students were able to connect to one another about their art and ideas during the creative process. The Gallery Walk Critique was a more formal way for students to see art, think about what the artist was saying and what they themselves thought about the art. They were able to talk about art in general and contribute their perspective so that as a community of artists they could connect with one another and learn about each other through the art process. The creative process is a powerful and transformative way that people can express themselves, share ideas, navigate challenges, find joy, and build resilience to manage stress and anxiety. Creating art has helped me many times in my life and I want to share this gift with my students. If students can learn this process of creating and seeing its value in their life, then the belief is that they can also use these skills and aptitudes in other parts of their life as well.

Statement of Purpose

In the literature review there were three themes that were represented. First, conscientization, (Mernick, 2021) presents how through the creative process and self-reflection one can gain a critical consciousness about the world. As such, art can be used as a way of

reflecting on the world around oneself and a way to see it through multiple perspectives. Because of this process students are then able to find critical consciousness and become more aware of their surroundings and where they fit into their world (Dewhurst, 2011).

The second theme explored classroom connectedness through art pedagogy. Three forms of art pedagogy that can connect us with one another were highlighted. The first type looked at community arts based education (Lawton, 2019), which integrates students into the community by having students work together with local artists in creating community art projects. This is rooted in Dewey's (1899) advocacy that learning sinks in when it is community-based. Therefore if students are relating specifically to the community that they live in and have personal experiences they will be able to learn at a different level than if they were learning in the classroom (Lawton, 2019). Another benefit from community-based art education is that it increases creativity and self-expression which helps teenagers to improve self-esteem (Hyungsook, 2015). The second is Transformative Arts Education which is seen to be a balance between the teacher and student causing transformative growth through the creative process (Campbell, 2011). The third form of art pedagogy identified is Arts Based research, which functions as a form of qualitative research used along with art to find a deeper understanding of emotion and experience through process (Keifer-Boyd, 2011). Expressing one's experience through a visual language can illuminate ideas differently than one can with words (Muhr, 2020).

Lastly the literature shows how art education and resilience serves to promote adolescent social emotional health. It is important to note that we are always changing, growing and learning through experiences. Therefore our identities are not one fixed value (Hetrick, 2018). Self-expression and identity are tied closely together since self-expression is not just telling a story about oneself, but it is also how someone shows their life experience (Gude, 2009). Lawton (2019) also states that if there is a lack of imagination then there is a corresponding inability to

empathize or see different perspectives of peers. Accordingly, this is an important aspect to transform society by changing the range of imagined possibilities (Lawton, 2019). And according to Hyungsook (2015), in order to build resilience one must also develop four different qualities: social competence, an ability to solve problems, being independent and having a direction and purpose, and all of which art helps, and once someone has that ability to move through these stages they can use this process in their everyday life along with during the art process.

Although there were many ideas in the findings from the study that overlapped with the literature there is a gap in understanding how to guide students through the creative process in a way that allows them to find their own way, overcome challenges, and find joy in their work. Although in the literature there was talk of connectedness through community based arts education (Lawton, 2019), this study explored more deeply how students in a classroom setting connect with one another as a foundation for understanding themselves individually, in community and connected to the larger world around them. Consequently, the study sought to understand how art can help students make connections with one another and how those connections were important for students to get feedback about their art and be able to see different perspectives, so that they can use critical thinking to grow from the process of making art and identify how they relate within and across their communities.

Overview of the Research Design

This research project consisted of a qualitative approach inclusive of pre and post surveys, critique reflection and analysis, field notes and observations, interviews, and the multi-week art project itself. The study focused on the ways students engage with and persevere through the different stages of the creative process, embracing both the challenges and joys. In art there are many different ways to move through challenges, so it was important for students to

think critically and find a way that worked for them instead of looking to the teacher whenever there was a problem that occurred. This research was informed by a constructivist worldview to investigate the importance of more open-ended projects and how the students both understood and constructed their own knowledge and aptitudes.

This research was conducted at a public middle school in Northern California. The three questions that guided this research were: How does community learning support middle school students in developing conscientization while honoring individuation? How does art help students with connectedness within their community? and How does student identity help with self-expression? There were ten eighth grade student participants. The art teacher that I interviewed has over thirty years of experience, and I have observed in her classroom as she served as my mentor. During the course of the four week study, students were given a pre and post survey about the project, identity and ideas relating to the art process. They did a Gallery Walk Critique where students gave and received feedback about their art pieces. Also, two focus group interviews of 2 and 3 students were conducted. Data was also collected from observations during class time and from informal conversations with students that were participating in the study during class time.

As the researcher I had been teaching some of these students for one to three years and some I had been their teacher the previous year during a pandemic. Additionally, I had had a previous relationship with almost all of the students.

Significance of the Study

During the research project there were a few major findings that differed from the literature. The first of the findings was that the process of creating can be a powerful process for students to overcome challenges, build resilience through the creative process, and to find their own way. They also found connections in the creative process with other students. When the

project had more flexibility students were able to talk with one another about the process and share the techniques that they had found that work for them. Connection also came when students shared their ideas used in their art pieces. Allowing students an opportunity to connect with one another proved to be an important part of the creative process. It allowed students to receive ideas and other perspectives about art which can broaden their own ideas about their art. Three quarters through the creative process students were also given the opportunity to reflect and share thoughts about each other's art during a more formal critique process. Students shared their interest and enthusiasm about what other students thought about their work. Students when offered more of a choice about what they were creating shared a more unique and genuine view in their artwork. Not only were the art pieces different from one another because of the freedom within the project there was more engagement because of this. They found confidence in their work and were able to share their identity, who they were and tell their story through their artwork.

Research Implications

This study shows that it is important to have more flexibility and choice within projects. Students must be able to feel that they have the freedom to create something that is meaningful to them and be able to relate to their everyday lives. When students are given the opportunity to think about identity or think about ideas that relate to them there is more engagement and effort put into the project causing the projects to be more unique and students to have more of a chance to share their voice through their art.

Process and flow within an art project is a powerful tool for students to work through challenges, build resilience, find joy in what they are doing and to find their own way within the project. Because art is unique from other classes there are many ways that one can find success in the process while creating art. Therefore, teachers should be more of a support system or guide

for students. When the curriculum is tailored so that it gives opportunities for students to dive deeper into their own thoughts about themselves and what is important to them, all students will be able to find success in the creative process. When this project is presented again to students in order to take it to a higher level of connecting to one's community, students will be asked to also present their work to a younger audience and display it at an elementary level school in the district. The creative process is important and how we help support students through that process and it is also important to have students share what they have created in a meaningful way that will allow for students to connect and get different feedback from their community on a larger level.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to understand how middle school students develop identity and find their voice through artistic community and expression. Hetrick (2018) identifies how middle school is a critical time for adolescence development, one that can be helped along with a well applied art curriculum. As such, this literature review will focus on conscientization, classroom connectedness through art pedagogy, and how art education and resilience can be a way to help promote adolescent social emotional health. While there is research on social emotional learning (SEL) and art pedagogy, which addresses social development and student agency, the integration of conscientization, classroom community and educational individuation has not been examined with middle school art students who have returned to in-person schooling after a year and half of remote online and hybrid learning amidst a global pandemic.

Art education is a unique way for teachers to tap into deeper understanding of their students, themselves, and the community around them. This research is important because schools are in a unique educational situation as a result of a global pandemic, and both teachers and school administrators need to assess how they responded, and consider new strategies to anticipate a better, more supportive response in the future. It is also important to integrate the focus of conscientization into the concepts of students' self-identity, social emotional development, and student agency.

In this review of literature, I will explain three main themes. First, I will define conscientization and how it integrates with three different forms of art pedagogy (community-arts based education, transformative art education and arts-based research). Second, I will discuss the importance of SEL in the arts and how social development, self-identity and student agency can help students find their voice, learn different perspectives and be able to understand their world. Third, I look at how art education and resilience can be a way to help promote

adolescent social emotional health.

Conscientization

There are many stages of consciousness that one can move through. Giselly et al. (2018) illuminate how Freire believed that one can move through three different stages: semi-intransitivity consciousness to transitive-naive and, finally, to criticism. Freire believes that the first stage is one where people are in survival mode so their only importance in the world is to make sure that they have what they need to survive. The second stage is based on the idea that the individual is learning and is thinking more deeply about themselves instead of just what they need to survive. Also in this stage they have a tendency to look for the “fix” instead of delving into root problems. The third stage is seen as the person continues to learn and their understanding becomes even deeper and more sophisticated. Once a person moves through all of these stages, then they move toward a more critical view of the world where change can happen. In order for students to find that important phase of consciousness, (Freire, 1970 as cited in Mernick, 2021) notes that “teachers should support students in developing a critical consciousness,” and that “artmaking... is an ideal medium for conscientization—the development of a critical awareness about our world and our role as active participants in transforming it” (p. 452). Kirylo and Boyd (2017) do also note that there is a fourth state of consciousness that Freire looks at called fantasized consciousness. In this stage, people choose to try to escape reality and become emotional and act irrationally.

Art can be used as a way of reflecting on the world around oneself and as a way to see it through multiple perspectives (Dewhurst, 2011). When students use critical consciousness and become aware of the world around them, they can become empowered. As an example, Dewhurst (2011) talks about a 15 year old student who found that social justice art helped with her attitude to change as well as social change. After creating art through such a process, she felt

like she had a better understanding of the world around her and that she could relate to some of the current issues in her world better than before. Additionally, she developed better tools to understand where she fit in with society and how they can create change for themselves.

“Ultimately, the goal of conscientization is that people come to a place where they can both denounce the structures that are oppressing them, and announce a new vision of the kind of situation or society they desire” (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017, p. 81). Further making a point that it is important to view conscientization beyond merely awareness but rather something that moves to action by becoming the catalyst for one's own social and political change (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017).

Art Pedagogy

Until now, the history of art pedagogy has followed three different lines: standard, multicultural and postmodernism-influenced art (MacGregor, 1992). The standard practice encouraged the study of mostly white male European artists. A reaction to this Anglo-European angle was multiculturalism, which was influenced by the civil rights movement to include more artists from non-European cultures, and therefore allowed the opportunity for students to have access to cultural traditions in which they may feel more fully represented. A further evolution of this new awareness in art pedagogy also brought into the classroom a political awareness from the postmodernist art movement and its influences on society. Each of these styles of teaching was relevant at its time but often became too far reaching in how it dominated the curriculum (MacGregor, 1992).

Community-based arts education

Community-based art education is primarily focused around the tools and teaching artists that are in the community (Lawton, 2019). This approach gives students opportunities to learn art technique and skills through community based projects, and these experiences can take place both in and out of the classroom. During these experiences people that participate in the

community based art learn from each other and connect more with the larger community, and build relationships through an artistic experience while learning about one another (Lawton, 2019).

Every community has its own origin in some history, which shapes its perspective. Morris (2008) argues that it is important that students are able to be exposed to the visual world that is current to their lives so they can create understanding about the world in which they live. Dewey's (1899) teaches that learning deepens when it is community-based. And Lawton (2019) suggests that this means relating specifically to the community the students inhabit and experience directly through their personal lives. Morris (2008) believes that it is important that the student find deeper meaning in their own art if it helps them understand their current culture, not just through history, but to what is relevant in real time. Hyungsook (2015) builds upon this belief by showing how community-based art education increases creativity and self-expression which helps teenagers to improve self-esteem. While researchers note the benefits of community-based arts, many teachers face the challenge of how to integrate it into a school setting.

Transformative Art Education

Campbell (2011) sees the holistic approach of education as a way of fostering and finding balance within the student. This approach to teaching and learning leads to transformation through self-understanding. The holistic style of teaching brings education in “alignment with the funda-mental realities of nature” (Miller, 2007 as sited in Campbell, 2011 p. 3) and that for this alignment to happen the” *transformation* model recognizes the wholeness of the student, where in the curriculum and the student are not separate but connected” (Campbell, 2011, p. 20). This is a form of teaching that is seen as more of a democratic style that connects teachers and students together, finding students' interests and helping them become better citizens through the

process. Campbell (2011) outlines how art documents where society has been, speaks to its future addressing the transformative process. The most important goal in education is self-understanding and once the students are able to deeply understand their world and what shapes who they are that is when self-transformation can happen (Campbell, 2011). Goldblatt (2006) also says that the transformative experience is when one changes to a higher state of understanding of oneself as well as becoming a better citizen in the world. Accordingly, “Art functions as experience. Processes of inquiry, looking and find-ing meaning are transformative, extending connections with what is good and right” (Goldblatt, 2006, p. 17).

Goldblatt (2006) goes on to state that “In his focus on a moral life, Dewey looks to art as a way to combine and exemplify democracy: the artist makes art available to everyone, modeling trans-formative processes based on personal and public experiences that society must embrace to foster the growth of its citizenry” (p. 32). To add to the idea that the transformative process can help us become better citizens. Ryan (2016) as cited in Bentz and O’Brien (2019) conceptual framework, stated that “art can attend to and transform emotions, creating positive emotions such as hope, responsibility, care and solidarity” (p.5)

If we view the creative process as leading to more agency, then we need to expand the view of teaching, teachers and those being taught (París & Hay, 2020). When children think of the learning environment as a co-produced creative space, then they invest more in their own learning and goals, often from one another and not from the traditional concept of ‘school’ where one is ‘taught’ rather than a place where one goes to ‘learn’ (París & Hay, 2020). Co-produced learning spaces also give more power to the accomplishments collected in the environment, as students also learn to take more credit and also responsibility for the things that go right and those that do not (París & Hay, 2020).

Arts-Based Research

Keifer-Boyd (2011) states the simplest definition for arts-based research is that “ art is contiguous with insight involving extensive research conducted by artists to create their work. ” (p.7) Keifer-Boyd (2011) goes on to say that “arts-embodying arts-based research is a multi-sensory way of exploring ideas or concepts that promote human dignity through sub- versive renderings of difference that dislodge hatred of self and others” (p. 12). As such, art has an impact when internalized through an active process. The idea appears to make more impact by direct involvement, so the outcome of awareness of social inequities is made very obvious to both audience member and artist through the collaboration.

Muhr (2020) highlights how arts-based research is a way to use a visual language instead of words to find differences of human nature and connectedness. They go on to note that this type of research is able to look deeper into emotions and experience because art can say things differently than words. Using art as a research form can tap into the cognitive aspects of oneself and can draw out unspoken knowledge.

As one example Keirfer-Boyd (2011) studied aging women and asked how their social invisibility forced viewers to question how we contribute to this bias and also the influence of the common perception of others in a youth-oriented culture. The bias needs to be seen from the perspective of the promoter and also the victim to see the difference clearly. Keifer-Boyd (2011) dissects arts-based research into five parts: arts-insight, arts-inquiry, arts-imagination, arts-embodiment, and arts-relationality. The first part of art-based research is arts insight which consists of researching information for their own work. The second part is an arts inquiry that has a parallel with qualitative research, which involves documenting and analyzing work or creative processes by observation, interviews or artistic development itself. The third part is arts-imagination. This is when the process of creating imagination is used to help with understanding

within one's life. The fourth part is arts-embodiment. This part of arts-based research is more internal and connects to experience through art as a way to internalize moral improvements through art. The last part of arts based research is arts-relationality. This part is about being immersed in the creative process, where the underlying belief is that one must know and learn about art by creating it.

Kowalski (2005) as cited in Keifer – Boyd (2011) studied self-portrait paintings and sculptures. He wanted to critically examine current scientific models of physical self-concepts. His inquiry into artworks is based on the belief that art embodies knowledge. Namely, “art embodies how humans perceive their experiences and other intangible concepts, sensitivities, and ideologies (Kowalski (2005) as cited in Keifer – Boyd (2011) p. 12). Like a Rorschach, self-portrait gives clues and evidence to how the artist feels about themselves. Closely interpreting how the artist draws elements, both accurate and inaccurate, of themselves physically is a great indicator of how they feel about these assets and liabilities.

There are many different ways that researchers view arts based research, and many of them have different ideas about what it is. Bagley & Castro-Salazar (2012) comment on how Barone and Eisner (2006) suggest that there are two parts to art-based research. This first is the part that supports the educational aspects of the research and the second is immersed in an inquiry process.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social Emotional Development addresses some of these complex issues from both a societal and individual perspective. In this section, the focus will be on social development, self-identity and student agency.

Social Development

Adolescents who participate in art are improving their visual language skills, and thereby their development to express themselves and their complex emotions and ideas about themselves Farrington and Shewfelt (2020). To look more closely at the complex adolescent mind and how it learns, Farrington and Shewfelt (2020) identified ten key classroom experiences: five that are action and five that are reflection. Action experiences include encountering, tinkering, choosing, practicing, and contributing. Reflection experiences include describing, evaluating, connecting, envisioning, and integrating. Reflection and experiences suggest some interesting ways in which neural pathways are built and developed. In regards to art tinkering, connecting and envisioning are of particular interest as they connect to studio habits of mind. París and Hay (2020) also state that art can say so much more than words. Art is a powerful tool to help students with self-regulation skills and help them build their own ideas and self-realization. When students make these connections and recognize their own thoughts about the world, this is when there is a greater possibility for change. París and Hay (2020) also note that if students know about themselves and what their perspectives are and others, then they can make choices about the world that they live in.

Self-Identity

During adolescent years, concepts of self-identity are constantly changing (Hetrick, 2018). Art provides a great outlet for expressing these changes in the self and can help students reflect on where they have come from and where they are headed; a process that is critical to understanding themselves (Hetrick, 2018). Art, even in its simplest forms, provides insight to how one thinks of oneself. Hetrick (2018) states that people are always changing, growing and working on their identities, so no one is a fixed value. Identities remain a work in progress, a process, and not a destination, so that learning about one's identity is about the journey, not the

end product. Correlatively, during art projects, it is important to give students opportunities to reflect and also see different perspectives of other students within the classroom. It is also important for the teacher to note that even though there are some aspects of identity that are fixed there are also many that are changing and will change throughout one's life. Supporting students in the creative process and talking about what is important to themselves can help with creating meaningful art, instead of replicas of what is seen in their visual culture (Hetrick, 2018).

One's identity does not stop with the self. It also can reflect the society that one lives in because it can shape who we are through experiences. For instance, Hetrick (2018) says:

Adolescents are at a time in their lives when they are developing their identities. When viewing television, they are able to explore the construction of identity through a variety of roles and life possibilities presented on the screen. (p. 166)

Students look at popular culture or their visual world to use in the ever changing idea of themselves, so community and surrounding influences can be a big part of creating negative or positive views of one's own self (Hetrick, 2018).

According to Hetrick (2018), during adolescent development students may be very self centered and focused on their personal surroundings. They may care deeply about how they are perceived by their peers and this influences parts of their identity. Hetrick (2018) also outlines how there are some parts of identity that are not changeable, there are some that can change, and there are even parts of one's identity that can change depending on different social contexts. Mernick (2021) further proposed that each individual exists as multiple identities within different contexts.

Self-expression is not just telling a story about oneself, but it is also how someone shows their life experience (Gude, 2009). (Hillman, as cited in Gude, 2009) argues that, "self expression can show understanding of the experience and their point of view, which is so much

more than telling a story” (p. 8). Gude (2009) also believes that through art, one learns many skills that benefit them in other aspects of life. Art gives students the opportunity to observe from a closer lens and think about meaning from different perspectives, which leads to understanding the world around them and where they fit into it Gude (2009). Furthermore, art education supports students in forming various habits of mind. Society is made up of a group of selves but within that is a complex series of emotional and intellectual events that come together to create the individual, the cells of society Gude (2009). Thus, “a thoughtful person in the 21st century's ‘self-identification’ identifies internal multiplicity, contradictions and incompleteness—accepts the complex and always shifting nature of the self” (Mitchell, 1988 as cited in Gude, 2009, p.9)

Student Agency, Empathy and Imagination

Student agency has the power to affect the direction of one's learning. It is important to empower the student so they feel like they are in charge of what they are learning, creating, and what information they are getting from each project. Thompson (2015) reiterates that “Piaget and Vygotsky wanted to know the nature of learning, offering only incidental (and sometimes facetious) pedagogical advice: Piaget is said to have described the ideal school as one in which children are in one room and teachers in another” (Thompson, 2015, p. 119). Adults are seen more as interference potential than guidance. Accordingly, a student without a sense of agency will be less motivated than one that has more agency.

Art can help students learn different perspectives and help them learn how to empathize with the perspective of others Fitch (2017). This helps students see the whole picture of a topic or an idea giving them a better connection with their fellow students. Having this connection and being able to see different viewpoints also can help with imagination. As such, art provides a canvas for growth and maturity and can record the changes and process from one year to the next. And according to Fitch (2017), imagination is key to developing empathy. If one can

imagine what it is like for another person, then they will also be able to use that form of imagination in their art. Through art, one can get a better understanding of self and others, and this can create connections between the viewer and the artist. Lawton (2019) states that imagination is critical to transforming society by changing the possibilities of the individual/citizen, so if there is no imagination, then change cannot happen.

Art, Trauma and Resilience

Some students have experienced trauma in their lives, and some show this more than others. Reeves (2020) found that 46% of students have individualized trauma and that there are more forms of trauma that are generalized by society, and collectively as a minority group. Because there are so many different forms of trauma, it can show up in varied ways in students. The first and most important thing for teachers to know is what that looks like for students in school (Reeves, 2020). Teachers might know about past situations with trauma, but they might not know about current trauma that students are experiencing (Reeves, 2020). The unknown trauma can show up as “anxiety, denial, depression, despair, rage and anger, grief, numbness, hypervigilance, fear, hopelessness, and feelings of shame” (Karcher, 2017, p. 124). It is important to know what these forms of trauma look like because the art classroom can be a place where students feel safe (Reeves, 2020). Therefore, stories of trauma can be shared through students’ art or verbally to the teacher. Although there are many considerations to think about when supporting students, it is important to encourage students to get help when it is needed. Offering them support of a counselor or even just checking in with other teachers of the student to make sure the support for the students is from multiple places. Once a teacher knows what hidden trauma looks like, then it is important to focus on art pedagogy that supports students with trauma.

There are many different ways to support and have students work through trauma with art curriculum. Even though art teaching can relate to art therapy in many ways, teachers that teach art should not dive too deep into this aspect of art teaching unless they know more about art therapy. Reeves (2020) discusses how art education curriculum should better support students who have or are experiencing trauma. proposes that teachers should pay more attention to four aspects of curricula: advocating for art teachers to guide students between art for self-expression, art to critique students' circumstances, art to imagine a joyful future, and art as an escape.

Hyungsook (2015) explains, however, that art gives students the opportunity to express themselves through the creative process instead of focusing on trauma in their lives. As an alternative, teachers should guide students to think about more positive issues. Another way is the escape of thoughts and breaking the cycle of thinking about traumatic events in one life is the creative focus commonly termed as “flow”. When a person gets into the flow of their art, their ideas and thoughts are directed toward the art piece instead of thoughts about negative things that are happening in one's life. Because of this part of getting into the “flow” while creating art, art can also take students to a new place away from stress and aggravation of life (Hyungsook, 2015).

Art can also have an important role in helping with trauma by cultivating resilience. Rutter (2012) views resilience as an ongoing developmental process rather than a set individual traits., whereas (Bernard, 1991 as cited in Hyungsook, 2015) says that resilience is a set of qualities that help with traumatic experiences . Rutter's (2012) definition allows for a rise and fall in levels of resilience based on different experiences, therefore meaning that resilience is not a fixed value. In order for students to have resilience, which is the power to recover from problematic experiences, they should have four different qualities: social competence, an ability to solve problems, being independent and having a direction and purpose (Hyungsook, 2015).

Along with these four qualities, students also should be flexible and have a positive attitude on life. Art helps with resilience by allowing the student to think of different perspectives and to visualize different outcomes to work out issues.

Lowenfeld and Brittain (1975) as cited in Hyungsook, (2015) also focused on the importance of elevating the role of art for mental and emotional health. As art educators we can include artists that have worked through challenging situations to give examples so students can look to them for it has made an aspiration. Additionally, the therapeutic role of art can be pointed out for discussing resilience.

Art can support individuals suffering from feelings of isolation. Wexler (2004) discussed the benefits of painting with disabled and sick people who felt alone. Painting gave them a sense of connection and appreciation. Metzl (2009) also supports the ability of creativity, specifically in and around natural disasters, to foster resilience. The creativity found in the art generalized the ability to adapt for victims of the disaster (Hyungsook, 2015).

A Canadian study, primarily of lower income immigrant populations, often refugees, shows a connection between art and community development (Beauregard et al., 2020). The issue here in this study was complex involving Xenophobia and prejudice toward newcomers entering an established community. The newcomers were different and therefore some were threatened by differing religious and social values. It was suggested that one way to ease this wide divide is to provide a forum, often a community based art program that puts the different populations onto the same project (Beauregard et al., 2020). This can provide an opportunity for a gap in world understanding and perspectives to be bridged, and can address a form of resilience for both the arriving newcomers and the existing community. The existing community gets the opportunity to improve its acceptance and tolerance of new arrivals and the new arrivals get an opportunity to express themselves in a foreign and often confusing new world which they seek to

understand. The community art activities can give both a chance to air out these complex differences and find a resolution that improves each community, both the new and the existing. In Montreal, the arrivals would possibly not have many interactions with the existing community without a new common project welcoming their participation. Beauregard et al. (2020) states that because community arts can cultivate connections between people that would not normally interact, they are seen as being a way to encourage community resilience.

Building a resilient student requires several components. Examples include art programs that provide support for growth and change, a school and student community that provide a safe space for students to express themselves, self-expression for healing, and a space that allows one to concentrate their focus and get into the “flow” of the art process (Hyungsook, 2015).

Safe Space and Community

Along with knowing what trauma looks like in students and utilizing art pedagogy that can help with trauma, it is also important for art teachers to maintain a safe environment for students to be able to open up in order to do the healing itself. Mernik (2021) explains that it is important to create a classroom that is a safe place for students to be able to express feelings. If this space is not created with explicit expectations, then “it can do damage to the students and the classroom community” (Mernik, 2021, p. 24). The reflective process can bring up many feelings that can be traumatizing for students, so knowing they are in a safe space will help them work through feelings that may occur. Schools are a central form of culture where students experience their cultural community (Hyungsook, 2015). In an environment of potential violence, exploring art can help the student develop their personality and creativity which in return can make them better able to process such trauma should it occur. Creating art can help with the school being a happy and safe place. This concept is not just literal, it is also about emotional safety, or that “Creativity can provide a safe shelter for individuals in times of stress. Creativity also helps

individuals learn from experiences and be better at problem solving in the future” (Hyungsook, 2015, p. 197). The space being safe is important for students to create, but creating art can also create a safe environment for the students. The actions are reciprocal.

Conclusion

Art pedagogy offers many ways to create significant and authentic connection within schools and their communities. In the past, the approach was not as multicultural and did not offer much beyond a Eurocentric perspective. The literature supports the benefits of integrating the student as a stronger agent in their own education. Some of the ways this can be accomplished are through applying the research methods that address conscientization, identity development and community-aware pedagogical methods. Some of the literature even addresses ways that teachers can help adolescents work through trauma and work towards their education becoming part of their overall wellness. A unique aspect of art pedagogy is its minimal dependence on words, allowing individuals different ways to find and express their voices.

The literature supports the idea that an art program can improve the mental and spiritual wellbeing of the students, especially those weaker in reading and writing skills. One specific method is through conscientization, which can help students form critical awareness during the process of creating and connecting students with their peers and community. The existing literature helps situate an understanding of the bigger picture of art education, like where it has been and where it can go in the future to best support students with the end goal being developing them not just as artists and students, but as good citizens within their community.

Additionally, the literature about SEL and identity can be applied to the current crisis of a pandemic and its effects on classrooms and teaching environments. Because students have been in a unique and new environment of remote learning due to the pandemic, the literature has a gap

in addressing issues of isolation from the school community and its extended effects on SEL. There is undoubtedly a need to understand these effects further.

The end purpose of this research is to see how teachers can help students develop their identity, gain critical consciousness through the art process (also known as conscientization), and to find connections, new perspectives on their community and become equipped to create change.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this research is to better understand how middle school students develop identity and find their voice through artistic community and expression. This study will also focus on conscientization, classroom connectedness through art and how art education and resilience can be a way to help promote adolescent social emotional health. While there is research on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and art pedagogy which addresses social development and student agency, the integration of conscientization, classroom community and educational individuation has not been examined with middle school art students who have returned to in-person schooling after a year and half of remote online and hybrid learning. I believe that it is not only important to have students participate in art projects about identity but it is also important to learn about their thoughts about the art process and how creating and presenting personal thoughts about oneself can connect them to their peers and their greater community.

Research Questions

This research was conducted using a holistic approach focused on a combination of student pre and post survey responses, Gallery Walk critique and discussion, and project samples. The teacher and administration interviews were conducted separately through survey questionnaires. The research was based on the following essential questions:

- How does student identity help with self-expression?
- How does art help students with connectedness within their community?
- How does community learning support middle school students in developing conscientization while honoring individuation?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

My research was qualitatively designed and informed by a constructivist worldview to investigate the importance of how middle school students develop identity and find their voice through artistic community and expression. As well as the importance of conscientization, classroom connectedness through art and how art education and resilience can be a way to help promote adolescent social emotional health (Giselly et al., 2018).

Qualitative data is more open ended without predetermined responses such as one on one or small group interviews. This approach was appropriate because it focuses on what students thought about their identity, how that reflects on their art and how art has helped them connect with their world. Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This style of research was appropriate because it focused on looking at how students thought about identity and how it reflected in their art as well as how art can help students create connections with one another.

A constructivist worldview approach seeks to interpret the subject's truth based upon their perception of the world around them, and these perceptions are not etched within each individual but rather from the interactions with others (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Constructivism is a system of beliefs that builds upon itself starting with broad questions from whose answers one "constructs" beliefs or opinions that are meaningful to their experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a teacher we often have some biases that can sometimes obstruct our objectivity towards our students and the classroom where we are being taught. Research that has a constructivist worldview forces us to question these biases and look at the actual student experience from their own perspective.

Research Design

My research sample sought to explore how students develop identity and find their voice through artistic community and expression. It was also important to hear what the principal and teachers also felt about the same topic. The process of this research included a selection of middle school students (7th - 8th grade level), and a principal from the site where the researcher works and an Assistant Superintendent from the district of the researcher. Additionally, one art teacher was included from a surrounding district, and with whom I have an established relationship with from prior mentorships.

Research Site and Entry into the Field

This research was conducted at a middle school in northern California, which will be referred to as River Middle School. This site was purposefully selected because I have been working at the school for the last three years. The process of this research included a selection of 4th period students (8th grade level), teachers and administration with whom I have an established working relationship. I had pre-existing relationships with the student participants as their classroom instructor for the past 1 to 2 years. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school name and participant names.

River Middle School currently serves about 690 sixth, seventh and eighth-grade students. River Middle School has been recognized as a California Distinguished School. The school's minority student enrollment is 40%. The student population is made up of 46% female students and 54% male students. The school enrolls 17% economically disadvantaged students. The student population included 60.3 % Caucasian, 19.0% Hispanic/Latino, 11.0% two or more races, 8.0% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.4% Black or African American. Of this student demographic, 14 % are students from low-income families and 5% are English learners (Public School Review, 2022).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Seventh and eighth grade students at River Middle School were recruited for participation in the study. A consent form was sent to their parents or guardians for permission to participate. This sample of students included multiple gendered and race identities. Student participants were solicited through direct invitation after a brief presentation given about the study's purpose and methodology during regular class time in the researcher's 4th period class. Students then had to fill out an assent form and get a consent form signed by their parents. As such, the study relied on a convenience population sample-based on the number of students who chose to volunteer to participate and received consent from their parents.

The principal and the assistant superintendent who were included in the research were from the same site as the researcher, River Middle School, and the teacher was a mentor art teacher from another middle school in the surrounding school district. These people were chosen to provide additional viewpoints and understand thoughts on student identity and how art can help connect students with their school community and the greater community they live in. The teacher and administrator participants were similarly invited to participate either in person or via email, informed of the scope and nature of the work and provided a consent form if they expressed interest in participating.

Methods

The data collection was conducted through interviews, written survey questionnaires, mid-process critique and product samples. The researcher conducted a study using a qualitative approach to look at and address some of the important gaps in education by understanding how middle school students develop identity and conscientization, and find their voice through artistic community and expression, classroom connectedness through art, and how art education and resilience can be a way to help promote adolescent social emotional health after a pandemic

where students were isolated through remote learning for a year and a half.

The students in this research project participated in a 4 week art unit structured around a sculpture unit

Step 0. The research included a pre- and post-survey with questions to bookend the art project. They were documented in a Google form and were confidential and only read by the researcher (see Appendix A).

Step 1. Students began the project by identity mapping. Students were asked to put their name and 8 lines branching out to different contexts in their life: school, family, friends, personal (hobbies/sports/talents), hopes and dreams, objects and possessions, past experiences, and creativity. (see Appendix B)

Step 2. Students were asked to create a rough draft of the identity letter with at least five symbols of self-identity and two sculptural symbols of identity.

Step 3. The letters were made out of cardboard, small dixie cups, tape, and packing tape. Each student chose a letter of their first or last name or a letter that has some kind of meaning to them. They figured out a block letter type of font to use and cut two out of cardboard for the front and back. Cups were placed in the middle of the boards and heavy weight paper will be used for the sides of the letters. They taped them together with packing tape on the outside of the letter. Once the letter was made then students used acrylic paint to add five or more images about their self-identity to the outside.

Step 4. When students were about three-fourths of the way finished with their projects, they did a Gallery Walk critique. They were shown how to walk through the room and talk about how it is important to know that this activity is to give each other positive feedback. Students were asked not to insult each other or their artwork. Students were also asked to stay on topic with their responses. Each student was asked a question about their art that they would like

students to comment about from a set of five sample questions. Each art piece had a question and a sheet of paper for students to write about the art next to it. Once the Gallery Walk was finished, 2-4 students were asked to share some thoughts about the gallery walk, what they observed or if they were inspired by anything they saw. Students turned in written comments from the gallery walk and the in class discussion and gallery walk process was documented by observation and taking notes. (see Appendix C)

Step 5. For the post-survey, students were asked about what they thought identity was about again to see if their thoughts had changed on the topic. They were also asked to reflect on the process and how they felt about the artwork that they created and where they would want to show there they would share their art in the larger community and why. Also they were asked how they would feel about showing their work (see Appendix D).

Step 6. Interviews/focus groups with students occurred in a 15 minute session after the sculpture unit. Students who volunteered were invited to be included in the student interviews/focus groups. All interviews were audio recorded on the researcher's cell phone which is password protected. Notes were taken during the interview, and students more comfortable with answering individual interview questions in writing may do so. Written information did not include any names or identifying information (e.g., addresses, phone numbers, personal references).

Teacher and administrator interviews consisted of a 20-30 minute conversation. Participant teachers and administrators were provided with interview questions ahead of time and notes were taken during the interviews. All written information excluded any identifying participant information. The interviews occurred on zoom, on campus at River Middle School, or in the researcher's classroom or on campus. (see Appendix E)

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis methods were used to analyze the pre and post surveys, mid process critique and interviews. During discussions in class memos were taken and observational notes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher of students, teachers and administration. After the mid process critique and after the debrief group discussions were documented in field notes, analytical memos and all visual material was cataloged. Once all data was analyzed all data was put into coding categories and then applied to data found in the research. After codes were categorized, indexed and data organized to look for patterns and similarities.

Validity

Most of the students who participated in the study were also students from the previous year and had developed a close knit community because of the pandemic. During this study of my own students identity, mental health and connectedness were of concern and may have created bias. I wanted my students to do well and to have positive findings about identity development, finding their voice in their artwork, and how artwork connects them to the community in which they live.

During this research project I had been trying to look more deeply into the meaning of the project and gauge the student's perspective of the creative process. I had been checking in with students more to make sure that I understood what they were trying to say in their work. If I had a better understanding of who they were and gave them opportunities to look more deeply at who they are so that they would be able to find how they fit into the world and connect with one another. Voicing our thoughts and ideas through visual art allows us to change our critical consciousness over time. Art projects in my classroom can be the beginning stages of this. In order to set this up, it was important that projects provide students with choices, develop artistic

skills and techniques and allow students to freely explore their own questions and personal expression of what they want to say through their art.

Art has helped me in many ways throughout my life. It has helped me look and observe life with greater detail. The process of creating has had a therapeutic feel to it and when I am in the flow of creating all I think about is what I am doing in the moment. When I first started teaching students I wanted to share my love of art and how it can help through life's challenges. Since I have been teaching for 9 years I have realized there is so much more to the process of creating art. Through this study, I have continued to look at multiple ways to support my students so that they recognize the benefits that the making art process can have in their life. I love being an art teacher so I can share my love of art with my students. I have enjoyed finding different art mediums and ideas for students to think about, and seeing what they come up with. In particular, I have embraced moments when I've sparked something in a student that inspires them to create artwork that truly shows their personality, or they arrive at something of which I would have never thought. I am continually connecting with them, asking how they are doing and asking questions about their art, what it means, what they are trying to say and how they are going to get the message they want across to their audience. My hope is that students have learned about themselves and their community through creating art, and discovered ways in which they could become positive members of their community by making interpersonal connections and seeing and reflecting upon different perspectives. Ultimately I have hope to help them find their voice and find joy in making art. Once they recognize this value, they can use art as a way to get through challenging times in their life.

To address my biases multiple validity procedures were used. First, data sources were triangulated by collecting data from more than three different data sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes. Since themes were created from different perspectives of

participants this process will add to the validity of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Second, rich data and descriptions of data found were used while documenting findings.

Maxwell (2013) notes that, “Both long-term involvement and intensive interviews enable you to collect ‘rich’ data, data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on (p. 126). Lastly, I used respondent validation by having students have access to the research information and have them give feedback about the accuracy of the study.

This helped make sure that all perspectives were represented correctly (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter 4: Findings

This research project originally intended to look into how identity reflects in one's artwork, how artwork can connect you to one's community and how it helps with social and emotional health. As the pandemic arose during my initial interest including its effect on overall identity, community and emotional wellbeing could not be overlooked. The question of how to cope with trauma that the pandemic may have caused, seems extremely relevant to these topics. Particularly, I wanted to focus on the use of art to reconnect students to their peers after one and a half years of comparative isolation and separation from social interactions caused by the new social distancing and remote learning environments. Research is still emerging on these subjects post-pandemic. After analyzing information collected through observation, interviews, pre and post survey data, critique, and a multi-level project, I found three major findings. First, the art process and flow can be a powerful way to help students reflect and develop a sense of joy that facilitates a connection between their own identity and an experience with freedom. The second theme illuminated how self-expression provides a way to connect to the world within and around us. The last theme was how important it is to have students engaged in the creative process because it can help students learn more about themselves and what identity means to them, which may nourish social and emotional health in adolescent age.

Process and Flow Creates Joy and a Connection Between Identity and Freedom

Process and flow are a large part of creating art and very important for students to be able to find joy in connection and be able to learn more about themselves. While interviewing another art teacher about the importance of process she stated that, “[process] can be a really powerful tool... to showcase who they are [and] tell their story.” Overall I feel like most students did tell their story with their art, showcase how they are and shared an emotion in their artwork, offering

nuance which made it interesting to see different personalities come out in each student's artwork.

The beginning of this project started off a little shaky for me and I thought to myself this is going to be challenging to present this to my students where everyone feels comfortable and safe with presenting their thoughts and ideas. Students were asked to brainstorm and think about identity and find symbols that represented the different parts about them. Coming up with ideas and also what ones they were comfortable sharing with other people in the class was part of the process that students found to be one of the more challenging steps. CoRo during an interview revealed that, “It was kind of hard [at first] to think of things to put on it...I know what I like. But whenever it comes to putting something down about me, it's hard because I don't know what I want to show people about me.” But she also said that it really helped to do the web diagram and brainstorm the different parts of her that she did want to represent in her artwork (Figure 1). However, through the course of the unit, KoRo described how in “building the actual letter” and through the “different steps” they “found that the whole process was really fun and it was fun to learn how to make everything and put it together.”

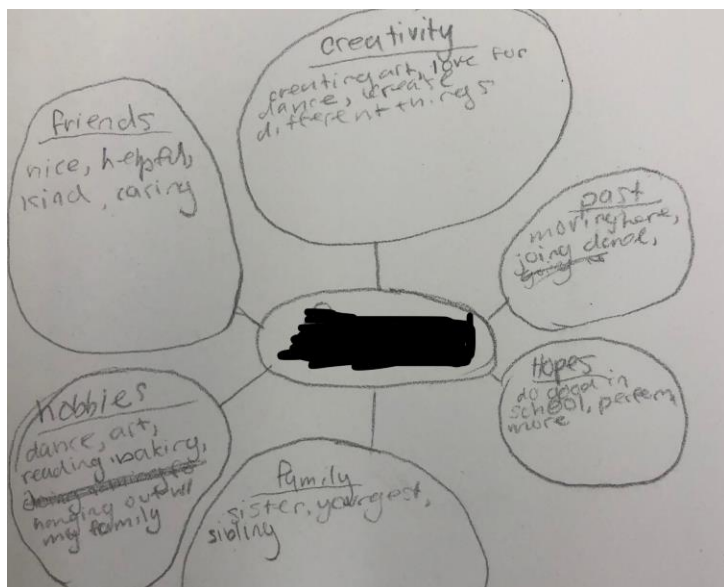


Figure 1 : This figure shows how students brainstormed for the final project

As they moved through the project and got through the brainstorming stage the students seemed to start to really be engaged in the project and the process. For instance, Jean stated that she really loved the process of creating this project, “especially when we were in the building process because I really looked forward to it” and because, “it was so customized” to each student.

After listening to what students felt was successful about the project and what they enjoyed about it, I found that most students were experiencing joy through hands-on exploration and through creating something three dimensional so that it worked and stood up on its own. This showed me that the process of creating can create a lot of joy and that is a very important aspect in order for students to engage with what they are doing. The act of doing something and seeing it grow from a vision into something that is in front of them also created a lot of excitement especially when they were pleased with their project.

The process of this project helped others learn a little more about themselves. Milo stated that this project, “helped me realize how much I like to keep to myself,” and that they would only, “express it to people sometimes.” It was clear that “before this project, I just didn't know why I kept it in.” And then they realized it is a “special thing” that “someone has to earn to know about me. I had hoped that this project would give students a chance to think more deeply about themselves so that they could possibly learn something about themselves they did not know before. This unit was designed in alignment with what the art teacher had stated, “assignments should be tailored, so that students are given the opportunity to look inward.”

Although not all of my projects allow for students to think about their identity and what it means to them and how they want to say about it, I do think that it is important to add an opportunity to reflect about oneself and what is important to them to a few projects throughout the year. I was surprised that most students had the stamina to keep working on the project even

though it took longer than most. I thought students would get tired and bored by the end. Since it was personal and unique to each person, most students kept with it and really enjoyed it. Seeing this engagement in the project has left me thinking of other ways to give students opportunities to look at what they think is important and ask them more about what they want to say in their artwork.

Overcoming Challenges and Resilience

Although joyful experiences took place during the building part of this project, there were also many challenges that Students learned from and grew from the challenges, which on one level can be seen as an approach to building resilience. Milo, a student with whom I have worked for three years, felt like they were “getting better at sketching and painting” since the first time they started taking art as a 6th grader. They mentioned, “I learned throughout this project that I can't sketch something so much that it's hard to go over with paint,” and they need to create a “rough sketch” because the “paint is what actually is going to show.” CoRo stated, “first, you have to like, actually think about it before you do anything,” that painting had challenges, and “the more I look at it, the more like oh, I need to go over this.” I think knowing when to stop is a challenging part of creating art because many times if you work in an area too much it looks worse than if you left it how it was.

Jean found that it was hard to use the paint, but she also learned how to help the paint go on smoothly. The process that worked for making painting easier after trial and error was, “sometimes when the paint is thicker, [and] adding water helps.” I loved hearing that each student had found out something new from the process of creating. Ham said they, “learn how to draw stuff that you never have drawn before.” and Milo said they “practiced different painting skills.” Each student had something to add to how they created their letter and what part of the process was challenging and the most engaging. They were eager to share their tips with one

another. I have noticed that even though I have told them many tips that work for me, they still needed the chance to figure out what works for themselves. Ham even said that, “if you tell me how to do it then it isn’t really my letter.” By the point in the school year when we were working on this project I think that most of my students have an understanding of how to use most materials, but this was the first time students had worked with cardboard and three dimensional shapes other than clay. Ham’s comment made me think more deeply about how it’s ok, even important, for students to make mistakes and then find ways to correct it. I do not think that the way that I do things is the right way, it is just the easiest way for me and sometimes that is not the same for students. Stretching and exploring and persisting when something challenging comes along is all part of the art process.

CoRo felt like there were some challenging parts of building the letter since it was a curved letter. She stated in the interview that, “I wanted it to be all round, but then I would have found that it would have fallen over.” She managed to figure out how to make it flat on the bottom and still have it stand and created a letter that was more of a bubble letter than some of the other letters in the class. There was also another student that created a unique shaped letter that was lowercase instead of capital like most of the class did. She even put serifs on the letter and put weight in the inside to make sure that it stood up correctly (Figure 2).



Figure 2 This figure shows how the first letter is so much different than some of the other letters created

The variety in the letter and what students found during the process were different from one another causing this project to be unique to each person. Syd even said that it had, “a lot more freedom” than some of the other projects and Ham also said something similar since they felt the “directions were kind of just free.” Although I do have requirements for the project since the project was more based on each student identity there was the ability for each student to feel as though they were creating something more unique since it was created on the idea of self and not as rigid of an assignment as some of the other projects that these students have created during the year so far. Students really valued the freedom of being to create their letter in a style that represented them. So in the end they looked at their personal identity through artistic expression and this helped them create unique pieces that represented them, their story, their perspective on things and who they are.

Finding Their Own Way

As I have been revealing, I realized during the process of this project that it was very important to let students find their own way of doing things. I had set up the requirements, gave them step by step instructions that I thought they would need. I then provided time to brainstorm, and reflect on their identity, what that identity means to them and how the rest of the project needed to be about their creative process. In an interview with the art teacher, we had ourselves reflected on the importance of the journey and process of artistic work. She shared that:

Sometimes, a student can kind of hit a wall, or can feel resistance because they don't feel successful. But if they come to appreciate the process of creating, then they can take that idea and apply it to other places in their lives.

This was a really powerful way of thinking about the process and how students might feel while creating. I know from experience that students in general want to feel successful with their work which in turn can create joy and confidence. She also stated that, “it's a process for you to

express yourself in whatever way you want.” In essence, when challenges occur, one thinks critically on how to move through these challenges so that they can feel that their art is successful. If they feel successful or have had success in the process then I feel that the artist can then appreciate their process of creating and will have gained confidence within themselves.

Most students followed directions and asked for help when it was needed with creating the letter. After I share information with my students I tried my best not to make my suggestions as I consider how my suggestions and the fact that I will be grading their work may unduly influence their process. Ham, one of my students is a student who loves to explore different processes and to do things for themselves. For example, as I was checking in with students and noticed that Ham had primed their letter and was painting it black. This does not seem like a big deal but it defeats the purpose of priming the letter. Before I could stop myself I exasperatedly said “What are you doing Ham?” They were a little shocked by my reaction. The whole reason to primer is to make sure that bright colors can stand out. Their response to this was, “If you tell me how to do it then it's not my letter anymore.” This made me think for a minute and then I agreed with what they had said. Although it is not my way of doing things they needed to find their own way and appreciate the process and journey that the art piece was taking them on.

There were other students that found their own way by creating things a little differently than what was shown to them. The example letter that I had provided was a simple block letter. I teach this style because it was the easiest style and I did not even think that anyone would do anything differently since I have never done this project with students before. I watched one student create their letter and although I was not sure their idea would work I did not say anything. I just observed each day the progress they had made with their letter. I had told everyone that they needed the letter to be two and a half inches wide in all spots so that the small dixie cups can be put in between the two pieces of cardboard for support, but in this one

student's art there were parts of the letter that were less than an inch. It was a lowercase letter and there were serifs on the ends of the letter.

I have had this student for almost two years now. We have talked about their work through many different mediums and they always added something different to each project and challenged themselves. The letter was unique and it stood up in the correct way after they added some coins and some heavy things in the middle. I checked in once it was built to ask what the process of thought was for them. They said that they did not want it to just be a block letter and when it did not stand up they thought it would help to put something heavy in it. They admitted that they did not know how they came up with the idea. I really admire this student and would hope to encourage this type of experimentation through the art process with some of my other students. This came naturally to this student. In each and every project they find a way that works for them so they can appreciate a creative process that feels successful and unique to their own art.

A Couple of Obstacles

The topic of identity was such a hard topic for all of us even though it had been talked about every year in each grade level of their middle school years. When I sent out introductory information to parents that I was doing a project about identity, I received some negative responses, such as parents not wanting their student participating in the study. I felt sad and upset about this reaction to a project that was meant to be about discovering something important to creating successful art. In the end everything worked out, but there was a feeling of uncertainty about whether I had chosen the right topic for this research project. I reached out to a school counselor and another teacher and they both reassured me that the students would be able to do this project, and that it was timely in the context of transitioning through the pandemic.

I also observed that if the process of this unit did not create joy for individual students, then these students were not engaged in what they were doing and would give up on the project or just create something that is good enough to move onto the next project. And in fact, some students did struggle, and some may have even found it more stressful than empowering. On the whole, most students overcome their challenges and made unique amazing letters that really represented who they are.

Connecting to the World Within and Around Us

Before this research I thought that self-expression through art and identity were more separate concepts. Instead I am finding that for many of the students it's very personal and individual how they respond to both the way art affects them and how they in turn affect or connect to their community. For some self-expression is an escape inward away from the influences of society and the world and for others it is the opposite and a way to fully integrate into the world.

As adolescents much of their exposure to the arts has been through computers and television and it is possible that these mediums that students are exposed to in the home or rather the privacy of the home as opposed to going to a gallery or a museum. The experiences are different because the accessibility through the technology is different. And this difference from even one generation before continues to change at a rapid pace how students view art and self-expression in general. Identity in a digital universe can change with a single post. The send button is permanent and in all likelihood affects how we view ourselves and others.

Since self-expression is based on identity, it is a necessity to have students think about who they are and how the world affects them or influences them. During this project I asked students about their identity and what it meant to them. It was obvious in some of the responses that they have talked about identity in other classes before, most gave examples of identity as

Jean said, "What kind of person you are as a whole" or CoRo said, "how you grow up, friends, family, sports shape your identity." I was not surprised by this but there were a few that stood out to me Jay said, "My environment shapes most of my personality and identity." I felt that this was interesting and a simple way to say how identity is shaped and what parts of their environment shape their identity. I wanted to know more about this person's environment and background that made them who they are. Joe also stated that, "deciding on how to act on your future to shape who you are and who you want to be is what matters." Do you think about decisions because you have a preconceived notion of who you want to be, therefore this shapes your identity as well. Maybe as a person that is learning about who they are they could try to be something and try it out for a little bit. It's like trying on a pair of new clothes and seeing if it fits or not and if it represents who you think you are or what you want to present yourself to the world you are like.

As an educator it is so important to give opportunities for students to connect with their world and where they fit into it. This was mentioned a few times in interviews with administration and with the art teacher. The art teacher gave examples of where art is in the world around us. For example when she does printmaking, she talks about the numbers at the bottom of the print and then asks students if they have any prints at home and have seen these numbers on the bottom of the page. In this project I thought about it and then tried to create a similar connection that could help students connect with the world around them. For this project every student made a letter out of cardboard, so I had students primer their letter white so that colors would be bright. I asked them if any of them had painted a room in their house before and if they had to put a primer coat down first. A few students said yes and I continued to say that is what we are doing with our letter. I wanted them to see this connection and support something the art teacher said, "art happens on many, many levels, and it kind of is all around us." I wanted to also give them the opportunity to "see the connection between their lives." In a separate

interview, a former principal made a good point that students are “struggling to understand how they fit into the larger picture. So anything that can help that they create that connects with the world helps them find their place in it.” In presenting art projects to my students I hope that I can help them find connections to their world so that they can see the value art brings to them. Many times I feel my students do not feel that art is important, but if they can see that art is all around us and a part of many things we do, then they can start to understand the importance of art and what it means to them.

Art is a unique medium that can help students express themselves in a way that no other medium can through visual symbols and emotions. In this project students learned a lot about themselves through self-reflection, the process of creating this project about them and connecting with other students about their art. They were given a few opportunities during the process of creating the project with their table groups or students that sat around them or during a gallery walk critique. Students walked around the room during this critique and were asked to reflect on what they saw and what they thought about the artwork they were looking at. It was tough for some students to write down what they were seeing and what they thought about the art, but it was a good activity to engage them on a deeper level about what they were seeing. This activity also gave them the opportunity to think about art and its meaning. Providing that space to the students helped them learn more about themselves.

Before starting the project I asked, as part of a pre-survey, what students wanted to “say” in their art. I did this because I was interested in seeing if they already had an idea of what they wanted their art to be about. In general I wanted to see if during the process the idea or meaning in their art would change or be similar to what they wanted their art to say. Jean said they wanted their art to have the message to “Be yourself, bring awareness to events in the world” and that “no one should be excluded from seeing art.” Another student, Luna, said “You can’t or

shouldn't change your identity because of clothes beliefs or ideals." CoRo offered that they wanted their art to have a happy message instead of a bad one and they would only want their family and close friends to see their art. When looking back at the project in a post survey students were asked what their message was in their art project that they just created? It seemed like some students had continued with the message that they first wanted to say in their art and some changed the message a little after creating their piece of artwork. In the end CoRo stuck to the same idea of a happy message. She added bright colors so that it would seem happy and fun when other people looked at it. Luna, though, decided that her artwork's message was "that it's ok to mess up and when you do you grow from it and become better." Although in the pre-survey it was a general question, and not specific to this project, it made me wonder whether the process of creating and connecting with others changes the message of art? Do we create art to say something to the world, or do we create art because it helps us cope with the world around us? And do these connections through the process of creating help us learn about the world and what is important to us?

During the course of this project, students participated in a Gallery Walk Critique, during which they walked around the room and looked at each other's art as if through an art gallery or a museum. Students made comments when they liked something and touched art even though they were asked not to. Since this was a critique they were asked to: describe what they saw; interpret what they thought the artist was saying; what the mood of the art was; and what they thought was successful. I found that many students were able to talk about what they saw and what they thought was successful, but when it came to talking about what they thought the artist was saying or the mood, they had no idea what to put down. They either stated what appeared to be the obvious, or if they had inside information about the person whose art was being observed they responded with information and ideas that were not actually obvious in the art. These students

had a hard time analyzing the art and telling what they thought the art meant, the mood or what the artist was trying to say. This might have happened because they have not had enough experiences giving feedback or talking about different styles of art. Since they might have little experience they might not know what different art means to them or have not had a chance to think about it. Another reason students were not really able to share that much about what the mood was or what they thought the artist was saying was maybe they did not want to be wrong about what they were thinking about each other's art. Other students during the creative process expressed that they wanted students to understand exactly what they were thinking and not have misinterpretations of what they are saying. So maybe on the commenting end of the critique they did not want to misunderstand what their fellow artist was saying so they only put down the obvious. I hope in the future to have students try this again because I think it is important for students to talk about what they see, think and wonder about and give their peers feedback about their work. This gives them multiple viewpoint perspectives about their work and sometimes my feedback about their work is not as valued as what a peer evaluation of their work could be. There is a big difference between understanding something and explaining it.

The former principal at River School said there is a “mutual exchange of connectedness when students are expressing themselves and sharing ideas and messages in their art.” There were a few times when students mentioned feeling more connected during this project. That might not have happened in other projects. Milo said that, “even when sitting in your seat you could look at another student's project and learn a little about them and what they liked.” Syd shared that this project, “feels like you do stuff that you're interested in. And then you can see what other people are interested in,” which can then connect us more with the people in the classroom. Along with being able to see things to connect with in other students' art such as symbols or images of different things on the letter, students were also connecting by talking

about different techniques they used or how they created certain colors. I did not even think about it before I talked to a few students in an interview but the way students got paint from a central area in the room gave them more opportunities to connect with one another, whereas in the past I had created supply bins that had everything they needed so they would be able to sit in their seats and have everything they needed. Students found connections in just working side by side with their fellow classmates. Even though they were working on their individual project they could talk with the person next to them and see what they were doing and ask questions or get inspiration from one another. Something they saw on their tablemates' artwork could spark an idea for something on their own art.

Sense of Respect

Before the critique I let students know why it is important to look at other students' art, tell what you see and talk about what inspired you or stood out to you as successful and give positive feedback to your classmates. This way they receive different perspectives or viewpoints about the art under observation. Critiquing can also help as artists see something they may not have thought of or are inspired to try something not done before. Critiques foster collaboration and community, and give us a chance to interact with one another while the art as the focal point. In doing so, we get to know each other better. We are able to discuss our thoughts and interpretations in a safe space. As we think and write down what we think, we understand ourselves better. At the same time, we begin to understand others, their motivations, and beliefs. We are able to compliment students where they are successful which gives students a sense of respect from others and can also have students be more aware of the value art brings to themselves and others in the classroom. Students are learning about self-expression through seeing art and what type of value it brings to their lives by having it presented in the classroom. Students notice this through witnessing the different approaches and ideas represented in artwork

of others. This project gave students autonomy in their artwork and independence while making decisions. Students were able to look and see differences in the project and were able to respect the differences within what they saw. This can be seen as similar to the idea that professional artists put their art out into the world just like these students did in the classroom but on a smaller level. Although I did not make this connection for them during this project it would be important to share the parallels between professional artists sharing their work and its importance for connection with one another and sharing different perspectives about what they see and think about art.

Included here are three art pieces from students and what students thought about them. Ham thought a student's art piece was successful because her art “was so clean. And all the edges were so straight. And the colors were solid colors, just straight and there were no overlapping things. "and they continued to say, “She had a beach with the sky and it went into condos and the night sky. So that's cool.” This student's artwork was not pictured below but Syd said that Jeans were that way too, like really nicely painted and so clean and neat.” Jean replied with a thanks and a smile. She accepted the compliment which can build your confidence as an artist even if you might think this is wrong or does not look right because an artist always knows the piece of artwork inside and out and all the flaws whereas a peer viewing for the first time might not see the flaws at all. Syd also was able to learn a lot about this artist by just looking at the art piece. She noticed that, “she liked the color pink based on the choice of the background. She described what she saw like “she is good at school, art and she likes music because of the symbols that were used.” She thought that “the symbols were the most successful part of the project because they were neat and clean.”

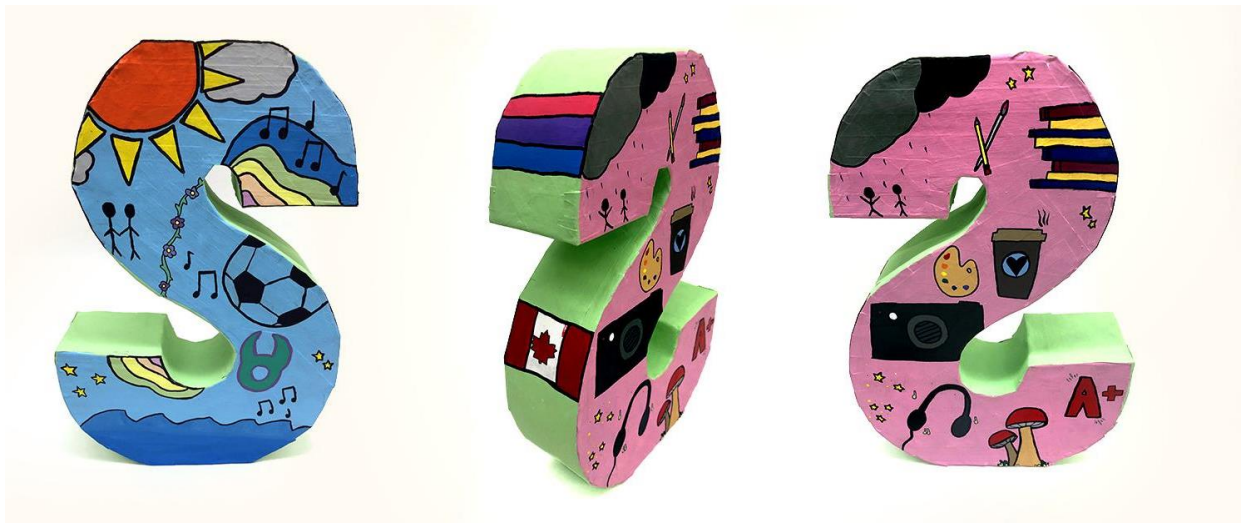


Figure 3 This is a sample of Jean's letter front side and back

CoRo's was described by another student as, "having lots of color and line. The color palette is pastel and it made me feel at peace and happy when she was looking at it." She also said, "it feels like a warm summer day with a breeze in a meadow, her art was highlighting aspects of their personality, and the mood is light and airy." She felt like, "the rainbow really stood out to her and it pops against the light blue background." Jean said CoRo's letter was successful because, "she kind of had both where she had a landscape and she had symbols. So it was kind of like the sky. And then she had some of the things she liked. It was like seen, you know, it was also really clean. Really neat."



Figure 4 This is a sample of CoRo letter front side and back

Although Luna did not get much feedback about their art piece, a few students said they thought the clouds and fish were the most successful part of the art piece. Another student added to this thought by saying, “I think the flow of the water is shown very well, you can see where emotion was put into an element and what it was that was felt.” Syd also said, “I wasn't able to come see it through the walk, but I liked her D. It was a font, it wasn't just what you'd think of a capital D. And it looked really cool. Like they had all these like designs and stuff on it.”



Figure 5 This is a sample of Luna's letter front side and back

Engagement through “Voice and Choice”

When you give a student the freedom and choice in their artwork it can spark their interest and this can then engage them in their art project. The former principal from the River School had identified the same thing during our interview by saying that,

If you get to create or write or design something that's important to you, you're invested and engaged and then when you're engaged you push yourself more, and you learn more.

It taps into the pieces of the brain that I think help kids formulate who they are.

If this is true then if students are given a project with more freedom and choice then it will also allow students to have a space for them to use their voice in their artwork. The former principal also highlighted the role of “Voice and Choice” that they had used for a writing program in the nearby elementary school. This program could be seen as a parallel to what could and should be done in art to encourage engagement. Students were given the choice on what they were writing and teachers were reported that their engagement was high. After observing my students for four weeks during the process of this project I felt like the engagement was also high due to the fact that it could be unique to each student and it allowed them the freedom for them to make it their own.

After our Gallery Walk and critique of students' artwork, Jean voiced to the group that one of her observations was that she liked all the different styles in the letters. She always has a way to voice what she is seeing that gives me another perspective. This helps make things more clear to me and highlights aspects of the project that I did not think of before. This way of viewing things could be seen as engaging with aesthetic diversity. Another way that I saw Jean engage during this project was with others. Throughout the process of this project Jean said, “It's just nice to chat and do art.” Although when we think of engagement solely with our artwork there are many different forms of engagement. This student was engaged with her work but she

also was engaged with others as well during the project. She talked about her art with her tablemate and also connected with them on different levels by sharing ideas with one another about how or what they should add in their art piece and in this case even share a color of paint that Jean had made too much of. Jean said, “You could see what other people were doing and then make it your own.” I loved how she added “make it your own,” because many times, in the past, I had seen a few students, especially ones who sit near each other, have the same thing in their art pieces. Engaging with peers and talking about art with one another is important for gathering different perspectives on a project, and as the current principal at River School shared, we are “stronger together” and:

With all those skill sets together, then you're able to solve more problems, or come up with something more creatively, because I'm going to have an idea that they wouldn't have thought of, but we put our two ideas together, then that sparked something.

I think that is what happened in Jean’s case. She was engaged with others and then those conversations and ideas helped her think about her art in different ways.

Another student who was engaged in his project from the beginning to the end, showed his love for graffiti in his letter, and with graffiti quotes and visual images that supported them. The graffiti style is regularly represented in all of his work, but the letter he created was a little different than some of his other art pieces that he had created over the past two years. He starts off each piece with excitement and can sometimes get overwhelmed by the process or not like how the look of the project is going and lose interest. With this project, it was different. He created the letter and then worked hard adding to each side and really thinking about it carefully. He thought about the color and placement of things and how to fill each empty space so it looked finished. He was always excited to come in for study hall to work on this project whenever he could. This student also struggled with visual images and words for support. He once asked what

I thought about adding a word to the image. I asked if the word was necessary to get the meaning across to the viewer. He said he really wanted the viewer to know exactly the meaning of the image, and that if he did not put the word then people might ask what it meant. He did not say that he did not want to explain it to people, but the way he was talking about it gave me the feeling that he wanted the piece to talk for itself. I also saw this show up with another student's artwork as well. Although this was just two students that voiced they wanted to communicate their ideas in a specific way I wondered if this is the same for others. If students have limited experiences voicing their ideas to the world do they then need them to be seen in the correct way or will this change over time and experience with self-expression? It seems like although I only had this conversation with two students, they really wanted people to know the actual meaning of their work with no room for interpretation. Is this viewpoint about their work because they have had limited experiences with creative expression and presenting it to their peers and school community? Or could it be because they have strong opinions on what they believe in and do not want them interpreted incorrectly, which may lead people to see them and their identity differently than they wish to share it with the world.

Engaging with Community: Possibility and Potentials

There are a few other findings that I thought were interesting. First, although we have not shown the art pieces to other people than in the classroom, I did ask students if it was important to show their art, where they would show their artwork and how they think it would make them feel to show their work. I got a mixed response from students. Some wanted to show their work and some that did not. One student said they thought that it is great to share your art with the community, “because you receive constructive criticism from showing your work and receive multiple perspectives on something that is always better than one.” She would like to show her work in “a place that draws the most people so school would be a great place” and she feels

comfortable sharing her work on the school campus. To me this shows a student who is excited about her art and believes that sharing is an important part of the creative process. Milo thought that:

It is important to show your work to the community because for me art calms me down and looking at other people's art is also calming. It also gets you to think what the meaning is behind the art piece and I love it when it's a guessing game and it's not super easy to figure out, I also like it the other way too.

They shared that she would like to show it to preschoolers, “so they could have a colorful three dimensional letter and do that for the whole alphabet.” She found, “from experience that color and shapes get little kids attention faster than words.” Although Milo thinks it is important to share their art and found it most meaningful to present to younger students, she did not want to share her art with her school community because, “it is just not the type of art that I would like to show, it's not my style, and I don't like the symbols I put on it.” So maybe what this student is saying is that because the art did not turn out the way she thought it would, she did not want to show it or that it was too personal for her to share with her school community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence shown in the research project aimed to look closely at the creative process and flow of the project can help students find joy in diversity and that finding their own way is important to the creative process. The students in this study were given a project that was set up to show each student's specific identity in the form of symbols and images about themselves and because there was freedom and more choice given with this project students were able to find joy in the diversity of this project. Students found that, because of the freedom and choice, there are stylistic varieties of art in this project, making it unique to each student. Because of this there was more student engagement in the project. The project had some

challenges related to construction and planning the building of the letters, and through exploration most students were able to find a way that made sense to them to resolve whatever challenges they faced. As an art teacher I also found that it was important to step back and let students find their own way instead of telling them they are doing it wrong. There are so many ways to create the same thing in art and if we all made the same exact thing then the art created in the world would be so very boring.

The first research question was *How does art help students with connectedness within their community?* The result from the study showed that not only is the creation of art a way to express oneself, it is also a way one can connect to the world within and around us. During the process of this project students found that they were able to connect with their classmates in a different way because of the nature of the project. Because students had created identity letters about themselves, students were able to look at each other's work and see visual information that they never knew about each other and then have conversations about things they noticed that were the same, different or something that surprised them about their classmates. This type of collaboration and engagement through the art process has shown me that not only is it important to give students space to express themselves but it is also important to give them space to struggle and persist with challenges and to give them space to create their own style of art and feel successful and unique with what they created. It also showed that not only is the process of creating something important to learn about oneself, it is also important to connect with others. There were many opportunities that were accidental that created connections between the students and also some that were more formal and planned. In the end that connection between one another was also a very important part of the process of creating and exploring and learning from one another and sharing one's art to the larger community so the viewer can start to understand the artist's world and their perspective.

The second research question was *how does community learning support middle school students in developing conscientization while honoring individuation?* The information found showed that community learning was important for seeing each other's perspective and finding inspiration from one another. This then helped with students reflecting who they were and what they were comfortable saying as an individual artist to their classroom community. Community learning also reinforces individuation by allowing the artist to get feedback from the group on their individual pieces.

The third question was *how does student identity help with self-expression?* This project of creating an identity letter has shown me that there are different kinds of engagement in the art process and how that can help with students learning about themselves. Since the project was flexible and each student was able to create a unique piece of artwork that represented them they were able to engage in what they were doing and find out more about themselves in the process. In my findings it was important that students are creating something that is personal to them, and that they can connect to their lives so that engagement with the project can happen on a deeper level. The process of thinking about identity gives them clarity about what they would like to express in their artwork. If they know themselves in their identity and what is important to them then they will be able to share these ideas in a better way than previously.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study looked into the importance of the process and flow of creating art, how this process can help students learn about themselves and use this to express themselves through and as well as connect with their community through the creative process and sharing their art with their community. The findings also indicate that in order to find joy in the process of creating there should be exploration, overcoming challenges if some should occur and a sense of freedom within the project which was phrased as “voice and choice.” During exploration in the creative process, findings showed that it was important for students to find their own way instead of being told what to do by the teacher. The literature and the research both found that the teacher should be a guide and support system for the student during the creative process. This helped students have ownership of their creations so they could show their individual identity and voice in their work.

The research findings and the literature review have some similarities. First Freire’s concept of conscientization (Mernick, 2021) mirrored the ideas that the process of creating and looking inward about oneself that I asked of my students in this project, as a way of inviting more of a critical awareness about who they are and how they fit into the world around them. There were some examples where after reflecting on their project or moving through the process of creating, they found out something new about themselves that then helped them see more of who they are, what was important to them and more perspectives about others. The process of developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action is one of Freire’s concepts. Also, Mernick (2021) notes that it is important that the teacher should be supporting students in the process of creating. This idea was also mentioned in the interview with another art teacher. Having art projects that are tailored for students to look inward to have the

opportunity to think more deeply during the creative process and the critique conversations and comments reinforces the idea of conscientization in the art classroom.

This project was one of the more open projects students have had, and it provided opportunities for students to reflect on their identity, personal feelings and their identity. In the literature it mentioned that without agency, students will be less motivated or engaged (Thompson, 2015). My findings mirrored this, in the fact that if students had more freedom or thought they had more agency with the project, then there was more engagement in the creative process. In my findings the process and flow of creating presented students with a sense of joy.

Implications for the Literature

The findings of the research highlights the process and flow that creates joy and a connection between identity and freedom. The research project focused on the process and observation of the experience of each student giving a more in depth idea of what happens during the process of creating. In the findings, students found a sense of joy while creating their project and needed a sense of freedom to create the art that they wanted to create in a way that was their own. Whereas the literature did not focus on the sense of joy students receive while creating, the literature did touch on the idea of student agency (Reeves, 2020). And as the teacher I was able to guide them on this journey, as opposed to dictating the steps they took, by having a more open ended project that was focused on identity. It gave them the chance to reflect about what was important to them and what they were comfortable sharing about themselves. During the study it also came clear to me that my role in this process needed to be more hands off sometimes so students could find their own way. What this means to me is that there are many ways to create, so it is important for students to explore, make mistakes, overcome challenges so in the end they can say that they created this piece of art instead of saying that someone told them every step in order to create it. When they explore and share ideas with one another they can find ownership in

their creation and through this project I also saw a sense of confidence and pride that was acquired by creating something that was uniquely theirs.

Also findings from this research showed three ways that students connect to the world within and around us through art. First, students found connections while creating their artwork in the classroom. During the process of creating, students were able to see personal symbols that represented themselves and were able to make connections with others through things they did not know about each other, similarities and differences just by looking at each other's art pieces. The visual language in each piece gave students the opportunity to start conversations that they might not have been able to start before due to the lack of knowledge about one another. Students also connected with each other about techniques that they had found to get through some of their challenges during the creative process. They were building community by helping one another with the process of creating. I loved that they solved some of the challenges by connecting with one another instead of asking me for help instead.

During the Critique students were able to more formally write about what they saw and give some feedback about each other's art which was another way students were able to connect with one another by reading responses and getting different perspectives about their artwork from their peers. In the literature there are similarities with Community Arts-based education (Lawton, 2019). Lawton (2019) states that encouraging a community-based teaching and learning experience can take place in and outside of the classroom and this style of learning experience gives students opportunities to learn from one another and about their community through art. The findings of connections in the classroom could be the start of a Community Arts-based education style of teaching. If the students were to take their art to the next step and share it with the larger community they live in, then I would consider this project to be part of this style of education. For example, one of the students in this study mentioned that she felt it

would be most powerful to represent an alphabet of the letters they created in an elementary school. For a future step with this project it could be presented to the larger community in this way and also some of the middle schoolers that created the art could present their art or even make a few letters with elementary students. Students having to describe the process and or teach the process to another group of younger students would also allow for themselves to learn more about themselves in a different way. When it is community-based what they have learned really sinks in (Dewey, 1899).

Implications for Practice and Policy

Classrooms

In order to have more engagement in the classroom there needs to be more voice and choice for students. If students have more opportunities with projects that are more open-ended and involve fewer requirements, students will be able to find their own way and experiment during the process and flow of a project. There will be more engagement and therefore more unique and interesting projects created. Along with more flexible projects the teacher should be a support person to guide students to finding their own way that works for them. Many times I feel that students look to me for the answer, but since there are many ways to create the same thing in art it is important to ask questions in order for the students to support them in the creative process. This way they have to think about what works for them and what they want to say instead of creating art that is in my perspective instead of theirs. Lastly, it is important for the teacher to give students the opportunity to create art about themselves and their ideas and experiences. If students are given the opportunity to look inward they will be able to create more meaningful art about themselves or their ideas and learn more about themselves.

Another thing that I found important was that students also need the chance to look at greater varieties of art, reflect on what they are seeing, and analyze art in general. Most students

could write about what they saw, what they thought the artist was saying and what they thought was successful in the artwork. But what I did not really see was students talking about their art in a constructive way. In order to support more comfortable conversations about art in the classroom it has to be something that happens more consistently during the school year. Perhaps a think and pair-share activity before they share to the group would help cultivate conversations further, if they had a chance, first, to talk to a closer table mate about their ideas. My students have a strong understanding of art techniques and the elements of art and principles of design but they are lacking in how to interpret what they see. I think I would like to do a few more activities such as looking at famous pieces of artwork and doing an activity called See/Think/Wonder. This type of activity is a way to think about art, what students are observing and what that means to each individual. It might even be possible to start the class off with a question of the day or question of the week about how art could help create comfort in talking about art.

Schools

At a school level, teachers should be supported by administration in curriculum development with more open ended projects where there is more voice and choice for students. Also teachers should be supported with professional development that supports teachers and specifically art teachers in how to facilitate more meaningful conversation and dialogue about art and the art process as well as having critiques that are equitable for all students' learning abilities.

Schools can invite artists on campus or have students visit practicing artists in their community. The latter would especially provide an opportunity for students to connect with the local community of artists and witness the world around them. These forms of participation in collaborative art projects will help students not only connect with one another through the process like seen during the identity letter project but also on a grander level, which can allow them to connect with their community and see the importance and value of art in their world.

Educational Policy

In order to help students connect and share ideas with their community art teachers should have a project that is based on working with practicing artists in the community. This would help students connect with the larger community that they live in and help them see the connection and value of art in their own world.

Teachers should also be trained in facilitating discussions and conversations about identity and challenging or critically engaged topics in class so that students can express themselves in a way that is safe for everyone. Although these conversations can be challenging and even scary for teachers to facilitate in class, they are important to have with students and to tie directly to art and the art process. In my research, I had to go to a counselor to help with how to present some of the things, in this project, to my students. Therefore it would be beneficial for all teachers to be trained by a counselor or other expert in discussion facilitation to better be prepared for challenging conversations with students. Since I know our school looks at identity at every grade level, it would be also beneficial to have a workshop or meeting to help parents learn more about identity, so that the school, students and parents can be on the same level of understanding of the meaning of identity so as a community we can break through the barriers of the unknown or any associated fears.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations of this study. First there was a short time frame that the research was done in which consisted of a four week project. The research only focused on ten students within one class period and only two of them were male students. Out of the ten students that participated only two identified as Latinx participants, and one student as Canadian. The lack of diversity in the study may have caused a skewed perspective on the findings.

Data was collected during class through pre and post surveys, brainstorming sketchbook activities, critique reflection on artwork, observation, discussions during class time and from the artwork directly, but information used was limited to only students that were participating in the study, therefore if interesting views came up from other students they could not be used in the study. Interviews with students, administrators and another art teacher were done during prep periods, lunch or afterschool when interviewees were available to come in and use their free time to interview. It is possible that outcomes to this project would be different if the study was integrated into the project more during class time and with more of the student population.

Many of the students who participated in the study were students in my classes for the past two to three years. Therefore, many of these students know who I am and have experienced a unique situation of working and creating art together through a pandemic. As such, my own biases could cause some limitations in this project, because I really wanted these students, who I knew so well, to share their inner ideas and thoughts about identity.

Future Research

In future research it would be helpful to have multiple projects exploring identity and connectedness within one's community as well as broadening the participants to all of my 7th and 8th grade classes. This would help diversify the population within the study, introducing more perspectives and viewpoints. Also extending the study to not just the art process, but also how and where it would be displayed after it was created. By taking these projects to the next level and by displaying them in the greater community there would be more of a connection for students outside the community of the school. Sharing art with communities, getting feedback about their art and seeing other perspectives about their art is important for us as artists to get a broader perspective of who we are and how we might feel we fit into the world we live in or understand our world better. Extending the study to also cover how and where it is displayed

might also give another perspective of how students connect with their community outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

In this study my findings showed me that it is important to give students the opportunity to look deeper at their own identity and how they can then use that information in their art in a unique and meaningful way. The process and flow of creating is very important for students to work through. There may be challenges to overcome and moving through challenges to create a successful project can give a feeling of joy to the students and can help students build resilience through trial and error. Because of this research I have found that more choice in a project can cause students to be more engaged in what they are creating, and therefore creating more of a voice and uniqueness in each individual's art piece. My students have taught me that it is important to let them explore the process of creating so that they can find their own way in the creative process that works for them. There are many ways to do the same thing in art. I can teach them techniques but doing and exploring and trying different things are all part of the process of creating art. Lastly it is important for students to share their thoughts and ideas with each other to form a sense of community that is safe where they can see similarities and differences that connect them with one another.

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Appendix A:
Sample Pre-Survey Questions

1. What is identity?
2. Who am I?
3. What factors shape my identity?
4. What parts of my identity do I choose for myself?
5. What parts of my identity are determined by other people or by society?
6. What parts of your community have influenced who you are?
7. What activities or groups have you participated in that you identify with?
8. How do the communities you participate in affect how you interact with art?
9. How would you define yourself to someone else?
10. What are some past experiences that have shaped who you are?
11. What role does art play in your life outside of school?
12. If you could send a message to the world through your art, what would you say? Who would you want to hear your message, and why?

Appendix B:
Sample Identity Map Questions

1. Identity. Who are you....?
2. What are some of your skills, talents, hobbies, hopes, likes, dislikes, etc.
3. What makes you unique and how do you express that in your art piece?
4. Do other people or things define you as a generation? (companies, brands, etc)
5. Tell me about your family.(relationships, beliefs, traditions)
6. Friends
7. Elements that you could include into your “Identity Letter”
 - Favorite Colors
 - Skills/Talents
 - Activities-Sports, Clubs, Interests
 - Hopes, and Dreams
 - Favorite Foods
 - Music
 - Subjects of Interest
 - Hobbies

Appendix C:
Sample Gallery Walk Critique Questions

1. **Describe and Analyze** (Tell what you see by using the Elements of Art- line, shape, form, space, value, color and texture).
2. **Interpret** (What do you think the artist is saying? What is the mood of the art? What is the story being told?).
3. **Reflect** (What do you think the most successful part of the artwork was and why?)
4. Does the letter meet all of the requirements for this project? If not, what is missing?

Appendix D:
Sample Post Survey Questions

1. What did you learn about identity from this project?
2. Do you feel like this project has helped you in a positive way? If so, Why?
3. Do you feel that this project has made you more aware of your identity and your role within your school community?
4. How does this art project make you feel about yourself? Has it changed any thoughts about yourself? If so, why?
5. How does creating art about yourself make you feel?
6. What message do you feel your art project represents?
7. If a friend was looking at your art piece what would they say about you?
8. Do you think it is important to show work to your community? Why or why not? What can be created, communicated or shared in a community?
9. If you were going to show this artwork in the community where you live, where would you think would be the most meaningful place to hold this art show?
10. How would it make you feel to show your work to the school community somewhere on campus?

Appendix E:
Sample Student Interview/Focus Group Questions

1. After seeing the classes' art pieces, were there any that really stood out to you? Why or why not?
2. Was there anything that surprised you about this project or the artwork created?
3. What part of this art project was the most engaging and why?
4. How important is it to you to create art?
5. Do you feel that art helps with stress and anxiety? If so, why?
6. Do you feel like this art project was successful? Why or why not?
7. How does art class help you with self identity?
8. How does art help you feel connected in the world?