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Fostering Social/Emotional Learning in a School Setting with Adolescents with Special Needs Through Collaborative Art Experiences

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Abstract

This capstone focused on working with adolescents with special needs through art experiences. The framework in working with has evolved into the incorporation of social-emotional learning. Social-emotional benchmarks have been present in common themes in working with the special needs population. Art has been seen as a beneficial tool in therapeutic work with this population concerning cognitive growth, emotional regulation, adaptive behavioral styles, and physical development. This capstone specifically highlighted collaborative art and its role in an art group composed of adolescents in a school setting. Collaborative art experiences were presented through art partner work. Data was collected through observations, group process notes, discussions with multiple staff members, and intentional group curriculum. Through the presentation, process, completion and sharing of the collaborative art experience, data collected has presented an overall positive experience of this art group. Students participated and fully engaged in social-emotional learning through the process of collaborative art, proving art as a method to be a potentially useful tool in working with this population therapeutically.

Introduction

The framework for working with adolescents with special needs has primarily been focused around social-emotional competencies. This has been developed because of the vulnerabilities that shape the clinical profile of this population. The arts have a potential role to incorporate into the framework of treatment for adolescents with special needs. This capstone will be focusing on the social pieces of social/emotional competencies through means of engagement in collaborative art experiences.

Social-Emotional Learning serves an important role for students with special needs as well as the staff that serves them and has continued to be researched in ways of implementing this learning into school settings (Adams, 2013). Frameworks for evaluating the quality of social and emotional programs, such as the CASEL program (Core SEL Competencies, 2017), have identified five core competencies promoting intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competence, which can be taught in many ways across many settings (homes, schools, communities, etc.). These five core competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Core SEL Competencies, 2017).

Current research supports the use of art as an effective tool in working with special needs students. For example, Freilich and Shechtman have yielded favorable art therapy outcomes in academic adjustment for students with disabilities. Art therapy has also been seen in addressing areas of need in students with special needs such as cognitive growth, emotional regulation, adaptive behavioral styles, and physical development (Lith, Stallings, & Harris, 2017). Furthermore, Kostyunina an Drozdikoza-Zaripova Kazan have found that mandala art therapy shows benefits through use of color associations chosen by students which can add to the communicative piece in working with special needs through art (2016). Previous research

provides ample evidence to support art as therapeutic work to engage students with special needs in social emotional learning through art experiences

Although there has been a large amount of experience and research of the benefits of art therapy in working with the special needs population, there is little information about how collaborative group art processes can aid in social/emotional learning with adolescents. Knowing this, I aim to incorporate art in the process of student group development with students of varying disabilities. Additionally, I believe that this work can be used as an additional approach in working with adolescents who have special needs. This capstone is used as a framework for potential future research as well as an arts-based approach in working on social skills.

Literature Review

This section will address current literature which highlights the clinical profiles of adolescents with special needs within a school setting along with the benefits of art therapy, group work and social/emotional learning.

Autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is defined as "a neuropsychiatric disorder characterized by the impairment in the social reciprocity, interaction/language, and behavior, with stereotypes and signs of sensory function deficits" (Reis, Reategui, Karen, Queiroz, Silva, Morya, & Brasil, 2017, p. 1). The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for ASD includes symptoms present in early developmental periods such as specific social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts and restricted repetitive behavior, interests, or activities. These symptoms are diagnosable if they cause significant clinical impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD is diagnosed on a spectrum as the varying social and communications present in varying patterns.

Due to the neuropsychological nature of this disorder, there has been an ample amount of research done on ASD and the brain (Reis, et. al, 2017 and Pisula, Pudlo, Slowinska, Kawa, Strzaska, Banasiak, and Wolanczyk, 2017). Electroencephalography (EEG) has been used to identify abnormalities in the brain of children with ASD and compared to brain activity of a typically functioning children. "The analysis of the power spectrum in children with ASD during visual stimulus of happy, neutral, and angry faces demonstrated an increase of power in higher frequencies (above 30Hz) in the ASD group in frontal, occipital, and center-parietal areas when compared to control group" and decreased activity in the frontal lobe when shown fearful faces (Reis, et. al, 2017, p. 9). Brain activity is also different in visual-spatial processing which include the occipital, temporal, and ventral pathway parts of the brain and in object recognition which resides in the parietal, temporal, and dorsal pathway parts of the brain. The communication failures between the dorsal and ventral pathways are noted to cause difficulties in these areas. The deficits in brain activity contributes to the difficulty in identifying things visually and socially for a person with ASD. Pisula, et al. (2017) found that self-insight was also low in comparing parental reports and self-reports of adolescents with ASD as behavioral/emotional disturbances were reported much less severe in self-reports than parental reports.

Special Needs in a School Setting

Experience in a high school can be challenging to the special needs population. In both public and special schools bullying and 'othering' can be experienced by student with special needs and require structured social experiences to thrive, most experiences organized by the school (Holt & Lea, 2017). Some supports-based interventions provided by schools are general education class participation support, peer support arrangements, assigning roles to general education peers, instructional groupings, and peer training (Carter & Hughes, 2005). Although

these interventions are beneficial in social engagement, it requires typical peer involvement and organization by the school which can fall short in some instances. For example, there may be a lack of peer involvement for volunteer-based peer lunch groups or having the flexibility of a staff to make alterations in scheduling their school day.

Within a school setting it often requires a team of professionals to treat students who present complex profiles of care. In school settings services such as counseling, special educations, transition skills, nursing, speech and language, reading, assessments, and one-on-one work with a teacher's assistant can be provided through academic services. Services for student with social and emotional difficulties requires a team of specialists in their field working collaboratively while adhering to professional roles that are also clear to the students being served (Hughes, 2012). Roles within the different professions of staff serving in a school must be defined within the school setting through goals each professional has in working with a student.

Regarding professional roles, the role of a teacher aides (TA) has developed further as schools have adapted to inclusive learning environments. From preparing instructional materials, supervising and providing clerical assistance, TAs are now given more challenging tasks with little training. Such tasks may include conducting functional behavioral assessments, providing personal care, collecting performance data, facilitating social inclusion, tutoring, implementing behavioral interventions, and more (Howard & Ford, 2007). Although Howard and Ford found much job satisfaction in TA work through qualitative interviewing, it was also found that more staff support and training would be beneficial for improved work with students (2007).

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning has increasingly been recognized as a vital role for students with special needs and the professionals who serve them. Adams (2013) wrote on models

incorporating social-emotional learning to implicate not only in special education classrooms but general education classrooms as well for a school-wide approach. Programs that promote social-emotional learning such as the well-known PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) curriculum focuses on the fostering of emotional development, self-regulation, and social problem-solving skills. Studies on this program have shown long-term effectiveness in teachers reporting less internalizing and externalizing behavior as well as a reduction in depressive symptoms as much as two years after implementing the curriculum (Kam, Greenberg, & Kusche, 2004). One of the benefits of incorporating social-emotional learning is to foster behaviors and attitudes that can help students with social-emotional deficits effectively and ethically take part in daily tasks that are normally prevented. Teaching intrapersonal, interpersonal and cognitive competencies can be taught in many ways and across many settings to enhance generalizing expected behavior through school life, home life, and out in the community. The CASEL program has distinguished five core competencies to be implemented into learning which are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (2017). These competencies are of significance in working with special needs and are often taught through multimodal approaches for effective learning.

Art Therapy and Special Needs

There has been much work by art therapists dedicated to working with the special needs population, however, there is a need for a more global understanding of the structure and facilitation of working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Lith, Stallings, and Harris (2017) have attempted to develop clearer ways of understanding how art therapists typically work with the special needs population in ways of which themes should be encouraged through art making. Drahota, Stadnick, and Brookman (2012) also explored this theme of universality in

art therapy treatment in their study. In their literature review of 18 examined studies, found that art therapy can address areas of need including cognitive growth emotional regulation, adaptive behavioral styles, and physical development. This study also found that with ASD evidence-based practice (EBP) training, 1) therapists felt more confidence in integrating strategies into art therapy work, 2) enhanced treatment methods through time considerations, individualized strategies, increased parent involvement, and focusing on systematic approaches to behaviors, and 3) influenced positive outcomes such ae improvement management of skills, improved parent management skills, and reductions of the frequency and intensity of a child's behaviors. Lith et. al (2017) have identified that many art therapists who have worked with special needs had common aims of social skills development, behavioral regulation, sensory integration, communication/sensory supports, and emotional regulation (Lith et. al, 2017). It was also identified that common approaches art therapists practiced in working with special needs were humanistic/person-centered, developmental, and cognitive-behavioral (Lith et. al, 2017).

Lith, Stallings and Harris also collected qualitative information from an array of art therapists in how to structure sessions through using best practices. It was explained that in material integration, a "'top-down' approach to the ETC", starting with more restrictive materials on a cognitive level and progressively working toward more sensory/kinesthetic materials, works well across sessions (2017). Also, the structure of sessions was of noted importance in that an art therapist has ample considerations in framing the opening of the session, introducing the art directive, communicating with clarity, sparking curiosity, staying aware of transitions, encouraging sharing with others and providing preparation for termination of sessions (Lith et. al, 2017). Practicing art therapy with students can also differ in focuses from an academic setting. A study in Israel conducted by Freilich and Shechman found that students receiving only

academic assistance had similar progress to those receiving both academic assistance and art

therapy, however, the interventions entailed different focuses. Whereas the academic

intervention focused on "improved learning experience," art therapy focused on "emotional

exploration and awareness-insight development" (2010, p. 1).

Art therapy, as previously stated, can aid tremendously in sensory integration which is

essential in working with special needs. In Kearns' (2004) article, a case study was facilitated to

address if there were benefits of using art-based activities during a daily check-in with a

kindergartener experiencing sensory integration difficulties. The results showed that although

days of arts-based interventions did not eliminate poor behaviors, the child showed a greater

ability to postpone the onset of negative behaviors as well as a decrease in the overall amount of

negative behavior blocks.

Group Art Therapy and Social Skills

Group therapy and art therapy very likely lend themselves well to interventions of

education of social skills. Epps (2008) showed the effectiveness of a social skills program which

included art therapy group work in working with special needs. The SSRS, a standardized, norm-

referenced instrument typically used with children of mild disabilities related to social skills, was

the main instrument used in this study. Data was also collected through mailing a questionnaire

to parents and teachers as a pre- and posttest. There was a statistically significant change in the

mean of problem behaviors measured between pre- and posttest showing a decrease in

internalizing behaviors (Epps, 2008). Likewise, benefits of group art therapy were explored

within special education settings in Hong Kong (Sau-Lai, 2016). The 14-session group did not

show clinical significance on the children's sense of autonomy or competence in their learning,

however, observations made during sessions showed art therapy's facilitation of these areas.

Parental reports indicated improvement in the behavioral difficulties of their children. Art Therapy group size is also an important consideration when working with special needs. Groups of 6 children or less have shown to be beneficial in containment ability and facilitation of a manageable social construct (Sau-Lai, 2016). There is much to consider in running art therapy group sessions with special needs in relation to social-emotional learning.

Method

The facilitation of social-emotional learning in adolescents with special needs through collaborative art experiences was implemented through the following methods.

Participants

This method was practiced at my internship site, a public high school setting, encompassing students from ninth grade to twelfth grade, in a suburban affluent community. The group consisted of six students of varying abilities within the school's Transition Skills Program. Teacher assistants were also present as four out of the six students had one on one support throughout the school day. The Transition Skills Program instructor and the Occupational therapist observed some group time as well. Two of the students are female with downs syndrome and the four remaining students are male who have received the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There were ten group participants in this method which included the students and teacher assistants.

Materials

The collaborative art experience that was facilitated included a wide range of materials. This method intentionally used a mixed media approach in creating the art project. Watercolors and watercolor paper were used to create the frame of the pictures. Pictures of each participant were also provided, and half of the picture was used in the project. Pencils and colored pencils

were used to draw and color in the other half of the portraits in the art activity. The use of fluid materials and controlled materials were used intentionally to engage in different levels of the ETC (Hinz, 2009).

Data Gathering

Data collected for this method was composed of observations made during group sessions. Observations and reflections of perceived experiences were recorded in a journal and group process forms. I incorporated these writings from personal journaling and process notes, collecting data which can include but are not limited to personal reflection, description of student art, and conversations between the transition educator, the occupational therapist, teacher's assistants, students, etc. The group curriculum was developed identifying what opening, art time and closing of each group was anticipated to look like along with anticipated goals to aid with reasoning of chosen activities for group. I also included my reflection art in reflecting on main themes that emerged during group. The art products created by the group also serve as data in the data collection process in terms of being able to complete the task. Finished and unfinished art products were noted. The data gathered was synthesized through analyzing the completion of art projects, observations made during group, and team conversations. A social lens was applied when analyzing experiences throughout art group (Are students interacting? Are students sharing about themselves? Are students listening to others? Are students giving feedback while sharing?).

Procedure

The structure of the group as well as the chosen art activities were chosen with intention. Intentions behind developing the group emphasized social-emotional learning through the choice of collaborative art experiences.

Group Structure

The groups were structured in the following way:

The students would transition from their classroom to the art studio. After everyone was seated and appears to be ready for art group, an opening activity is presented. The weekly opening activities would often consist of an opening game or a getting to know you activity, a demonstration of the project or materials being used, or a review of what the group participated in prior if a continuing project is being presented. The activity following the opening would consist of an art project that is collaborative in nature. Most projects would include every student adding to each other's art, teamwork, and contribution. For group closings, sharing is the main component. While sharing each student has a chance to talk about their art in relationship to the group's contribution to their art, while also offering group feedback. The group would return to class with some time at the end of the period and were prompted with the question "what did you do in art group today?" Students then were told when the next art group would be, and they were assisted in writing it down in their agenda. Often a break would follow and individual work in the classroom was done for the remainder of the period when art group fell on long blocks.

Discussions

Throughout the group, communication was encouraged, whether it was between students and peers or students and TAs. Communication influenced group structure as the amount of materials given out decreased each week to facilitate an increased amount of communication through asking for and sharing materials. Students also were prompted with questions such as "what did we do last in art group?" or "what art project are we currently working on?" at the beginning of group and closing questions such as "what did we do in art today?" or "what did you like about art group today?" With occasional assistance, students were able to answer these

questions and there was a conscious effort to call on different students every week to answer these check-in and check-out questions. Although there as opportunity for conversation through sharing materials and casual discussion during art making, the sharing portion of group had an integral role in facilitating meaningful conversation within the group. During sharing time, the group allowed one person to talk and focused on the speaker, a conversational aspect that is often difficult for this population. Students also were encouraged to state one thing they liked about their peer's art during the feedback portion of sharing. This specific art project required students to introduce their own art while introducing the group to another person, their partner. The interview portion of this project supplied everyone with three things about their partner. The students experienced sharing about their partner and having their partner share about them to the group. This type of sharing provided a scaffolding for students to learn different things about each other. Students showed a positive affect while sharing about their partner, inferring the experience of getting to know their adult partner as a positive one.

Team discussions also revealed a reflection of positive student experience in the art studio. Feedback from the TAs' participation in group was positive in that TAs voiced enjoyment from involvement and feeling they were doing something during group time. An occupational therapist who practices sensory work with the students was present for some groups during this project. Discussions with her reflected on positive material experience such as students expanding from their rigid color palette and using more of a variety of colors in their art. I often discussed group curriculum and the collaborative nature as a framework with the Transition Skills teacher to receive input. She agreed that collaborative art was a good fit for this group of students to experience something outside of themselves and to show they are not an island in their experience.

Collaborative Art

This method incorporated the components of social/emotional learning protocols, specifically focusing on the social skills portion for expanding group dynamics through art experiences. Students within the Transition Skills Program had varying disabilities that impacted their experience in academic settings, social situations, and in daily life. Students in this group were introduced to engaging in group-based art activities. These art experiences were tailored around overall group ability, success rate, and group involvement. Art projects aided in prompting students to function as a group through a creative and engaging way. This student population also benefited from the hands-on experience of art making on a sensory and process-oriented level. As autism spectrum disorder presents well-defined diagnostic criteria such as communications/social interaction and behavior deficits, with restricted and repetitive interests and activities, art can be a creative way to access communication and encourage social interaction (Reis Paula, Reategui, Karen, Queiroz, Sulva, Moryam and Lima, 2017). Each activity presented in the group required the contribution of every student to complete the art project and required teamwork between students and teaching assistants as well.

Partner Portraits

This capstone is highlighting one collaborative art project specifically that encapsulates the method discussed. The project emphasizes collaboration in the form of partner work. Partner portraits included identifying one's partner. For four of the students requiring a one-on-one, their partner was their TA. The two remaining students who did not require a one-on-one collaborated with each other. This project took four groups to complete. The goal of this project was to facilitate social-emotional learning through a collaborative art experience by ways of working

with another person, having another person complete a picture of oneself, observing a person enough to draw a portrait of them, and interview a person after drawing them.

Results

Week 1: Picture Frames

The group was introduced to this project through a demonstration (see figure 1). First there was a demonstration on watercolors with an example frame. The frame was then added to the perimeter of an example half picture. The group aided in verbally saying what should be added to complete the picture (an eye, hair, an ear, etc.). This demonstration provided a preview of what the final project would consist of. Before painting, the concept of working with partner's and completing each other's portraits was explained. Students were then prompted to identify their partner to the group. In reviewing the beginning step of painting the frame with watercolors, what to expect when using watercolors (sometimes the colors mix, the colors spread out, etc.) and how to use watercolors (use a soft brush, dip you brush in water and make a puddle in your color before painting, wash your brush in between colors, etc.) were reviewed. The group was given time to watercolor their picture frames. Everyone went around at the end of group and shared their frames with the group. To end the group, everyone identified their partners again, and each partner took a turn in taking a photo of their partner. Once everyone was finished with photo taking, they lined up to go back to class.

Week 2: Painting

Due to student absences and meetings, the next group was given an open studio format, slightly delaying continued work on the art project. The students worked with tempera paint to continue working with a fluid material from last group. The students were given large pieces of paper, shown different types of brushes (stamp, stencils, soft, large, small, etc.), and given a

choice of colors to encourage experimenting. The students spent the rest of the group painting and were encouraged to switch brushes and colors during art making time. At the end of group, students shared their paintings with the group and reviewed the project they would be continuing next group.

Week 3: Drawing Portraits

The group opened with passing out the picture frames everyone previously made. Everyone received their own picture already cut in half and glued onto a piece of good quality paper. A student handed out the glue sticks. The students were given a demonstration on gluing the frame to the piece of paper (glue the side without paint, the glue dries quickly, put the frame so it's on the edges of your paper, etc.) and then were instructed to glue their frame to their picture. Everyone was asked to identify their partner. Once everyone identified their partner, everyone was instructed to switch their portrait with their partner. Everyone was shown the example again and explained the concept of completing the other half of the picture. A student passed out a pencil to everyone. Everyone was given time to draw their partner's portrait. A student collected the pencils from everyone. The Students shared their drawings and then lined up for class.

Week 4: Coloring Portraits and Interviewing

The group opened by getting back their own portrait. Each person received their own picture and was asked whose picture they should have (their partner's). Everyone was prompted to switch their portrait with their partner's portrait to finish the portrait by adding color. Student were asked what they could do if they were unsure of what color to use (ex: for eyes or hair), the answer being to ask their partner or look at the half picture. There was intentionally an array of skin tone colored pencils in one separate container and one container of the rest of the colored

pencils. The students were prompted in a discussion of how they can get the colors they wanted (ask for the color and not reach to get it). When students asked for a color that was already being used by someone else they were prompted to wait and ask for the color from a group member rather than being given another pencil. Once everyone completed coloring the portraits, everyone was provided with a piece of paper with questions listed (see figure 2). The questions were "What do you like to do for fun?", "What is something you are good at?", and "What three words best describe you?" along with a name space and "Who are you interviewing?" space. Each partner got interviewed and interviewed their partner, getting assistance on filling out the page when needed. A student handed out and collected the pencils. For the final sharing in completion of this project, everyone shared the portrait they had competed of their partner and introduced their partner to the group by saying one of their interview questions. Everyone shared something about their partner through sharing their art.

In my experience of facilitating this group I felt an overall positive experience from the students' time spent in the art studio. Each student completed the collaborative art project, resulting in 10 completed portraits. The main goal was for students to feel encouraged to complete an art project by working with their partner. While engaging in the art process, students had the opportunity to have meaningful interactions, work together, and contribute to a collaborative art piece. Meaningful interactions such as sharing one's own art work through introducing the group to their partner rather than themselves took place. Working together, students were part of multiple art projects at once, adding a frame to their own picture while still allowing someone else to draw the other half of the portrait and completing half of someone else's portrait. Each student tried the art activity even though the materials and process may be new to them.

Observations

The observations of perceived mood of the group was recorded and processed weekly. Group process notes and personal journaling indicate that the group found their time in the art studio enjoyable. The group had positive responses throughout the four weeks of the art project when asked if they had enjoyed art group. Some students were perceived to enjoy working with their one-on-one and another. Students were eager to interview their one-one-one and share new things about themselves with their one-on-one. One student kept repeating how his one-on-one never knew he had moved here from another state. One student had trouble working with her one-on-one as her recent one-on-one transferred. This student also struggled with sharing. While working with watercolors, each pair of partners were given one water color set and water container to facilitate sharing, however, this student would often move the watercolors away from her partner and declined prompts to share the materials. As a result, materials and the project were taken away and the student was given secondary chances for materials to be returned. Although she had resistance in working with her one-on-one, so much so that she drew the other half of her partner's portrait as an alien which one of her favorite things to draw, she was able to complete the project and introduce her partner during the sharing portion.

During the art making, students were encouraged to observe their partner when needed. During the drawing phase of the project, students were encouraged to observe what is already shown in the picture to help determine what should be drawn to complete the picture. Some students struggled with drawing half of a face which showed when students drew a whole face, two eyes, or a whole body as their drawing of the other half of the portrait. Some students were prompted to effectively evaluate the drawing when exhibiting these facial recognition difficulties. In observing, it was noted that when students would get corrected a lot, emotional

dysregulation would ensue. One student began showing physical signs of dysregulation by clenching his fists, gritting teeth, and moving his arms rapidly after several attempts to draw half of a face and one eye. He was verbally prompted to take a break by going for a walk in the hallway. Some student would also perseverate on meetings they were nervous about later in the school day and the amount of homework they had. When engaging in this verbal perseveration students were prompted by myself or a TA to focus on what is being done in art group at the present moment.

Art Response

I chose to also respond artistically to my own experience in facilitating this collaborative art experience with the group (see figure 3). Reflectively responding, I found that I made my art centering around the emergent theme of connection. I created the frame around my art to reflect on intentional structure I developed my group curriculum around. I mimicked the half portrait on the right side of my art. Then, I reflected on the interesting observation of spatial recognition and whole-body drawing exhibited by some of the student art. My left side also reflected the connection made between the partners during this art project. I emphasized connection through completing the other half of one's portrait. This art was made in reflection of observing the partner work in completing the portraits of one another.

Discussion

Through facilitating this collaborative experience within an arts-based group, themes have emerged that support collaboration as a catalyst for social-emotional learning. The structure of this group with focus on collaborative art supported social-emotional learning competencies, primarily social awareness and relationship skills. In social-emotional curriculum, social awareness competency requires appreciating diversity and respect for others while relationship

skills are exhibited in communication, social-engagement, relationship building and teamwork (CASEL, 2017). Groups and activities presented were structured in a way to foster SAFE (sequenced, active, focused and explicit) elements that are commonly used in effective SEL learning. Sequenced activities that are connected and coordinated were incorporated into weekly groups such as this continued art project with multiple steps and processes for each week. Active forms of learning to help master new skills and attitudes were exemplified through use of multiple art materials. Focused groups with goals of developing personal and social skills were interwoven during the opening activities, art focused time, and sharing for the group's closing. Targeting specific social and emotional skills such as teamwork within a partner project, engagement in the art process, and appreciating diversity and respect for others in drawing someone different from oneself during this project (CASEL, 2017). Through analyzing group process notes, the social-emotional component intention was exhibited during group weekly by every student through instances such as sharing art materials, using new materials, communicating with one's partner, and sharing artwork.

Description of Portraits

The portraits created by TAs showed typical artistic skill and will not be touched upon in depth. The portraits created by the students will be discussed further and notables in artwork will be mentioned. From group process recordings I have observed themes that consist of facial recognition, spatial recognition, and color perception in student artwork. Also, while some artwork showed deficits in these areas it is interesting to note the high artistic ability in some student artwork. Savant syndrome has been studied in relation to autism. Although savant syndrome is a separate entity from autism, there has been attention given to savant syndrome in individuals on the spectrum. Advanced skills are often categorized in five general areas of music,

art, calendar calculating, mathematics or mechanical/visual-spatial skills. Some other skills identified less frequently include language (polyglot), unusual sensory discrimination, athletics or outstanding knowledge in specific fields such as neurophysiology, statistics, navigation or computers. An individual can acquire one or more of these skills (Treffert, 2013). Two students exhibited advanced artistic ability in completing the portraits single line work with accurate facial perception.

It is significant to note that this type of art content in drawing human faces can exhibit ability level for students who are nonverbal or have limited capacity for language (Betts, 2003). Facial recognition with this population has been researched as it can be a vulnerability in this population to recognize facial features as well as affect (Betts, 2003). A well-known art assessment, the Face Stimulus Assessment, speaks to this struggle in being unable to produce a human face without constant face stimuli. The human face was applicable with populations of individuals on the spectrum as a face is a well-known region for emotional expression and identity which are important avenues of exploration for individuals on the spectrum (Betts, 2003). One of the student portraits exhibited difficulty in creating half of a face as the student drew a whole human face to complete the portrait. Two other students drew whole bodies in their completion of the portrait. In addition to creating a whole body, one student also had difficulty in expressing skin tone in choosing to color Caucasian partner orange while being presented with skin tone colored pencils.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations that contributed to the overall group experience which could also influence the results of this experience. The public school setting presents itself with a structure that has influence over how the group was run, for instance transitions from the

classroom to the art studio and from the art studio to the classroom were accounted for which would be structured differently in other settings working with this population. Due to the rotating schedule of the school the group also did not meet at the same time consistently. The group would sometimes meet the first block of the day, second block of the day, or right before lunch time. The timing of the group can contribute to the attention span, regulation, and cooperation of the students. Also, student absences from school or meetings also influenced the group structure, so much so that one week of the art project was delayed and the students engaged in an open studio for painting. This inconsistency or break in working on a project series should also be noted as a limitation of this experience. Another important aspect of the group is the varying abilities of the students. Each student has different capabilities and vulnerabilities which can often be highlighted in collaborative work in contributing individual parts of a while art project.

Applications

When considering working with this population in a school setting, the application of arts in academic settings can provide an alternate way of learning concepts of social emotional learning. Research and work done with adolescents with special needs shows certain vulnerabilities and needs in emotional regulation, sensory deficits, and social skills (Pisula, Pudlo, Slowinska, Kawa, Strzaska, Banasiak, & Wolanczyk, 2017). In social emotional learning, a difficult aspect is gaining the generalizability of concepts in social emotional learning as navigating relationships often require a skill set to implement through in-the-moment interactions (Hughes, 2012). Art, specifically collaborative art, can provide a hands-on approach and alternative outlet to this population that bypasses communication and cognitive deficits (Freilich & Shechtman, 2010). Collaborative art be a beneficial tool in facilitating social learning through alternative means in solidifying social concepts.

Conclusion

The experience of collaborative art making has demonstrated the potential value of group art-making as a catalyst for social-emotional learning in working with adolescents having special needs in a school setting. Focusing on primary benchmarks in social emotional learning such as social awareness and relationships skills, group art projects similar to the project implemented in this capstone can facilitate the integration of these core competencies of social emotional learning (Core SEL Competencies, 2017). Data gathered reflected an overall positive experience with student time spent in the art studio. The students completed the collaborative art project together and engaged in sharing their art with the group. The student artwork reflected struggles and strengths of student diagnoses. This art project also allowed the opportunity for students to engage in the relationship dynamic between student and TA as well as promoted observational skills in drawing another person and vice versa. Through use of partner work students not only engaged in completing their partner's picture and their partner completing their picture but were additionally encouraged interviewing skills in gathering information about another person while sharing personal information with another person also. In reflection upon this experience, one can ensure that future work can be successfully implemented. Such work can include art experiences with alternative partnerships to facilitate social-emotional learning. While this experience focused on the partnership between TAs and students, future experiences can incorporate partnerships between students with disabilities and typical students or students with disabilities collaborating with students of similar profiles. Also, modifying the art experience in a way that incorporates the use of advanced art materials can foster learning. Through this experience and also possible future work, the structure and facilitation of collaborative art

experiences can be considered a tool in social emotional learning in working with special needs populations.

Resources

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Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3