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Integrating Expressive Therapies and Visual Literacy Skills in an Exceptional Children Classroom

Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

The method conducted in this thesis integrated museum education, exceptional children education, and expressive arts therapy practices. Objectives for implementing the method were to learn how to effectively address the unique needs within the exceptional children classroom, as well as to collaborate with the teacher to address those needs through expressive arts therapy and visual literacy approaches. In so doing, I wanted to examine the differences and similarities between museum education and expressive arts therapy and how they can work together to meet therapeutic goals. The method took place over four sessions; each session focused on a work of art and artmaking experience. Using the software program BoardMaker, I used the picture exchange communication system (PECS) to translate these questions into a picture form that was familiar to the participants. Participants of this study ranged from 15-21 years and 9th-12th grades. Diagnoses amongst the group included Autism, Down Syndrome, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and Moderate Intellectual Disability. The process affirmed the need to support more inclusive conversations centered on works of art with exceptional children. Benefits of integrating VTS into the therapeutic space included increased verbal communication, participation in artmaking, group cohesion, and positive self-concept. I hope that this method will continue the conversation and research on inclusive practices centered on works of art within the therapeutic, classroom, and museum space.
Introduction

The method conducted in this thesis integrated museum education, exceptional children education, and expressive arts therapy practices. Often, these three domains intersect. I have witnessed this professionally as a trained elementary and English as a second language educator, museum educator, and during expressive arts therapy experiences with clients. A method was developed that met goals within all three domains. At the same time, in the literature review the differences between expressive art therapy and art education were examined to propose how professions could support one another in achieving the same goals for students. This method was developed to continue the conversation and research on inclusive conversations centered on works of art.

In my thesis project, I found a gap in the literature regarding the use of visual literacy with exceptional children. I inferred that this was due to the differing abilities in verbal communication. Additionally, the majority of the work identified for exceptional children centered on those diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which is why the literature review for this project focuses heavily on this diagnosis. As a museum professional, I have observed the need for more inclusive practices in the museum visit experience for exceptional children; such as more docent training on this subject, ready-made tour materials for families, tactile elements to facilitate museum object discussion, and low sensory spaces. This thesis highlights a few of the many ways museums can become more inclusive in their practice either within the museum space or in their community outreach.

Antonetti and Fletcher (2016) researched the views of caregivers of children diagnosed with ASD who attended a research program at the Dallas Museum of Art. They measured perceptions of family experiences and found that caregivers wanted their children to participate
in museum activities but encountered barriers that prevented full participation (as cited by Kulik & Fletcher, 2016). Some barriers were logistical; such as times that programs were offered. Other barriers however, regarded the nature of the activities. Caregivers described that activities were tailored toward younger children and as a result, their child became easily disengaged. This could be due to the perception museum staff may have about what children diagnosed with ASD are capable of (Kulik & Fletcher, 2016). Recently there has been increased interest in developing art museums as places of social inclusion and equality (Sandell, Dodd, and Garland-Thomson; as cited by McMillen, 2012). According to Mulligan, Rais, Steele-Driscoll, & Townsend (2013) inclusive practice policies for exceptional children have resulted in the development of successful practices and advances in public education and early childhood settings (p. 308). However, there was less research regarding full inclusion approaches for community-based public programs; such as in museums. As a museum educator, the shift in museum education and cultural institutions for more inclusive practices indicates that there are more ways for institutions to improve methodologies through training and research, being vocal about accessibility offerings, and intentional connections with the community. Strong impact statement of purpose and rationale for project

Skramstad (1999) stated, “in the world of the future, every institution, including an art museum, must be judged on its distinctive ability to provide value to society in a way that builds on unique institutional strengths and serves unique community needs” (as cited McMillen, 2012, p. 33). McMillen (2012) continued to state that art museum outreach needs to go beyond its internal agenda. Museums need to shift their focus from an internal transmission approach to external, person-centered engagement (McMillen, 2012). The intention for conducting this method was to encourage cultural institutions to carefully examine the communities they are
serving and consider ways to address those communities’ needs. Exceptional children need to be given the opportunity for conversations with works of art in a variety of communication styles, both verbally or nonverbally. Again—clear rationale and purpose

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a methodology that strengthens critical thinking skills with a work of art as the center of discussion (Housen, 2012). The VTS method asks three essential questions: 1) What’s happening in this picture? 2) What do you see that makes you say that? 3) What more can we find? In my research, I did not find sufficient examples of the impact these questions might have with the exceptional children population which supports the premise for the development of this method. I wanted to adapt VTS questions so that they could be used with exceptional children who expressive themselves verbally and nonverbally. I hoped—envisioned that this would help facilitate discussions on works of art between the therapist, teacher, and within the group. Using the software program BoardMaker, I used the picture exchange communication system (PECS) to translate these questions into a picture form that was familiar to the children a part of this study. I also translated the elements of art, feeling words, and positive affirmations into the PECS format. Visual communication boards supported communication about the artworks and personal artmaking.

A variety of sensory considerations were taken into account when choosing the works of art and developing the artmaking directives. The classroom part of this method receives services from a local non-profit which offers expressive arts therapy sessions to the community. I wanted to include a variety of materials to address the non-profit’s goals of sensory integration; some materials included paint, found objects, pine straw, and clay. Another goal of this non-profit is to help increase students’ self-concept. I was intentional in preparing artmaking interventions that would provide successful outcomes by focusing on process and choosing art making tools that
were accessible to all participants. Additionally, the non-profit focuses on increased ability to communicate in a group atmosphere. I included a third communication board that focused on giving positive affirmations to their peers’ artwork and receiving positive affirmations from their peers’ about their own artwork.

The method took place over four sessions; each session focused on a work of art and artmaking experience. Participants of this study ranged from 15-21 years and 9th-12th grades. Diagnoses amongst the group included Autism, Down Syndrome, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and Moderate Intellectual Disability. All interactions took place within their classroom and images from a local museum were used to support a field trip scheduled later in the semester.

The objectives for implementing the method were to learn how to effectively address the unique needs within the exceptional children classroom, as well as to collaborate with the teacher to address those needs through expressive arts therapy and visual literacy approaches. The expected outcomes included examining the differences and similarities between museum education and expressive arts therapy and how those can work together to meet therapeutic goals.

**Literature Review**

This literature review is divided in the following content areas: role of museums in supporting exceptional children, differences and intersections of art education and expressive arts therapy, and considerations for the classroom and museum space. The focus of this review illuminates the need for more inclusive conversations on works of art, the responsibility of the museum to create inclusive experiences either within the museum space or in the community, and to discuss the considerations in implementing these inclusive practices.

**Role of Museums**
Research shows that families with children diagnosed with ASD are challenged to comfortably access resources and programs enjoyed by other communities (Mulligan et al., 2013). The occurrence of ASD has increased dramatically within the last 20 years. ASD prevalence was estimated as one in forty-five children (Van Lith, Stalings, & Harris, 2017). This demonstrates the need to research inclusive practices that promote positive community integration within cultural spaces. Families reported an interest in participating in community activities but worry about their child’s reaction to the new environment or experience and as a result, report feeling isolated (Mulligan et al, 2013). Adults diagnosed with ASD have communicated ideas such as organizations providing social supports, structured or scripted social activities, minimizing crowds, access to quiet spaces, and alternative modes of communication such as pictures to promote inclusion within these spaces (Mulligan et al, 2013). Wilson, Bryant, Reynolds, & Lawson (2015) discussed how museums and art galleries have a vital role in public health in regards to maintaining health and facilitating recovery as they provide a space away from traditionally clinical settings. With this said, cultural institutions have the responsibility to consider the stigma that certain mental health conditions face. Moreover, institutions need to address the physical accessibility, social attitudes of the museum staff and patrons, and unique needs of the individual (Lamb, 2009; Beresford 2013; Taylor 2009; as cited by Wilson et al., 2015). Addressing these barriers must be conducted first in order to encourage participation in the arts and prevent the cycle of social exclusion. Exclusion from access was shown to have negative effects on health and recovery (Sayce, 2000; Stickley, 2010; as cited by Wilson et al., 2015). Barnes & Mercer (2010) recommend those with disabilities to have active involvement in the process of how institutions address these issues (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; as cited by Wilson et al., 2015).
Rancort (1990) stated that our society should strive to “value people with disabilities and in so doing we will enable people with disabilities to take on various valued social roles, including those associated with leisure activities, such as participating in museum education programs” (McMillen, 2012, p. 103). Accessible Arts (2009) found that cultural institutions in the United States are becoming more aware that people with disabilities experience violations of their cultural and social rights (as cited by McMillen, 2012). The American Art Museum’s *Everyone’s Welcome* guidelines are based upon theories, such as Normalization theory, which says, “people with disabilities should be actively involved in the everyday patterns of life just as able-bodied persons and become central to any decision-making processes” (McMillen, 2012, p. 103). Understanding the theory behind the AAM’s guidelines can help museum staff better understand the nine steps to disability access and achieve accessible art educational programs for exceptional children. According to McMillen (2012) these nine steps are:

1. Publish an accessibility statement;
2. Designate an accessibility coordinator;
3. Employ an accessibility advisory council;
4. Provide staff training;
5. Review of existing facilities and programs;
6. Plan for accessibility;
7. Promote and advertise accessibility in the museum;
8. Institute grievance procedures; and
9. Review access efforts (p. 105).

These guidelines must be addressed beyond the walls of the museum. Art museums in the U.S. must “strive to meet ADA compliance in all aspects, including their educational outreach programs for visitors with disabilities” (McMillen, 2012, p. 104).

Wyatt-Spratt and Wyatt-Spratt (1999) stated:

Today, public institutions, such as art museums, must comply with a range of ADA laws that mandate appropriate treatment toward people with disabilities. It is to society’s
advantage that everyone be treated equitably and that all barriers to accessibility be removed (as cited by McMillen, 2012, p. 105).

These studies highlighted the responsibility of the museum to provide access to information either in promotional materials that are provided within the museum space but also within the community. This encourages audiences with disabilities to feel welcome and to realize a sense of belonging in the museum space as they are made aware of inclusive practices the museum has available to them.

**Differences and Intersections of Art Education and Expressive Arts Therapy**

Art therapists often work within educational settings and institutions with exceptional children; providing therapy that may resemble an art lesson. At the same time, art educators working with exceptional children may find themselves needing training in art making or material adaptations necessary to meet individual needs (Parashak, 1997). It is important to discuss the differences and intersections between the roles of an expressive arts therapist and art educator so that each professional can learn how to best support one another’s goals. In research conducted by Treadon, Rosal, & Wylder (2006), they found that in a collaboration between an art therapist and museum educator in a museum setting, communication was essential to the process and resulted in a high satisfactory experience by participants. Taking time to discuss difference and similarities between their roles aided the efficacy of the experience for the participants. They discussed that the museum educator’s role was to introduce the art objects regarding knowledge about the exhibits and aesthetics. The expressive art’s therapist role was to help participants engage in discussions about the emotional impact of a work of art, understand the emotional and psychological needs of the participants and possible issues that would arise from being in an environment that may have been different for them, and prepare for the variety of reactions that
According to Andrus (1995) there are several philosophical and ideological connections between art education and art therapy: “(a) providing services for children with disabilities, (b) preparing art educators to teach children with special needs, and (c) sensitizing art educators to teach children with unclassified special needs.” (as cited by Parashak, 1997, p. 241). Parashak (1997) proposes that art therapists with backgrounds in both art education and art therapy may be particularly effective in working with exceptional children.

Expressive arts therapy focuses on the process rather than the product (Alter-Muri, 2017). Malchiodi (2007) stated that “the goal of art therapy is to allow unconscious images to emerge and be contained which serves as a tool to process otherwise hidden thoughts and feelings” (as cited by Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 21). For exceptional children, art therapists use clinical interventions to “strengthen and broaden art activities” by focusing on their therapeutic goals (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 20). Art therapy differs from art education as it does not focus on art making techniques or aesthetic critiques of their products. A treatment plan encompasses the understanding of behaviors, psychological attributes, and challenges of individual students (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 20). Additionally, the group size is typically smaller than that of the classroom so the therapist can better meet individual needs (as cited by Parashak, 1997, p. 241).

Discussing elements of design such as line, color, and shape when observing a work of art with an art therapist can further personal expression of feelings through art (Parashak, 1997). Elements of design are typically taught in art education courses but according to Kramer (1971) are “indispensable tools in therapeutic art programs” (as cited by Parashak, 1997, p. 244).

**Choice-Based Art**
An advantage to arts-based instruction for exceptional children is that this approach allows students to make decisions as they create and have autonomy over their learning. Learning becomes a hands-on experience through the use of art materials. Students are given opportunities to demonstrate different ways of understanding beyond traditional methods which enhances their understanding and engagement (Mason, Steedly, Thormann, 2008). Collier & Wix (2017) write how a choice-based approach has the ability to engage learners in art, peer relationship, and creates built-in inclusivity. Choices can vary in means of expression, action, materials, resources, and communication. Onosko and Joergensen (1998) recommend to use the arts as an “opener” or to create interest or to facilitate cooperative learning situations within an inclusive classroom (as cited by Mason, Steedly, Thormann, 2008).

**Benefits**

A recent National Art Therapy Association survey of members about current practices, found that approximately 10-15% of art therapists were specifically working with people diagnosed with ASD (Elkins & Deaver, 2010, 2015; as cited by Van Lith, Stalings, & Harris, 2017). The majority of art therapists working with children diagnosed with ASD worked in educational settings. Martin & Betts (2010) indicated that therapy conducted within therapeutic settings “has been noted for being conducive to fostering of biopsychosocial development using visual expression and communication methods within a structured environment (as cited by Van Lith, Stalings, & Harris, 2017).

Alter-Muri (2017) defined the range of symptoms of ASD, such as deficits in social communication, social–emotional reciprocity, idiosyncrasies in body language, and repetitive motor movements and speech. ASD affects one out of fifty children (Kulik & Fletcher, 2016). Expressive arts therapists work with students diagnosed with ASD to “increase cooperation, peer

For those who are unable to visit cultural institutions due to accessibility or resources would benefit from community resource materials being brought to them. For example, museum materials such as tactile art objects may develop personal expression (verbal and nonverbal) as it provides multisensory stimulation (Parashak, 1997). Additionally, exposure to others’ creative expressions, such as works of art, may inspire the creative process and encourage children to take risks. Parashak (1997) stated, “successful attempts at taking small risks through art can build the confidence to continue taking steps toward communication with others” (p. 244). Parashak (1997) discussed how this is seen in group work when members reflect, project, and interact about a peers’ artwork. This increases insight not only to their peers’ artwork but also promotes personal growth in their own artmaking. Reflecting on works of art may help clients reflect on personal experiences, create greater self-awareness, and provide deeper meaning for an exceptional child. According to Alter-Muri (1996), “identifying with the artist may bring new self-awareness to the client” exceptional children “may find that the museum and its works of art have a had a great impact on them” (as cited by Parashak, 1997, p. 244).

**Self-Concept**

Art can offer countless meanings depending on the viewer. Hacking, Secker, Spandler, Kent, and Shenton (2008) found that after 6 months of involvement with art projects that included paintings or original compositions there were increased feelings of empowerment and an overall
improvement in mental health (as cited by Kaufman et al., 2014). Boyes & Reid (2005) & Haynes (1990) found art education programs benefit self-esteem which in turn positively affected academic achievement (as cited by Kaufman et al., 2014). Within the museum space, art classes for children with autism spectrum disorder and their non-autism spectrum peers led to increased positive social interactions for both groups (Schleien, Mustonen, & Rynders, 1995; as cited by Kaufman et al., 2014). Engagement in the arts gives children independence over expressing their ideas. The arts can provide the opportunity for an exceptional child to explore their voice in the way that they communicate. Mason, Steedly, Thormann (2008) stated:

In this respect, students are not “given” their voices; rather, they find their voices through the process of trying on, exploring, and rehearsing. In that regard, the arts provide a way for students to express their understandings, their feelings, and their beliefs. “Voice” within this context refers to the unique and individual way students with disabilities can use an art form, and the process of creating art, to communicate information about themselves and their understanding of the world (pp. 40–41).

Engagement in the arts helps exceptional children express anger, frustration, fear, confusion, and unhappiness. Expression of voice is closely linked to confidence and self-esteem as it allows a person to learn that their contributions to a conversation are valued. When this is discovered, they are more likely to participate more often in conversations. This in turn helps build classroom or group community (Mason, Steedly, Thormann, 2008).

**Visual Thinking Strategies**

One way educators and therapists can support students’ group discussions and observations about works of art is through Visual Thinking Strategies. Housen (2002) defined Visual Thinking Strategies as a sequential curriculum that includes in-school teacher-facilitated
discussions about art, yearly art museum visits, and teacher training” (p. 100). The method developed by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen, museum educator Philip Yenawine, and their colleagues, includes three foundational questions to prompt inquiry: 1) What is going on here?, 2) What do you see that makes you say that?, and 3) What more can you find? (Housen, 2002, p. 100). The structure is intended to be conducted within a group and the teacher asks open-ended questions about a series of intentionally selected images of works of art. The discussions that follow allow students to construct their own meaning and continue to build meaning while listening or observing the responses of their peers. As a result, they accelerate shifts in their own thinking by being exposed to the thoughts of their peers (Housen, 2002).

Considerations for the Classroom and Museum Space

The art therapist or educator must take in mind disruptions to the art making space such as visitors walking in and out of the space, noise levels, or even the size of the group (Alter-Muri, 2017). Bringing in tactile objects that students are connected to helps students conceptualize their own learning and improves language and communication skills (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 21). It is important to consider that students diagnosed with ASD may have trouble expressing themselves verbally and following step-by-step directions. Reasons for this may be difficulty with social cues or focusing on one topic in a conversation while excluding other important information (Malley, 2013; as cited by Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 21). Children may have difficulties “starting, stopping, continuing, and switching from one thing to another” during art making (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 21). It is important that art activities are designed in a way that all students can feel successful at various levels. The article also describes several activities connected to a skill(s). For example, to address the release of emotions, Alter-Muri (2017) led an exercise where students hit sticks on a board forming holes to create a pattern. Nails were hammered into the
holes (by the therapist) and the children wrapped yarn around the nails creating an abstract pattern. This exercise helped reduce anxiety as well as addressing gross and fine motor skills, and tactile awareness.

**Sensory Considerations.** A multisensory approach with interactive and hands-on experiences is effective for exceptional children (Parashak, 1997). Students diagnosed with ASD regulate their hyper or under stimulated senses by shutting out forms of communication (Alter-Muri, 2017). With this in mind, the sensory aspect of materials need to be carefully considered when working with this population. For example, creating art work on paper that is not pure white benefits the art making process due to difficulties with processing and depth perception. Other considerations may be the organization of art supplies; considering access to materials and limiting the number of materials available. Tactile considerations are important due to hypo- or hyper-sensitivities to touch. Sensory experiences can increase verbal or nonverbal communication so it is important to consider individual sensory needs or sensitivities. For example, a student may find that clay may be overstimulating; the therapist can adapt the artmaking by placing the clay into a plastic bag. This allows the child to still experience interacting with the clay without an overstimulating tactile experience (Alter-Muri, 2017). Smells of materials such as glue, clay, and markers can affect the ability to concentrate. Moreover, multiple sounds; noises of fluorescents lights, art making, and voices can cause either distraction or withdrawal (Alter-Muri, 2017).

**Method**

The development of a method thesis option was chosen since there was minimal research on the use of Visual Thinking Strategies with exceptional children. This pilot project furthers research on this topic and presents new perspectives on the collaboration between museum
education and expressive arts therapy. I view this thesis project as a form of social and educational activism; advocating for a population that has not been consistently given the same opportunities to discuss work of art in the museum space.

**Description of Participants and Location**

All four sessions took place in an exceptional children classroom at a high school in North Carolina. The seven participants in this study ranged from ages 15-21 and are enrolled in 9th-12th grades. Diagnoses amongst the group included Autism, Down Syndrome, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and Moderate Intellectual Disability. The group was a part of a local non-profit’s Exceptional Children program. The sessions within the classroom led up to a visit at a well-established art museum in the community. The sessions were once a week and were consecutive with the exception of the final session; there was a week break in between.

**Description of Method**

Students observed a work of art that was on view in a local art museum. Works from this collection were selected as the class had planned to go on a field trip to the museum later in the semester. The intention was to help build connections between the works of art prior to the museum visit so that students would be able to recognize pieces during their museum tour. This was also to build background knowledge to help further facilitate conversations about the works of art in the museum space. The sessions were scheduled as such:

1. VTS discussion about work of art
2. Art making in relation to the work of art
3. Sharing and affirmations

The sessions were facilitated using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). These strategies were adapted using PECS images using the software program BoardMaker. One page described
the VTS questions, another described elements of art, and the last page described positive affirmations (see Appendix).

I created a document to record information (see Appendix). Qualitative data was gathered during each of the sessions. An art therapist working with the non-profit assisted in taking notes for each of the students that would later be compiled into group data. There were six areas and prompts that were noted during each session for each student. For each section, we noted whether the student pointed to the PECS tool, said a word or phrase, pointed the artwork or demonstrated a combination of the three. The areas and prompts that were noted were:

- Responds to, “What’s happening in the painting/sculpture?”
- Point/say what you see in the painting/sculpture.
- Point/say more about what you see in the painting/sculpture.
- The student notices something in their own artwork (i.e. an element of art).
- The student notices something in their peers’ artwork (i.e. an element of art)/
- The student chooses an affirmation.

The method was created to address the initial assessment conducted by the non-profit which was an adapted Kramer assessment. Some of the observations on that assessment looked for were whether or not children could describe their artwork, the form of communication in which ideas were expressed (i.e. verbal, gesture, eye gaze), and the need or response to prompting by the art therapist. I used the PECS format after observing this tool used in a larger Pragmatic Organisation Display within the classroom. Art making was inspired by the works of art observed. A tactile board was provide to aide students in describing sensory elements to works of art (see appendix). Students were given choice in how to use the materials and all activities were process oriented.
Session One

The first session was centered on a lithograph by Wassily Kandinsky (see appendix), Composition with Blue Triangle, no. 8 in Neue Europaeische Graphik, 4te Mappe: italienische und russiche Kuenstler.

Artmaking. Use found objects of different shapes to print. Students dipped the objects into paint and printed the shapes onto their paper.

Session Two

The second session was centered on an oil painting by Louis Stone (see appendix), Untitled.

Artmaking. Create slit sculptures out of cardboard shapes. Students first decorated the shapes with pastels, attached the shapes, and then used pipe cleaners to create a variety of lines to connect the shapes.

Session Three

The third session focused on a beaded neckpiece by an unidentified Zulu (North Nguni) artist (see appendix), Neckpiece with Panel [Jewelry].

Artmaking. Create a textile by sewing onto an embroidery board with thread and beads.

Session Four

The final session focused on sculptures by Patrick Dougherty (see appendix), entitled Step Right Up. This artmaking was intentionally scheduled for the final session as the sculptures are located right outside the museum entrance. I hoped this could help students have an immediate connection to a work of art when they arrived to the museum.

Artmaking. Create clay sculptures using natural materials such as straw, twine, and sticks.

Results

Educational Goals Met
IEP Language Arts (speaking, listening, reading) goals and Healthful Living (Interpersonal Communication) goals were met in this method. Extended Content Language Arts Standards that were met:

- ELA: Acquire and use vocabulary
- ELA: Purposeful communication: discussions; speaking on topic; asking on topic questions
- ELA: Present information: precise communication
- ELA: Purposeful communication: discussions; speaking on topic; asking on topic questions
- ELA: Conventional communication: speaking
- ELA: Effective communication

**Session One**

There were three participants for this session. All participants were able to say something that they saw within the image. All students focused on elements of art and the lines they saw within the image. Two out of three participants were able to say more about what they saw in the image; both focused on shapes such as rectangles and circles. All participants chose an affirmation for themselves and noticed something within their own art work using the PECS board to communicate. All students also noticed something in their peers’ artwork using the PECS board; two participants focused on line while one focused on color. All participants used the PECS tool between five to seven times and communicated verbally between one to three times. All participants pointed to the artwork between two to three times.

**Session Two**

There were five participants for this session. All participants were able to say something that
they saw within the image. Some students focused on the elements of art while others thought symbolically. One student said the image reminded them of “snipe rifles”, another said it looked like “a bench”. Another student commented on the spiral lines while another commented on the brown, black, and pink colors. Four out of five participants were able to say more about what they saw in the image; some focusing on their opinion of the piece, others the straight lines, and another said they saw a trashcan in the image. Three out of five participants chose an affirmation for themselves. Two students noticed something within their own art work; both focused on color. Two students also noticed something in their peers’ artwork, focusing on color or texture. Four out of five participants used the PECS tool between one to five times. Five out of five participants communicated verbally between one to five times. Three out of five participants pointed to the artwork between one to two times.

Session Three

There were five participants for this session. Four out of five participants were able to say something that they saw within the image. All students focused on the elements of art. One student commented on the red and blue colors, another on the shapes (i.e. circle, octagon), two on the zig zag lines, and one student also counted the number of zig zag lines they saw in the image. One student commented on the spiral lines while another commented on the brown, black, and pink colors. Two participants chose an affirmation for themselves. Three students noticed something within their own art work; both focusing on shape and line. Four out of five participants used the PECS tool between one to two times. Five out of five participants communicated verbally between one to three times. Three out of five participants pointed to the artwork between one to three times.

Session Four
There were five participants for this session. All participants were able to say something that they saw within the image. One student said the image reminded them of “a forest”, another said they saw vines. Four out of five participants chose an affirmation for themselves. Four out of five participants pointed to the PECS tool between one to two times. Some students looked at the tool for ideas but did not point at it; some chose to say the word verbally or point to the artwork after looking at the PECS images. Five out of five participants communicated verbally between three to five times.

In the final session, students did not use the PECS images as much as in the prior sessions and there was an increase in overall verbal communication. Over the course of the sessions, I observed that the students gained skills to independently express themselves and their opinions about the works of art and their artwork. When visual communication tools were provided, students were more engaged in discussions centered on their artwork. I was surprised how quickly students grasped using the PECS tool to communicate. I observed that there were numerous times when students did not point to the PECS tool but rather used it as a visual reminder and pointed to the artwork. The method allowed for increased communication opportunities for individuals with limited verbal language ability and for individuals who do not speak a common language. The PECS communication tool has been used beyond this four-week method to support language arts instruction during book discussions and during informal conversations with peers.

**Museum Visit**

The class went on a field trip twelve weeks after the method was concluded. This was intended to be closer to the end of the method to help students better recall pieces they might see on their tour. However, snow days and conflicts in scheduling affected the ability to have a closer time in
between the conclusion of the method and the field trip. The tour was led by a museum docent and did not follow the same structure as presented in the method. The classroom educator and myself used the communication board to help support the tour and all participants utilized the tool. The museum docent was also able to easily grasp the tool and integrate the method into their tour. The use of the tool during the tour seemed to increase student participation. The active student engagement serves as an indicator for further research in using the communication board in the museum space.

**Further Observations**

One area that needed additional support was for the question, “What’s happening in this painting/sculpture?” The concept seemed abstract and open ended for the students. After this question there was the prompt, “Point/say what you see in this painting sculpture.” This received a more consistent response and I noticed that the concrete structure of the question helped students feel capable and confident in pointing to the work of art or the PECS card. When repeating this method in the future, I would spend more time explaining the different elements of art to help scaffold their language.

Another area that I noticed needed more support was in prompting the students to provide positive feedback to their peers. Future implementation of this method should include a plan or strategy to increase in communication surrounding positive affirmations. Towards the end of the process, participants were more engaged in artmaking and willing to share their products with their peers. There were several concepts presented in a limited amount of time and in a future implementation of this method I would continue modeling how to give positive feedback to a peer or notice elements of art in their peers’ artwork. Additionally, based on a recommendation by the teacher, removable icons attached with Velcro may support with this process. Many
individuals who use the PECS system have learned to communicate by handing icons to the person they are speaking to in the classroom or other settings. According to Barry (2018), this would reinforce their known communication systems. (Barry, personal communication, 2018). Additionally, it would benefit the class to have a museum pre-visit to orient students to the space.

When repeating this method within another classroom, I would conduct a pre-assessment of using Visual Thinking Strategies without the PECS cards that I developed. I would make this adjustment to reduce student frustration during this pre-assessment and make available their typical communication tools. By not using the VTS communication tool in the pre-assessment, I could better ascertain the impact the tool has when discussing works of art. I would also examine or investigate how this tool could be used in other subject areas as a way to engage learners before a lesson begins. Finally, I want to explore the use of other modalities; responding to works of art with movement, drama, or music.

This thesis process informed my work as a museum educator with preschoolers that I teach in the museum space. I became more aware of the distractions within the space such as the fluorescent lights, outside noises or visitors within the museum, and materials as well as realizing the importance of providing adaptive artmaking materials. In my expressive arts therapy practice, I integrated what I have learned in this particular classroom into other classrooms and with individuals as well. I am taking intentional time to communicate affirmations and using works of art as inspiration for communication or metaphor. There has been a notable and observable positive impact these new practices have had on my clients who speak English as a second language. I have used works of art to begin sessions and the visual communication cards to facilitate conversations when describing their work. I have noticed an increase in verbal communication about their artwork, acceptance of affirmations, and pride in their work.
Artistic Responses. In response to sessions, I created artistic responses based on my observations of student engagement, observations, and manner in which they used the materials. This process helped me develop insight into the thought process of the individuals. Specifically, I gained perspective on how certain materials were used and why individuals may have preferred certain materials over others. Moreover, the process helped me better understand perhaps why certain materials provided language more than others when thinking about the words needed to describe them.

Discussion

This thesis examines the intersection between expressive arts therapy, museum education, and exceptional children education. The author recognized a gap in the literature regarding Visual Thinking Strategies and exceptional children. I wanted to develop a method that allowed for inclusive conversations centered on works of art with children who have a variety of communication abilities. Children would later use communication skills and new language from VTS conversations on works of art within conversations about their own or peers’ artwork. The observed positive impact that these conversations had on expressive arts therapy and classroom goals was salient. Some of the intersected goals being: increased verbal communication, greater sense of self, increased self-confidence, increased communication within a group, and risk taking in sensory exploration. The sessions for each method first began with a projected image of a work of art and a discussion. By providing exceptional children with a visual communication tool, they were able to have autonomy over their opinions and observations about a work of art. Pittman-Gelles (1988) stated:

The purpose of art museum education is to enhance the visitor’s ability to understand and appreciate the original works of art and to transfer these experiences into other aspects of
visitors’ lives. This placed the viewer as the focus of art museum education. Thus, art museum educators had a new framework for planning and enhancing educational opportunities. The art itself was not the focus, but rather the way the viewer interpreted the art to create a meaningful experience. The experience could then help the individual increase the understanding of his or her own life (Mayer, 1998; as cited by Treadon et al., 2006).

The visual communication tool facilitated communication between the therapist, child, and their peers. Students became more willing to give and receive positive affirmations which result in an observable increase in self-esteem. As a result, in subsequent sessions, students took risks in the way materials were used and participated more frequently. A unique observation in several of the students was a shift in focus from the elements of art to more symbolic thinking.

The implications for children to be able to use such a tool in the museum space opens the possibilities for more inclusive tour experiences. I infer that it would change the view of museum staff as they alter the approach of their tours from that of lecture to conversation. This was notable in the museum tour with the use of the visual communication tool. The docent facilitating the tour was able to easily grasp and use the tool within their conversation which increased participation and engagement amongst the students.

**Recommendations**

Mason, Steedly, Thormann (2008) stated that “little research is available to further understanding about how teachers integrate the arts for students with disabilities, teachers’ impressions of the value of arts integration with this population, or its actual impact on cognition or academic achievement” (p. 38). Although the method used for this project does not directly address public school educational standards, educational standards and goals were supported as a result of this
process. The integration of Visual Thinking Strategies with works of art alongside expressive therapy methods within an exceptional children classroom addressed educational language arts goals. These language goals also meet expressive arts therapy goals in regards to expression and communication. The combination of VTS with expressive arts therapy methods to address educational goals suggests that collaborative planning among the expressive arts therapist and exceptional children educator can help meet goals in both areas. I would recommend to someone researching this topic to collaborate with as many professionals working with the exceptional children they are serving to better understand students’ individual needs and how they can be addressed across multiple disciplines (i.e. classroom teacher, speech pathologist, occupational therapist). The museum tour was not a direct part of the thesis method. However, students were actively engaged with the visual communication tool during the experience. I would recommend future research in the use of PECS images within the museum space and their impact on classroom and therapeutic goals. This would provide further insight into the use of the museum as a therapeutic space and accessible educational resource. As a result of this process, local community resources have engaged in conversations with me to learn how to create more inclusive experiences centered on works art within their respective institutions. These institutions have shared that they have been provided with resources regarding advocacy for exceptional children in the past but are now searching for practical applications that can be used by tour guides and docents.

This thesis project was intended to reach both expressive therapists and museum educators to help create more inclusive practices that benefit exceptional children. These benefits included increased verbal communication, participation in artmaking, group cohesion, and positive self-concept. It would be advantageous for other expressive arts therapists to determine
the efficacy of integrating works of art and Visual Thinking Strategies into the therapeutic space.
Appendix

Session One

Artistic Response to Student Work


Session Two

Artistic Response to Student Work


Board used to describe tactile elements of works of art.
### Observation Tool

(P=points to PECS, S=says word or phrase, A=Points to Artwork)
For example, if a student points the PECS tool and says a word or phrase it would be noted as: P/S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s happening in the painting/sculpture?</th>
<th>Point/say what you see in the painting/sculpture.</th>
<th>Point/say more about what you see in the painting/sculpture.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Notices something in their own artwork.  
- Notices something in their peers’ artwork.
- Chooses an affirmation.

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References


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**THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

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Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
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Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts Therapy, MA

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**Student’s Name:** Natalia Torres del Valle (Torres Disney)

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** Integrating Expressive Therapies and Visual Literacy Skills in an Exceptional Children Classroom

**Date of Graduation:** 5/19/18  
In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** Dr. Sarah Hamil

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