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Re-engaging disenfranchised Australian youth with education through explorations of self-identity, experiences and expression in Art

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ABSTRACT

This small scale research project undertaken in Australia investigates how an art-based approach can re-engage disenfranchised young people into education. The project was undertaken as part of Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme by the main researcher in Australia, at an educational setting for disenfranchised young people. The collection and analysis of qualitative data demonstrates how art stimulates students' interest and provides support in self-expression and communication. Methodological strategies involved visual art activities that promote self-confidence and self-esteem, which enhance well-being and supportive teaching relationships. Using self-reflexivity through visual creativity was found to help participants in developing more positive self-image and enhanced their self-confidence as learners.

KEYWORDS:

youth, disenfranchised, self-expression, art activities, self-exploration.

Introduction

This article reports a small-scale research project which set out to investigate how disenfranchised and disengaged young people could be supported through art to explore self-identity and whether this might lead to enhanced academic engagement. It was carried out as part of an outreach programme for an independent school in Aus-

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tralia, with the outreach being situated in a Police Community Youth Centre (PCYC). The centre offers young people of secondary school age an alternative approach to mainstream education. From a cohort of students 3 self-selected participants took part in the project though the whole group shared all of the experiences as they would typically do. These young people had been unable to engage in mainstream education due mental health issues, drug use and trauma, family violence or anxiety issues. Within the outreach facility a trauma-informed teaching and learning environment is provided. Trauma informed practice is built on a strengths based framework which emphasises safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment as well as respect for diversity in the relationships between teachers and learners in this case. Trauma informed services do no harm i.e. they do not re-traumatise or blame victims for their efforts to manage their traumatic reactions, and they embrace a message of hope and optimism that recovery is possible. There is in the setting a flexible approach to supporting the young people to re-engage and achieve academic goals. The project set out to consider how the use of art activities and their processes could help restore self-confidence and motivate engagement to learning through ethnographic pedagogical practices. The main researcher, who worked with the young people, has a background in Visual Arts and had previously found this to be an effective tool to engage the types of students described, where forging positive relationships could support the learners to meet outcomes across various curriculum subject areas. This aligns well with a number of international studies which indicate that art promotes self-expression and self-esteem which has the potential to enhance educational outcomes (Scholes & Nagel, 2012; Hod Orkibi & Bar-nir, 2015).

Inspiration for the project

Alongside the context, this project was inspired by the work of Sitzer and Stockwell, (2015) who conducted research using art therapy techniques in a mainstream school. They worked closely with teachers who were able draw ideas from the researchers' 'Wellness program' and incorporate elements into their own classroom curricular activities (2015, p. 72). Sitzer and Stockwell, highlight the difficulties traumatised young people have with communication and the regulation of emotion. They explain that impaired empathetic development and learning disabilities are associated with children's experience of trauma (2015, p. 70). Such difficulties were experienced by the young people who were participants in the project, partly accounting for them needing support in the outreach centre. It is important to acknowledge that these students find it very hard to communicate emotions and experiences verbally and the use of art enables them to explore self-expression through illustration and representa-

tions. Sitzer and Stockwell, (2015) show effective intervention in using the creation of metaphoric symbols that enabled their students to explore and process trauma (2011, p. 72–73). During this process the research identified a development in self-awareness and self-esteem (2015, p. 73). It is noted elsewhere that the creation of symbolic metaphors is a way to represent expressive portrayals of self-identity and to explore experiences (Karpati & Kay, 2013, p. 158).

The project

Methodological decisions in this project were rooted in the personal nature of the data to be collect and the sensitivity of the environment and participants in the research themselves. The main researcher would be working alongside young people as they created metaphoric symbols to communicate what they could not say. Hence the approach taken evolved from that researcher's professional context and was informed by knowledge of trauma-informed practice. This ensured that a calm and predictable environment for the young people was maintained throughout the research. The sample in this project was three existing students in the outreach who had been out of formal education for between six and 12 months at that time, and who between them had a range of very complex emotional needs. The ethics of research with this group demanded a range of agreements and permissions which were informed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) ethical guidelines and by the Australian Association for Research in Education Code of Ethics (AARE, 1993). In line with this guidance ethical agreement to proceed was given by the school principal, by the university supervising the research, and written consent gained from parents and guardians of the young people and by the young people themselves.

At the starting point of the project students in the group were presented with an art activity that required them to collect information about their zodiac sign and horoscope. Among them were the sample group of three individuals. The task for the students was to create a description of positive and negative traits, their lucky colour, flower, metal, birth stone, day of the week, numbers, natural element and a motto. The goal was to design a composition of symbols and illustrations through which they could represented themselves. All students participated in this work but by the end of the project only 3 participants had participated in the whole programme, for this reason they are the sample group. The task included composition since Karpati and Kay explain that 'symbolism is critical for expression of cognitive representations...' (2013, p. 158). The purpose of this task as a whole was for each student to explore their qualities and communicate these in an expressive and creative way. Through participant observation data was gathered that demonstrated their levels of engagement and interaction with the tutor (researcher) and

with peers. Questions about their representations were asked, which led to a group discussion. Each student was supported to reflect on their personality and what prompted them to make certain decisions in their depictions, this was the case for the participants and for the other students. These discussions not only encouraged the students to think about their individuality and to make use of descriptive language, but also to think about how they learn. Field notes were made from each individual discussion and about how the students interacted with each other. It was important to open a dialogue during these participant observations because this prevented assumptions being made by the researcher on attitudes and behaviour. Kuada explains that it is common practice to engage in conversation during an observation so that you can 'check the accuracy of your inferences' (2012, p. 96).

In addition the university based researcher acted as a critical friend to the main researcher throughout the study. This involved asking provocative questions, examining data through another lens, and providing supportive critiques of all aspects of the research process and outcomes. The value of both the view of the main researcher and the university based researcher are in line with Wellington's (2015) assertions that researchers' systematic, critical and self-critical inquiry contributes to the advancement of knowledge. A range of communications took place between the researchers during the project. Guba's (1981) constructs in raising the credibility of qualitative research suggest 4 areas to consider and these informed the discussions in the research team. Firstly, in addressing credibility, the researchers debated and discussed the project as it progressed to confirm that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny was being presented. Secondly, considering transferability, the team endeavoured to ensure there was sufficient detail of the context of the study to help a reader decide whether the prevailing environment is similar to one they might be familiar with. Thirdly, the dependability criterion which is difficult in qualitative work, was discussed between the researchers to seek to be explicit enough for a future investigator to purposefully repeat (rather than replicate) the study. Fourthly, to achieve confirmability, deep discussion and reflective evaluation took place between the researchers to ensure that findings did emerge from the data and not from any predispositions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Critical incident technique (CIT) was also used during qualitative interviews phase to gain further insight into the young peoples' experiences and the impact these have had on perceptions and behaviours (Kuada, 2012, p. 98). This is in line with practice in the setting. For example, as they engaged in painting or drawing students were able to regulate their emotions and unpack their situation. This ethnographic approach revealed the harsh realities the participants faced such as mental health issues, drug abuse and childhood trauma (Kuada, 2012, p. 95).

During semi-structured interviews the main researcher acted in accordance with trauma-informed practice and the school's ethical guidelines, as well as the ethical

guidance mentioned above. This ensured that participants understood that any information they choose to share that showed they could be at risk of harm to themselves or others would be passed on to the principal and police for their own protection. There was no discernible evidence that this impacted on what the participants shared during the research. This too was discussed between the researchers.

Getting to a raft of data

During the semi-structured interviews with participants they continued to work on their art pieces. Kuada explains that the advantages of this method is that it gives a more profound understanding and then the individual can give a description of the context in which their art work is created (2012, p. 96–97). Kuada also states that this can be seen as a disadvantage as the participant observer is more likely to become involved socially and emotionally (2012, p. 97). In this research this was not seen as a disadvantage since it allowed stronger relationships to emerge between the participants and their tutor (the main researcher). This strategy helped to repair students' attitudes towards teaching staff after only having had negative experiences with teachers from their previous schools. Furthermore, Bell states that this technique enables researchers to share their experiences and better understand why the participants act in the way they do (2010, p. 14). It also provided the participants with opportunities for oral exploration of their work. The purpose of this was to encourage the participant to communicate about the self-representation by describing what each symbol meant to them. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview allowed the participants fluidity in conversation and they were free to talk about their life experience in general. For example, if a participant had designed a symbol that represented resilience, they were encouraged to give an example of a time when they demonstrated this quality. Such conversations can help to restore trust in teacher-student relationships and support self-belief.

There were disadvantages to gathering data from this group in the manner described. Some participants had inconsistencies in attendance which meant they were unable to participate in all activities involved in this research. This is the reason that three of the group were research participants, though all of the group had agreed to take part. A further 'disadvantage' was the amount and depth of data that was generated. The art products, the field notes, the interview notes and the group discussion notes combined to create a very large and complex set of data, only some of which can be reported here.

Getting into and alongside the visual products

All participants illustrated symbols that represented traits they acknowledge in themselves and also told a story about a past experience and how they felt about them. It was noted that once they had drawn a symbol and illustrated an emotion in a creative way they were then able to reflect on it articulate it more effectively. For example, Cody read on a zodiac website that he could be impulsive at times, and he identified with this. He reflected on experiences where he had acted on impulse and the result of those actions. He spoke to the researcher about how his actions had resulted in him being in trouble with the police. Cody then came up with ways he could control his impulsivity in a better way. Using symbolism as a vehicle to represent elements of personal identity was effective for Cody throughout this art process.

Sitzer and Stockwell also found that students were able express emotions through creative arts processes (2015, p. 76). The art work produced in the study revealed that the participants were able to identify and become familiar with the emotions they were left with after trauma. The art process supported the students in understanding what they felt and why. Similarly, Sitzer and Stockwell also found their process to act as an 'emotional identification anchor' (2015, p. 77). One of the notable piece of art work in this study was one created by Cody, who said '*...I just felt anger all the time after Jenna passed away. My piece of work that is a tribute to Jenna looks like love. I feel happy when I look at that...*'

The interview and discussion processes enabled the participants to identify what they had learnt in their exploration of self and acknowledge abilities that they had. For example, as Cody looked at all his art pieces together he realised that he was able to pay attention detail: '*...I've realised that I'm a perfectionist and I pay attention to detail...*'

Throughout the processes of the study it was notable that self-esteem and self-confidence grew significantly in all three participants, and they were proud of their work. This was clear in the way they presented their pieces to each other. They would exchange compliments and make positive comments about their own work, for example Cody saying: '*...that's the best piece of work I've ever done...*'

Sitzer and Stockwell found that the improvement of students' self-confidence was also significant and that they felt a 'sense of accomplishment with each completed art piece' (2015, p. 78). They would validate one another's work as they shared connections and meanings to their images (2015, p. 79). During the interview phase of this project when the participants saw all their finished pieces together it was observed that they smiled and made positive comments. This demonstrated an improvement in their self-esteem, enabling them to feel confident enough to attempt other challenges such as mathematical tasks previously asked of the group. For example, Cody verbalised how proud he was of his work and concluded that he felt confident enough

to attempt a mathematical task about perimeter task which he'd previously refused to try: *'...I didn't know I could draw...My art work has given confidence to do anything. Because I've become more confident from doing this – it makes me feel more confident to do other stuff like that perimeter...'*

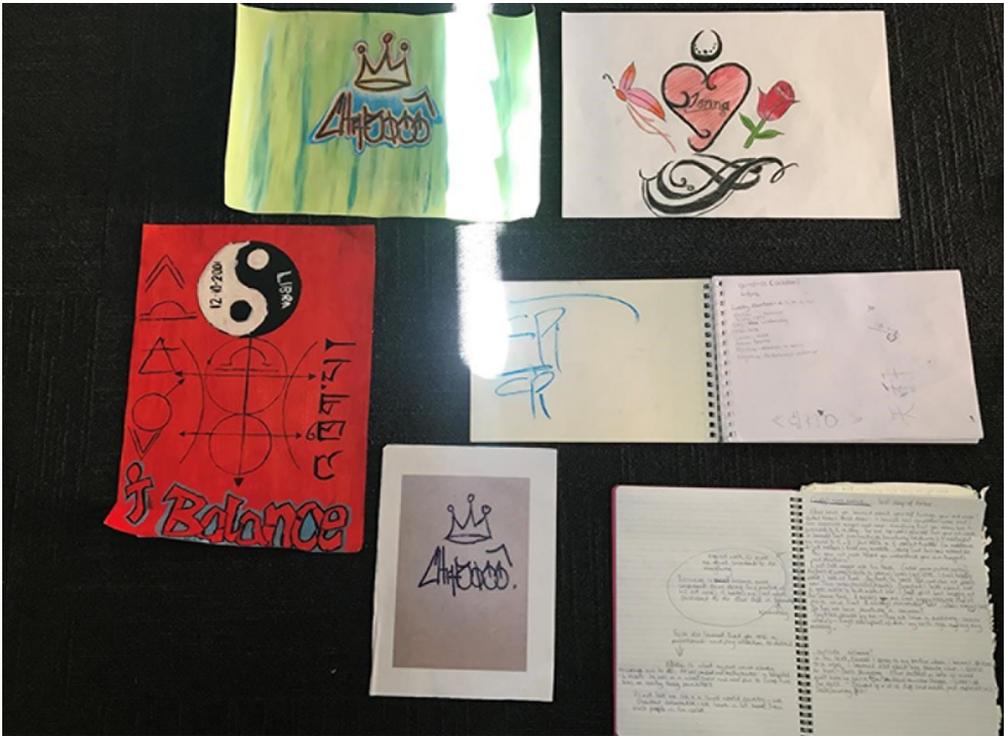
Realisation of creative skill was expressed explicitly during two of the interviews. As those participants explained that they did not know they could draw, it then became clear that the opportunity to explore creative skills were never made available to them. It was this realisation of talent that also supported their developing self-confidence. Not only did they feel more confident to tackle other academic goals, but also to tackle personal goals. For example, Jasmine stated in her interview that she felt more confident to walk to the shops on her own.

Personal qualities were validated through exploring representational symbolism, which empowered the participants. All three developed a deeper understanding of particular strengths and weaknesses and thought about how they could build on those. This it was hoped would support academic and personal goals. In a similar notion Sitzer and Stockwell designed an art directive where the students wrote positive qualities about each other and created symbols to represent them (2015, p. 74). It is evident from Sitzer and Stockwell's, findings and from the project outcomes that strategies such as these reinforce self-esteem and self-confidence.

Words and feelings revealed through process and product

All participants demonstrated an improvement in verbal communication through extended vocabulary and descriptive language. The use of symbolism initially did the talking for them but it was noted that after illustrating particular symbols participants were then able to explain what these meant to them. Over a period of weeks participants spoke more and more about their art work and their vocabulary noticeably started to broaden. As they processed past experiences through the creation of each art piece they started to use words to describe different emotions that were triggered whilst painting: *'...Sometimes they help me understand my own emotions... Darkness which represents my misery and loneliness.'*

Accessing literature throughout the project supported new reflections in the research team. For example, reading Talwar (2007) enabled a deeper understanding of how art helps to support the development of speech. There were similarities between the participants communicative development and Talwar's exploration of the neurological events taking place during art therapy. The literature explains that the execution of visual art activates 'explicit memory' and enables 'the telling of one's story' and 'narrating events...' (2007, p. 24).



Cody – Bottom left: A collection of work which presents a painting that represents his zodiac and personal-ity traits and qualities. **Top right:** A tribute to his step-mother which was a developed idea from initial painting

Talwar also refers to Van der Kolk who suggests that "...the limbic system and brain stem may produce emotions and sensations that contradict one's attitudes and beliefs" (2007, p. 24, cited from Van der Kolk, 2002, p. 5). From studying this literature and re-reading and reflecting on field and interview notes, the notion emerged that Jasmine and Cody slowly started to process emotions associated with their traumatic experiences and to acknowledge their confusion with conflicting thoughts. They were able to articulate their confusion as they spoke about their art work: '*...Sometimes they help me understand my own emotions – I feel sad when I look at all my characters and I don't know why – I know I'm trying to make sense of my emotions through my characters but I'm still confused...*'. And '*...I feel upset but happy at the same time.*'

Furthermore, the participants showed they were able to develop their range of descriptive language when talking about how they wanted their art works to look. They increasingly learnt how to talk about the composition of shapes and colour which would best represent their meaning, using vocabulary modelled by the main



Jasmine – The first painting represents Jasmine’s zodiac. The following images are paintings of developed ideas. They represent Jasmine’s past experiences and conflicting emotions

researcher and from other contexts. They showed they could now articulate the connections between illustrations and personal traits. As they put paint to paper, it was observed that they would move from the visual expression to oral expression. Interestingly, this contrasted with significant literature explored by Talwar who cites that Omaha, (2004) and Shaprio, (2001) who looked at a similar concept in the connection between visual language and verbal language. However, these looked at how participants ‘move from verbal language to the visual’ that would promote self-perception. The present project is different in that the participants were able not able to effectively verbalise their thoughts and memories before engaging in art directives. However there is similarity in the processing of traumatic memories and development of vocabulary which supports the ability to articulate emotion (Talwar 2007, p. 34).

Contexts and life experiences

Each participant had come to the outreach programme with different experiences and backgrounds. The following sections of field notes, interviews and reflection illustrate some of life experiences of the participants and their thinking during the research project. These are provided in order to allow the reader to more fully understand the research environment and the young people who took part.

Field note: *During the art process relationships started to forge as the participants began to speak more openly about past experiences and how they felt about them. If asked about a particular symbol in a painting they would increasingly explain in detail what it*



Alicia – The first painting is a representation of Alicia’s zodiac. The following image is a painting that represents past experiences and relationships.

meant and how it reflected a particular trait or memory. For example, as Alicia painted an impression of her birth flower she revealed that it reminded her of her grandmother who had passed away. After sharing her happier memories of the time spent with her grandmother she also described how she felt after her grandmother died. She also explained that this was one of the reasons that she had been a runaway.

‘...this flower also represents my nan...we used to draw together...I think it was another reason why I ran away...’

The main researcher found using art as a tool to re-engage the student group, including the research participants, supported building positive relationships and finding a common ground within the group. Eglinton, (2013) expresses a similar notion when exploring the ethical challenges that arose when using visual ethnography to learn more about the lives of her subjects. Eglinton states that she found ‘visual ethnography as a method elicit a closeness between researcher and the researched’ (2013, p. 256).

It was important for the main researcher to facilitate a safe space with the participants and when they shared experiences and expressed how they felt about them they were responded to with empathy and without judgement. Eglinton, (2013) explains how the young people would open up and she would respond by sharing issues she had in her own life which ‘resonated with their own’ (2013, p. 259). In the context of the present project there was a shared view in the team that participants understood the difference between caring professional relationships and personal ones, so such a response was not used in the current study. This was also to avoid taking the moment away from the participant and putting the researcher at the centre.

Field notes were recorded as follows, regarding the researcher’s obligations around safeguarding: *‘...even though I told everyone I had to report anything that I thought was*

putting them at risk they are still telling me stuff that has happened to them. It must be because they want help but are unsure how to directly ask...'

During the final interviews the participants extended their answers without prompting and revealed that they felt safe in the group. Alicia spoke about how a particular element of her painting represented a happier time which was when she started the outreach programme with the main researcher as her tutor: *'...My happy stage was when I started coming here...'*

The three participants appeared comfortable during the interview phase, as seen through their body language and facial expressions. They gave extended, detailed comments. Cody expressed his ease in talking about his step mother: *'...Every time I talk about her it gets easier to talk about her...'*

Jasmine, the other female participant shared responses which were different, it seemed that she found it hard to process and give relevant answers. The researcher input was differentiated for her which enabled her to formulate answers and supported her understanding. Jasmine explained that she felt safe when she was with the researcher and liked talking with her: *'...I feel safe and calm when I'm here and I like talking to you. I feel relaxed when I'm drawing my characters...'*

Outcomes, thoughts and the issue of generalisability

At the end of the research project outcomes were considered from a range of perspectives and at differing depths. For example, thinking of the artwork itself, in comparing initial works with later pieces it was observable that participants' boldness in expression was more prominent in their composition of shape and colour. Alicia illustrated confidence in her new found talent through her use of colour and applied detail in her second piece. Jasmine illustrated a sense of confidence and strength in expressing emotion from trauma in her development of detail and boldness in her characters.

All participants demonstrated an improvement in verbal communication through extending vocabulary in descriptive language. Initially symbolism had done the talking for them but after illustrating particular symbols they were then able to explain what they meant. Over the weeks as they spoke more and more about their art work and vocabulary start to broaden. As they processed past experiences through the creation of each art piece they started to use words to describe different emotions that were triggered whilst painting: *'...Sometimes they help me understand my own emotions... Darkness which represents my misery and loneliness.'*

Looking from a wider perspective, the most significant themes that arise in the findings make it clear that elements work in a complimentary way to support each other. Visual art stimulated interest and engagement which supported the develop-

ment of relationships within the group. As participants became more aware of personality traits through self-reflexivity, they were able to find ways to articulate a narrative. This improved their confidence and restored their motivation to participate in the educational setting.

Research findings from the project and supporting literature demonstrate how visual art offers disenfranchised individuals validation and appropriate self-exploration. There are many similarities with the findings of Sitzer and Stockwell (2015) with regards to self-reflexivity and the development of confidence and self-esteem. While on the other hand, Talwar offers an alternative approach by exploring how the brain effectively engages in visual narratives through art making processes (2007). In addition, Eglinton (2013) provides an insight into the ethical challenges that arise when relationships are formed during visual ethnographic processes. The main researcher used experiences from her professional teaching background to respond to the participants (and the entirety of the group) with processes of differentiation.

Eglinton also found that her participants spoke with more openness during and after the production of their art works (2007, p. 258). Eglinton mentions the emotional impact this process had on her. She states that she felt 'emotionally drained' and '...the pain I felt for some of the young people' (2013, p. 259). Reading and re-reading field notes made during the study and reading and reflecting on accounts of the participants experiences was draining for the main researcher, who had talked at length and in detail with participants about their traumatic experiences. Mandatory reports to child protection were submitted after some information was disclosed. This emotional demand was balanced for the main researcher by de-briefing with the principal of the school and the school psychologist on a regular basis as well as through discussions with the second researcher.

Despite the challenges of undertaking the work, the project provided compelling evidence of the impact of art activities on disenfranchised young people. Though the project has been completed the approach continues to be developed in the setting and in a new facility brought on-line more recently. This is not to suggest that the findings are generalisable nor could the project be replicated. The opportunity exists to repeat the project and in a sense this has been done at the newly opened setting. There is evidence from other research as well as from this work that the type of activities and support that this project included can be beneficial to disenfranchised learners. The potential of using metaphoric symbols to support these learners was clearly illustrated in the study, in this case using the self-identity art pieces. The additional contribution of the individual and group conversations (started through semi-structured interviewing techniques) aided the relationship building which also proved to be valued by the participants. Cody, Alicia and Jasmine have moved on from the centre towards successful integration in mainstream settings and to employment in Cody's

case. New cohorts of young people have come into the charge of the main researcher. Her passion for the work continues and has been fed by the project experience, and the outcomes continue to motivate her to continue in a challenging environment (she is at the time of writing based at the new centre). The second researcher has been enabled to gain new experiences as a critical friend and to gain some deeper understanding of ways to support young people who are not able to cope with the mainstream educational journey.

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