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A Spectrum of Experience: A Community Art Project to Build Empathy Through Identity Sharing in a Suburban High School

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Abstract

Having empathy for others is an important aspect of living within a healthy community. However, teaching empathy can be difficult. High school is a natural setting for learning and developing many social skills. If adolescents can learn to develop empathy at this age, they can carry it with them into their future communities. Research shows that story-telling and shared experiences have the potential to foster empathy. This paper describes a community-based art project within a suburban high school that was designed to use personal narrative and art-making as a way of developing a sense of empathy in adolescent-aged students. Students were asked to write and display something about themselves in a community area, as well as design and wear a button with a personal symbol on it. Results indicated that students were interested expressing themselves through a community-based art project and that connection with and support from peers is of great importance to people at this age.

Keywords: empathy, high school, identity, art, community, narrative, community art

A Spectrum of Experience: A Community Art Project to Build Empathy Through

Identity Sharing in a Suburban High School

This paper describes an arts-based community project entitled A Spectrum of Experience: A Community Art Project to Build Empathy Through Identity Sharing in a Suburban High School. This project was carried out in the high school of a suburban New England town, using story-telling and empathy-building techniques to foster community among the student population. This capstone project explored the question: How can art emphasize the inherent value of individual identities in forming a diverse community of students? The aim is to provide a space for adolescents to share qualities about themselves or their life experiences, as well as encourage learning about others' experiences in their community. Through this sharing of experiences, empathy has the potential to grow.

Fostering empathy has several potential benefits as an adolescent develops into adulthood. Research has shown that empathy can be a factor in spurring resilience in teens (Rhodes & Schechter, 2012). Further, having empathy for others can break down prejudices and negative generalizations of groups of people (Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali & Favara, 2013). This could help to form diverse, positive, and supportive communities.

Through research and this community project this writer hopes to learn more ways to create empathetic and supportive community among differing cultural and social groups. In a world in which countries, political parties, cultural groups, and individuals grow more isolated each day, it is important to reach across the boundaries or borders that we have created for ourselves and work together to make the world a more just and inclusive place. The only way to continue to exist is together in community, not apart.

Literature Review

This section discusses research topics that informed this Capstone project. Literature was reviewed from several online academic databases that included qualitative, quantitative and arts-based research models. By examining and utilizing ideas from literature related to empathy, shared personal narrative, community development, and adolescent identity development, a community-based project was created.

Identity Development

Adolescents are at a time in human development in which they are searching for their identity. Erikson (1980) theorized that the adolescent period is a time for struggling with identity and experimenting with different roles, while more contemporary theories emphasize adolescents' search for meaning in life, and answers to existential questions (Donnelly, 2013). Identity development and meaning-making are important steps in an adolescent's development that can help them be ready for challenges later in life. School and peers are important factors in identity development for teens (Duerden, Taniguchi & Widmer, 2012), therefore a school environment can be an extremely useful tool for this.

Development of identity can be paired with perspective-taking to give students a better understanding of people who are different from themselves. Worthman (2004) emphasized the need for a dialogue between students' reflections on their own perspectives and their understanding that others have differing perspectives. Identity and the defining of one's own perspective are the beginning stages of this development and dialogue. Worthman (2004) noted that the development of this perspective-taking is key to appreciating and respecting the perspectives of others, which in turn can lead to a deeper understanding and respect for diverse views. Coming to a realization that not everyone in your community thinks or feels the same way

that you do can be an eye-opening experience. This realization has the potential to create interest

or curiosity in learning about other's perspectives, which is an excellent step toward empathy.

Empathy

Developing empathy as part of a young person's identity can have benefits for the

community that a young person is a part of. Studies have shown that empathy can have a strong

impact on how adolescents act toward stigmatized groups (Silke, 2017, Malti et al., 2012). Malti

et al. (2012) showed that exclusion of others was linked to negative emotions in adolescents.

When questioned about this, adolescents in this study expressed feelings of empathy and

morality for people that had been socially excluded.

While the effects of a developed sense of empathy have been studied, the question of how

to develop empathy does not have a large amount of research. Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, and

Favara (2013) showed that sustained interactions between different groups of people encouraged

understanding and feelings of empathy between the two groups. When a group interacted with an

"outgroup," the "ingroup" (Capozza, et al., 2013, p. 534) began to associate the outgroup with

more human-like characteristics. More interactions between socially different groups might be a

way for empathy to grow between people that are culturally different. By encouraging the telling

of their own stories, this capstone project encourages different kinds of students to get to know

each other in some way. By using the ideas in Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, and Favara's (2013)

research, perhaps this project will encourage students to think of people outside of their own

circles with more human-like attributes, rather than just seeing them as others outside of their

own social groups.

Art-making has the potential to encourage empathy for marginalized groups. Potash and

Ho (2011) developed a study in which an averagely functioning group of people viewed art made

by people living with mental illness, and then created a response artwork to the art they viewed. By taking time and creating this response art, the viewers were able to gain some understanding of the artist, and to look for commonalities between themselves and the artists with mental illness. Overall, this study seemed to foster a new or different understanding of people with mental illness in the minds of the responders (Potash & Ho, 2011). This example study shows that art therapy, or even simple art making, can have a great impact on creating empathy for a population of people who are marginalized. The participants of this capstone community art project will be helping to create the piece of art, but will also be observing it as it grows over the course of the day. The participants are encouraged to interact with the piece, read what others have written, and reflect on the diversity in their community.

Story-telling and Narrative as a Therapeutic Tool

Linden (1997) describes a case study of an arts and performance evening in which several religions and cultures are represented and celebrated. The author describes the development of the performance evening, and the students' experiences in the creation of the work. Students showed signs of evolving in their own perceptions of themselves and their own cultures and confidence grew in students who had earlier seemed shy or uneasy expressing their cultures to others (Linden, 1997). The art created was not simply an educational piece for others, but also became a learning and therapeutic experience for the students involved in making the art. Community art-making occurs in front of others, and in collaboration with others. It also remains visible after the art is made, inviting a sort of audience to view it. These aspects of a community-based art project utilize concepts of performance as a therapeutic act as discussed in Linden's (1997) case study. This Capstone project aims to offer a space for students to express a part of

themselves that is not always presented in everyday life and to do it, essentially, in front of an audience.

Story-telling and Empathy

The opportunity to share experiences can be a powerful one. Studies have shown that once we have a window into the world of others, people often react in empathic ways, and express desires to take social action (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011). Sayed (2012) found that storytelling by older adolescents can be helpful in the area of meaning-making about racial identity, especially when these stories are shared with peers or friends. This plays into the development of individual identity, as adolescents can use this meaning-making to begin to conceptualize the role that they play within the larger community (Sayed, 2012). Through telling one's own story, a person might begin to process their own understanding of themself in the eyes of their peers. Sayed (2012) found that adolescents told more stories about race and identity to their peers, while telling stories about culture and historical connection to their parents or relatives. This could indicate that teens turn to their peers to work out how they might exist within a more diverse culture.

Creating Community

Hannigan (2012) discusses the creation of community through art. "When a group of people come together to share narratives about their identity in respect of shared place, they can be said to be taking part in a construction of community" (p 137). Through shared narratives, students can begin to connect the dots within their community and note that they share traits, struggles, or joys with others in their community. This discovery of universality can often be a transformative one. When we feel we are alone in our struggles, we have a tendency to turn inward, to isolate. This isolationism can cause misunderstanding by others, and often leaves a

person feeling even more cut off from the larger group. However, when a person realizes that they are not alone in a struggle, they may feel empowered to reach out to the wider community for support.

Benefits of Community Engagement

In the world today, creating community with people perceived as "different" might be a way to counteract growing social and political ideologies of isolationism. Many people are turning to their local communities to make change, rather than relying on the government, which seems stymied and unable to act in the current atmosphere. Through an artistic exploration of community, Horsford, Rumbold, Varney, Morris, and Dungan (2014) discovered that community can be created by happening to share the same space with other people, or by choosing to be part of a certain group, or by necessity to create safety. The authors also found that community can be strengthened by loss or times of difficulty, and can be sustained if the participants are willing to help each other through difficulty, and able to be committed to giving time to the community. This capstone project's main goal is to foster empathy and understanding within a school community using expressive art-making as a shared connection.

Studies have suggested that a connection to a community has the potential to build resilience in adolescents and give them a layer of protection later in life that will help them grow into well-functioning adults. Rhodes and Schechter (2012) explored the part that community art centers can play in creating resilience in inner-city youth. A review of literature revealed that certain factors such as poverty, systematic racism, and a perception by adolescents that they are marginalized can cause extreme problems in an individual's ability to develop resilience (Rhodes & Schechter, 2012). In this case study reviewing a community art center in Hartford, CT, Rhodes and Schechter (2012) looked at various ways that this center could foster resilience in the

participants of the program. The community art center did this through the physical space of the building, relationships established at the center, and art and cultural education for the participants. By incorporating art-making and other expressive modalities like dance with the relationships established with the staff at the center, as well as a focus on culture and community-building through ritual, the adolescent participants showed less stress, improved outcomes in school, and a motivation to stay away from gangs (Rhodes & Schechter, 2012).

Community engagement and the benefits of it are central to this capstone project. Attree et al. (2011) conducted an empirical review of 22 studies on community engagement. Their findings suggest that people who engage in their communities receive benefits from it, such as feeling empowered, improved self-esteem, and positive physical and mental health benefits. Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham (2012) found that school children reported feeling safer in multiethnic schools, because their feelings of vulnerability and anxiety were lessened when representation of different diversities was more even. Lower anxiety and increased feelings of safety are desirable settings for learning in today's schools.

Benefits of Community Art-making

Community art making combines the benefits of community engagement and art therapy, allowing participants to communicate in different ways. Hyungsook (2014) explored the connection between community art-making and character formation in a case study of North Korean adolescent refugees who worked with South Korean Graduate students on a community art project in a school for refugee children. This study showed a change in attitudes by the South Korean graduate students after working with and making art with the North Korean refugee adolescents. The act of making art together allowed space for learning about each other, and prejudices and anxieties began to fade between the two groups (Hyungsook, 2014). Community

art-making offers an opportunity for dialogue in a way that feel less threatening or confrontational.

The above research indicates that personal narrative can be used as a method for fostering empathy in adolescent-aged people. Additionally, engaging in community-based work has many benefits that can serve to bolster this kind of emotional learning. A community that feels safe and resilient is the optimal environment for growing empathy (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2012). Creation of art together within a community has the potential to build resilience, as well as unite varying groups of people. Based on the research completed, a community art project was designed that utilized community, narrative, visibility, and creativity in an attempt to grow empathy in a suburban high school.

Methods

The idea of this project sprang from incidents that occurred at the high school I was an intern at in the 2017-2018 school year. In late fall of 2017, prominent graffiti was found on a bathroom wall that contained racist slurs. In a second incident about two weeks later, more graffiti was found in a bathroom, this time containing homophobic language and targeting a specific faculty member. The school made efforts to respond to these events, including a student-led walk-out protesting the graffiti, and student-led panel discussions centered around thoughts and feeling that arose from the student body after the graffiti incidents. An investigation into the source of the graffiti was also made, but no specific perpetrator was able to be identified. I was interested in the efforts made by the school administration to address the hate speech. I wanted to create a project that might not address these incidents directly, but might encourage a healing environment to help the student community to move forward from these events.

The school has an annual event called One Day, in which students spend a half day (four hours) in various workshops and discussion groups that are of interest to them. These workshops are based around a variety of social issues. Mental health, race and privilege, gender issues, differing abilities, and identity development are some topics that are explored. This project entailed offering a public art opportunity during the "Identity Fair" portion of One Day, based around students sharing stories and aspects of themselves as a platform for developing empathy for people viewed as being "different" or "other".

Community and milieu-based work has many benefits. Artwork made in community is highly visible and has the potential to not only affect the people that observe the art, but also has the ability to affect the art-makers because of their interactions with others' work as the piece grows and changes. This project, situated among several stations in the "Identity Fair," allows for a different kind of interaction between students. By utilizing creative expression, students may be able to communicate or experience empathy in new ways.

Community Description and Participants

The entire high school student body was invited to participate in this community project. The project was carried out in a suburban New England high school with grades 9-12 (ages 14-18 years), serving about 1600 students. The student body is co-educational, majority white and upper-middle class. This high school has approximately 16% students of color, a 94% graduation rate, and 8% of students being eligible for free or reduced lunch. The student community is diverse in other ways, containing students of varying gender identities, physical abilities, sexual orientations, mental health statuses, and learning abilities.

Approximately 150 students participated in the community art project. Because of the nature of the project, an exact number was not possible to determine. The students entered the

"Identity Fair" in the cafeteria of the school and were allowed to choose from ten activity stations in the fair. The students were encouraged to try several different stations. Because of the nature of the fair, the students who participated in my art activity were self-selected to participate in the project.

Protocol

Students were invited to choose a colored strip of cellophane and choose a prompt to respond to, regarding identity. They wrote their responses to the prompts on the cellophane strips, and pinned them, clothing-line style, across a bank of windows in the cafeteria, creating a multi-colored, transparent art piece. From across the cafeteria, the pieces looked like a colorful rainbow of cellophane, but when one get closer to it, they can read the responses written on the colored flags that share pieces of different students' "stories" or identities.

Students were given a set of prompts to choose from:

- If you really knew me, you would know…

- Something that you have learned about yourself that might help other people.

- Write a "one-sentence memoir" (examples provided).

- I wish people could see _____ side of me.

- If I had to describe myself in one word, it would be _____.

- Something that few people know about me is _____.

Additionally, students were encouraged to create a pin-on-button as a way of taking the community project out into the world outside of the school. They were given the instructions to "Create a design for the button with a symbol that you feel describes an aspect of your identity." Examples of different cultural symbols were provided as inspiration.

This project was designed to provide an arts-based opportunity for students to share parts of their identities that they do not often have an opportunity to share about, and for others to read and interact with the thoughts expressed. This kind of interaction is not often available in a normal school day. By using aspects of performance and creative artistic expression, this Capstone aims to create space for students to express themselves in a way that they are not often asked to, and to help engender a therapeutic community experience in doing so.

The colored flags community art piece is a visual representation of the idea that a diverse community of individuals creates a colorful and beautiful community as a whole. Without diversity (of colors, ideas, experiences) this piece could not exist. Without the diversity of the people at our school, the culture and richness of the school community would not exist. The goal of this visual representation was to encourage reflection on these ideas, and to foster an appreciation and respect for the wide range of diversity at the high school.

The button-making aspect of this project was designed to give students a way to carry the message of identity home with them. The aim was that parents, friends and others might see the button on the person or their backpack, and ask about it. This would continue the conversation outside of school, and perhaps give the students who had created buttons an opportunity to discuss some things about themselves that they might not otherwise have a conversation about.

In this project, the students are indirectly being asked to consider their own identity in regards to the larger population and community. They are being asked to express who they are as well as to consider how others might see them when they add their flag to the clothesline. The students are also being asked to consider their role as part of the wider community, and to think about (and learn about) the identities and personal qualities of others in their community.

Data Collection and Organization

Information and data were collected in this project through my observation of the students as they participated in the art-making. I looked for ways in which the students interacted with each other and with the project materials. Did they take the project seriously? Did they talk to each other about what they wrote on the slips of cellophane or on the buttons? Did they seem interested in the subject matter, or simply do it for the credit in taking part in the activity? How long did they spend considering what to write or draw? Did they look at the whole piece before writing their own response? Did they look at it after? Did they look at others' buttons before or after making their own? Did they work together or share ideas for buttons?

I documented these observations in a journal by writing down answers to the above questions, as well as making sketches of the pieces created and some buttons I remembered. I also wrote down my thoughts about what I had observed and experienced over the course of the day. Additionally, I made response art to the flags created and to the buttons, as well as to my experience of the day.

By creating the response art, I was able to process my thoughts and feelings around facilitating the community art project. This allowed me to consider the format of the day, as well as the outcome of the art-making. I had experienced some anxiety about both of these things since some of the technical aspects of this day were beyond my control.

I was also able to discuss the project later with some of the students who had participated. We discussed their experiences and thoughts about the project. I documented the information from these conversations in a journal entry as well.

Results

The day of the community project turned out to be much more hectic than I had anticipated. On this specialized day at the school, students did not attend regular classes, but traveled throughout the school to attend the different workshops and activities. The Identity Fair, where my community project was set up, included many different activities all staffed by teachers and faculty, including mandala coloring, ping-pong, a therapy dog, bean-bag games, and my project, among other things. At each section of the day, there were approximately 600 students in the cafeteria who could choose which activities to attend whenever they wanted. This caused a fair amount of busyness in the cafeteria, and I found myself helping to direct foot traffic, helping to find supplies for other activities, making sure my supplies didn't go missing, interacting with other faculty and staff, as well as trying to give instructions on the two parts of my activity to a constantly changing crowd of students.

Across both of these identity-exploring activities, the students seemed happy and eager to participate. They listened to instructions for both activities and rarely had questions about what to write or draw. I did find that I was not able to interact with the students in some of the ways that I had anticipated. I thought perhaps students would want to talk a little about the prompts on both parts of the activity. I expected that there might be some conversation with me about what they wrote or drew, and perhaps some questions about the nature of the project.

I found that while students were interested in participating, they were not very interested in interacting with me, the facilitator. For the most part, they politely listened to my instructions and occasionally asked follow-up or logistical questions, like how to open up the plastic buttons. Then they took supplies and sat down with peers to create their flags or buttons. They often left my table when they were done without checking in with me. When I interjected a question or

asked about what they were making, the students showed me their work, but were mostly brief. Having worked with adolescents for many years, this behavior was not surprising to me, but for some reason I had expected more interaction to occur between the students and myself. Probably because of the nature of the day that the students participated in, they tended to act very independently of adults in the "Identity Fair" and seemed to be much more interested in working together with their friends and peers on both of these activities. In this way, the experience that I had anticipated was different from the day that unfolded. Although I had expected to interact more with the students during this activity, I felt that the students' inclinations to work together was a positive result, given that one of my goals for this project was to encourage community interaction.

Approximately 300 students participated in the Colored Flags section of the activity. Most often, they chose to write one word or short sentence that described themselves. I had expected there to be more questions or confusion about what to write on the flags, as there were several options and it was fairly open-ended. However, the students seemed to understand the premise quickly, and set about writing without much help or input from me or other adults. In fact, they often worked together in pairs or groups, or looked at what others had written on their own flags as inspiration for their own writing. No students throughout the day brought me their flags to look at or discuss before hanging them up.

Approximately 150 students participated in the Symbols Buttons portion of the activity. Students responded similarly in this activity. They listened to instructions, then chose a symbol and set about drawing fairly quickly. Just a few students (six that I counted) sat for a longer time (longer than five minutes), apparently thinking about their button and what symbol should be on it. These students mostly did not ask me for help, but almost all of them brought their button to

me when they were done, to show what they had made. This did not occur with most other students. Some of the symbols that I observed on the buttons were religious symbols, nature symbols (waves, flowers), cartoon character drawings (real and imagined), words, animals, and images related to their school mascot.

In the Flag activity, I noticed a change throughout the day. At the beginning of the day, there were not many flags hanging up yet, of course, and most students did not look at the art project before participating in it. As the day went on and more flags were hung up, I noticed more students referencing the flags before they made their own, seeming to gather inspiration from other's work. This was part of the goal of the project: that students would read bits of other people's stories, feel some connection or empathy, and respond somehow to the connection they felt.

As noted earlier, I discovered that the students were much more independent than I had anticipated. In general, they seemed very confident in their interpretation of the project instructions, and asked very few questions about the creative aspect of the project (making a symbol or writing something about themselves). The most frequent questions I received were about the physical aspects of the project: *Can I have a clip to hang this up? How do I open this button? Can I have a marker?* In general, there were no questions about the creative aspects of the project, after I explained the instructions. The students were creative and intuitive in their responses both in words and in symbols drawn. The students seemed to draw inspiration from each other, as they sat at tables and worked together to write or draw.

This show of creative independence came as a pleasant surprise to me. In my work with this population, I have found that often students need some prompting when it comes to creative expression. Sometimes they need to talk through ideas, or they ask for more specific instructions.

I expected this to be the case during this community project, however—perhaps because I was very busy most of the day—students seemed to turn to their peers for support when needed, or just sat quietly and thought for a while before they began writing or drawing. This reaching inward for creative expression was inspiring to see, but more inspiring was the reaching outward to peers and friends for support or ideas. In this way, I felt that the project succeeded; showing in a small way how working together as a community can create something beautiful.

The results of the button making were difficult to observe. This was by design, however. I was able to observe the process of actually making the buttons, but I was not able to directly observe what happened when students left the cafeteria wearing the buttons. The idea of the button was that the students could take a part of the art piece home with them, and potentially generate conversations later with friends or family. I discussed this with a few students later, asking if there were any reactions to their buttons. One student told me that his mother liked his button and that he told her how he made it. One student told me that her friends thought her button was pretty. Several students told me that their friends liked their button and wanted to make one. The responses I heard were mostly that people complimented students on the buttons. They didn't report that they entered into discussions about identity because of the buttons.

Artistic Response

For my artistic response, I made watercolor and ink drawings of some of the flags that were created (Appendix A), as well as cut paper (Appendix B) and mixed media pieces about the buttons (Appendices C & D). It was interesting to note themes that arose among the responses to each part of the activity. The flags/written responses seemed to elicit different themes than the buttons did. The flags responses included themes of physical characteristics/identifiers of the

participants, political statements, emotional states that the participants experienced, inspirational

phrases, and semi-silly or comical responses.

The buttons included themes of school or sports affiliations, religious symbols or script,

nature imagery, words, and widely-know common symbols such as a Peace sign, and some silly

or comical imagery, like visual puns. I made two art responses about the buttons. One is a cut-

paper and marker piece that reflects an image that stayed with me after the project was over

(Figure 1, see Appendix C for larger image). Two students showed me their buttons when I

asked about them. They held the buttons up in their hands, and displayed them to me, explaining

the drawings on them. This gesture felt like an offering of information and trust. I did not know

these students before this project, but the art they produced helped us to have a conversation, and to learn something about one another.

Figure 1

The second piece that I made regarding the button-making, was my own buttons (see Appendix D). In a response to the students creating buttons with symbolic art on them, I decided to share small pieces of myself through imagery on buttons as well. My buttons are a

combination of found imagery, and drawn imagery that I felt expressed my own personal story

and history. In making this piece, I was able to feel what it might have been like to be asked to

choose one image to represent yourself. In fact, I was not able to stop at one image, and I made

four. Through this I discovered that perhaps I asked too much of some students—to choose just one image or symbol to speak about them.

This reflective art making and response art allowed different ways to process the information gained through this community art project. By being able to experience the directive myself, I learned that it felt like to dig for words or symbols that might express the essence of myself. This was a difficult task that involved not only creativity, but also vulnerability. It made me feel vulnerable to create the symbolic work, and also validated when I was able to create the symbolic imagery.

Discussion

Through this project I learned that a community project has the potential to take on a life of its own. In this case, no matter how much planning and research I did ahead of time, the project outcome was difficult to anticipate. Especially because I worked with a large group of people, the community really created the project and it became something that I had not entirely anticipated. I observed that the project was much more about the process of creating it than it was about the final product. The final product felt underwhelming. I had imagined a thousand colored flags waving in the wind from the line, with writing all over them, and students gathered around looking at them and talking about what they were reading. At the end of the day, there were about 300 flags, spaced out and hung along the windows. There was no wind. The flags were also hung in a part of the cafeteria that does not get much foot traffic, so students would have to know about the piece to want to come and look at it. Overall, they did not seem especially interested in the piece after it was made.

The results of the button-making were difficult to observe, and upon talking to students later, I discovered that the buttons did not really spur conversations in the way that I had hoped.

Both of these results point to a potential shift in focus of what the important part of the project is. The actual effect of this community project seemed to take place while the students were actually making it: during the process. The students were asked to consider parts of their identity, and how they might express this through the flags or the creation of the buttons. The end results that I had anticipated did not occur as I had hoped, but the interactions of the students are the place where learning or understanding may have taken place. Because this was a community project and not a specific research project, no formal interviews were made to determine exactly what the students experienced or thought while engaging in this project. However, from my observations, students seemed to be engaging in the project in a spectrum of ways. Sometimes there were silly responses, but mostly there were thoughtful and caring responses that implied that the students who participated took these ideas of expressing thoughts and identities seriously. These responses ranged from surface-level sharing, such as racial identity, to some deeper concepts, such as sharing emotional states or expressing political views.

The students' ability to be independently creative came as a pleasant surprise to me. In my work with this population in the past, I have found that often students need some prompting when it comes to creative expression. Sometimes they need to talk through ideas, or they ask for more specific instructions. I expected this to be the case during this community project, however—perhaps because I was very busy most of the day—students seemed to turn to their peers for support when needed, or just sat quietly and thought for a while before they began writing or drawing. This reaching inward for creative expression was inspiring to see, but more inspiring was the reaching outward to peers and friends for support or ideas. In this way, I felt that the project was successful; showing in a small way how working together as a community can create something beautiful.

An additional point of learning that I took from this project is that a person might never know the impact that a project like this really has. It is something that was, in a way, given over to the community. The community took it and processed it in a way that might be somewhat unknowable to me. Later, after I am no longer a part of this school community, a student might remember an interaction they had while making a flag or button, and it may have an impact. However because of the nature of this project I have no control over these kinds of results, of which I might never even know about. Giving this project to the school community was an act of trust, and of letting go of control.

Future recommendations

One thing that I learned after completing this community project is that if I want the participants to receive a specific message (about identity and empathy), I need to do more direct work with the participants. This project could have had a stronger effect on the students involved if I had been able to sit in a quieter, less hectic atmosphere and encourage discussion amongst the students about the topics I wanted to explore. One way to do this might have been to run a workshop that students signed up for, and I would have had 45 minutes in a quiet classroom to talk with students and encourage conversation around identity and empathy, before engaging in the flags- or button-making.

If I were recommending changes for this project in the future, I would also recommend not trying to do two separate parts. The separate flags and buttons were designed to be a 2-phase project, but they actually split my attention during the project and with the number of students coming through the activity, it was difficult to give each part my full attention. Potentially, the two ideas, of story-telling and identity expression could be merged into one activity. Maybe the

students could have just made button or flags, and given more options on what to draw or write on them.

Contributions to Clinical Field

The social and political climate of the world leans more every day toward isolationism and the idea of national integrity. Many countries are rejecting immigrants and people that are viewed as outsiders; *others*. In the United States, we face crises of racism and sexism that seem to divide us more than unite us against (or for) a common idea. We are in crucial need of more empathy for others. The literature reflects that we are fairly well informed on the effect of empathy (Silke, 2017, Malti et al., 2012, Potash & Ho, 2011), but there is little in the way of understanding how to develop empathy in the first place (Gerdes, et al., 2011). This community project adds to the literature examining the question of how to develop empathy. Even though the project did not deliver clear results, it offers some new ways to ask questions about the development of empathy and its use in community-building. Some of these questions might be: What is a better way to record empathy development? How can the arts be used to foster or document this kind of development? Are there other kinds of expressive art-making that can better engender empathy in this population?

I used identity formation and expression as a means to foster empathy in this project. The results are rather unclear as to whether this expression of personal identities was able to create the empathy I aimed for. In the future, perhaps more studies and community-based projects can focus on more ways to foster empathy among adolescents, as well as measure the development of empathy in the community.

This Capstone project asked students to share a small piece of their own stories or identities, with the goal of providing a window into how it feels to share a story with peers. If

students were able to experience this in a small way, perhaps in the future they will be more open to sharing in a larger way. This community project did not aspire to help all of the students fully develop their own identities in one day, but it did aim to open up opportunities and experiences that could foster growth in areas of identity and understanding the role they might play in the future within the larger community.

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Appendix A

Watercolor and ink drawings of flags made.

Appendix B

Cut Paper and Mixed Media Response Piece

Appendix C

Cut Paper and Ink Response Piece

Appendix D

Mixed Media (buttons: paper, metal, plastic) Response Piece

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA

Student's Name: _Allison Stansfield_

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: _A Spectrum Of Experience: A Community Art Project to Build Empathy Through Identity Sharing in a Suburban High School_

Date of Graduation: _May 19, 2018_

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: _Cathy Barbatsiou, LMHC, LCMHC, ATR-BC_