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## Making and Using Natural Art Materials and its Effect on Adolescents' Self-Concept

Jocelyn Dimpel

Lesley University, [jdimpel@lesley.edu](mailto:jdimpel@lesley.edu)

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Making and Using Natural Art Materials and its Effect on Adolescents' Self-Concept

Jocelyn Dimpel

Lesley University

May 5, 2019

Jocelyn Dimpel

Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy

Dr. Raquel Stephenson

**Abstract**

The development of the study was to observe effects on adolescents' self-concept through creating their own natural art materials, as little prior research has been done on the subject. The study was conducted in a high school with two individual students, aged 14-16, who selected, created, and used their own art tools made from naturally sourced materials. By making and using their own art materials, students were able to process their internal state, thoughts, and emotions, express themselves outwardly, and connect better with themselves and their surroundings.

### **Introduction**

My interest in making art materials stems from my own creative practice and its impact on my connections with myself and surroundings. I believe creating an expressive art piece from handmade materials can strengthen a person's connection with themselves as well as connecting with something greater than the self, through the use of natural materials. Engaging in the material-making process provides an intimate experience with the art process on both an internal and external level. Additionally, I believe a person's self-worth can expand from experimenting with materials to create a functioning artistic tool.

For the purpose of my capstone, I chose the term "self-concept" for its broad meaning. The word is defined as, "The individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is" (Baumeister, 1999, p. 18). Self-concept includes external influences, such as experiences, societal standards, and other's opinions and beliefs. More importantly the term also includes internal factors like morals, beliefs, self-esteem, identity, and includes the past, present, and future idea of the self. I consider a person's self-concept to be fluid and changes throughout their life, and begins to solidly take form during mid-adolescence.

I worked with adolescents in a high school setting, and intended to explore the creation and use of handmade natural art materials with individuals at the site. The school heavily focused on academics where many hands-on courses such as woodworking, tech, sewing, and cooking have been eliminated from the curriculum. Most students decided to discontinue classes such as art or music to fit more academic-based courses into their schedule, based on the culture of the school. One of the cultural expectations of students at the school was to take several elevated-level courses and attend a four-year college after high school. During their time in high school,

much of their self-concept is influenced by the school environment and expectations, which at my internship site correlated with academic performance. My intention was to provide an experience where students are able to engage with aspects of themselves unrelated to academic performance. Students can create a piece of art from start to finish, beginning with the materials. I believe through making a functioning tool then creating an expressive art piece, adolescents could increase their self-esteem, self-worth, and connection with themselves and surrounding environment.

### **Literature Review**

Currently, little to no previous research has been written about the effects of both making art materials and using natural art materials on clients. While realizing the limitation the lack of resources on a crucial piece of the topic sets, I chose to explore related categories for further understanding of how important art materials, nature, and school settings are in art therapy for adolescents. I've focused on art therapists' use of introducing non-traditional art materials, approaches surrounding different art materials, eco-therapy, adolescents & self-concept formation, and counseling & art therapy in school-based settings to create a stronger support in my own research.

### **Art Materials**

#### *Traditional Art Materials*

Hinz (2009) recognized the shift in art therapists' view on media as defining it by "their influence on the art process" (p. 30). She believed the media used in art therapy so important that she extensively researched a theory called the expressive therapies continuum (ETC) to appointed therapeutic components to specific artistic materials. The components are: kinesthetic, sensory, perceptual, affective, cognitive, and symbolic. According to the theory (2009), fluid-like

media, such as watercolor, are thought to stimulate emotional responses and resistive media, such as pencil, are considered to evoke cognitive responses. Artistic media fall on different levels of the continuum and can be used to assist an individual in embodied intelligence. No matter which material is used, I believe making art materials engages an individual on both the kinesthetic and sensory levels. The sensory level is believed enhance the expressive process through “healing and emergent qualities” (Hinz, 2009, p. 60) by focusing on the sensory experience rather than an end product. Interacting with materials such as mixing paints, grinding stone, or pressing paper all involve the sensory process of creating the artistic media without the need of considering a final artistic piece. The kinesthetic level involves the “stimulation of arousal or energy through involvement with kinesthetic action, or the discharge of energy that reduces the individual’s level of tension” (Hinz, 2009, p. 41). Making art materials naturally involves the body and movement, and allows for processing information about the material itself rather than only its sensory components.

Ward believes “the way that someone relates to a medium through their body and body language can become the mirror for their being” (Cattanach, 1999, p. 111). From her therapeutic practice and own experiences, she believes the way the body interacts with artistic materials can provide significant information on how the individual approaches challenges in life. As an example, she discusses the client’s choice to use tools, such as brushes, scissors, sponges, which can offer a safe distance from the media & artistic piece or allow a client to build confidence in exploring something new; whereas not using tools can provide an instinctual process and a closer relationship with the art. For Ward, it is important to allow client’s to both choose their tools and media as well as the therapist supportively push the client out of their comfort zone. Her belief is that clients need to feel a struggle to begin to heal:

The actual physical struggle and contact between the medium and the body is so important because it is through the struggle that creative solutions are often found.

Through art therapy, the physical release of tension happens. This very special quality of externalizing through a tangible medium is at the heart of the approach. Wrestling with a three-dimensional medium, or with paint using a paint brush or with the fingers is all part of healing and creating a balance between the whole body and mind. I would like to suggest that art therapy brings about a homeostasis because of the balance it encourages between physical, mental and spiritual, conscious and unconscious, processes.

(Cattanach, 1999, p. 112)

Through interacting and struggling with artistic materials, clients can better understand and connect with themselves on multiple different levels, and can ultimately transfer overcoming the struggle in therapy into their daily life.

Similar to Ward's belief in materials reflecting a person's internal self, Bruce Moon has constructed his own approach that the artistic product and process are extensions of the creator. Moon (2009) believes:

Artworks come from the depths of human experiences. They are born of passion, creative conflict, and disharmony...Art processes help make life meanings visible by slowing down the world, allowing time for contemplation and reflection on the part of the artist.

Creating an artwork transforms common events into potent experiences. (p. 15)

Moon's philosophy involves how the individual interacts with their artwork both during and after the process. The art becomes a reflection, a "canvas mirror", of how a person interacts with and navigates aspects of life (Moon, 2009, p. 111). Having a visual and tangible piece echoing the

internalized state can allow for a person to consider more challenging experiences in a creative and confined way.

Moon (2009) believes “the changes that result from clients’ work endure because they emerge from the self, rather than being imposed by an outside authority” (p. 117). The process of creating and seeing the final result can bring a new perspective, or change, for an individual. That change can occur and continue on, according to Moon, because the person arrived at the conclusion from herself through the art.

### *Nontraditional Art Materials*

Understanding the history of materials used within art therapy was an important part of Cathy Moon’s work. She researched the theories behind certain media & materials, how clients & therapists viewed specific materials, and how technology is changing what is considered an art form. She also explored how materials can be used within the perspective of developmental theory. Moon (2010) states:

The behavior of art making is part of a developmental sequence that begins with the child’s sensory and kinesthetic encounter with the environment. Initially, behaviors such as smelling, tasting, banging, squeezing, or smearing characterize the child’s engagements with the surrounding environment. In the therapy setting, the goal of introducing pre-art materials such as flour, oatmeal, jello, shaving cream, feathers, or sand is to enhance the client’s cognitive, sensory, and motor awareness and involvement. (p. 51)

What Moon (2010) referred to as “pre-art materials” are largely nontraditional and naturally-sourced materials. She recognized the effect of the materials on youth in art therapy and how they engage an individual through several different modes within the self.



Moon was also interested in the effects of using found materials gathered from nature and learned that “natural materials and their processes of variation, that is, changes in temperature, light, sound, decay, and growth, enhance an immediate and visceral interaction with landscape, nature, and environment” (Moon, 2010, p. 123). She also thought it significant for individuals to use found/gathered art materials as they “foster a sensing of one’s way through tactile exploration” (Moon, 2010, p. 123). For clients, she observed how selecting ordinary objects from nature invited individuality and perceptive stimulation within therapy.

Batra & Ghoshal (2017) conducted several studies involving just under 100 college-level Indian students to determine the effects of different sensory experiences on self-worth restoration. The participants were given a quiz, then told that their scores were either in the top or bottom 5% of the group, and then given the contingencies of self-worth scale (CSW). The scale is described as “a 35-item questionnaire that contains seven subsets representing different contingencies of self-worth: family, support, appearance, religion, academic competence, virtue, approval from others, and competition” (Batra & Ghoshal, 2017, p. 922). Some of the participants were then asked to provide their opinion in an interior decorating project and provide several paint-color selections. In the second study, after completing the quiz and CSW, some participants were asked to listen to a pre-determined a capella music group with control of the volume. In the third and final study, some participants were told they would additionally be participating in a music study that included several different genres and in which the participant had no control of the volume level. After each ‘additional’ study, participants completed the CSW again.

The results of the studies showed that the participants who were exposed to sensory experiences afterwards scored lower in academic competence, competition, and approval

categories in the second CSW compared to the first time they completed the questionnaire. The researchers concluded that sensory input can alter self-worth restoration after either a positively or negatively viewed experience.

### **Eco-Therapy**

#### *Nature as Therapeutic*

Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan (2008) studied the restorative effects of nature on individuals' executive & cognitive functioning skills. The study was split into two parts: the first compared the restorative effects on cognitive functioning for thirty-eight individuals who interacted with nature versus those in an urban environment; the second compared differences in twelve individuals looking at images of nature versus images of an urban setting. Both groups were asked to do a series of tasks prior to and post interactions. Results showed that those who interacted with nature or the images of nature had increased their attention level, memory, and executive functioning skills.

In a more recent study, Martyn & Brymer (2016) investigated the relationship between anxiety and feelings of being connected to nature through self-report scales. Three hundred participants ranging in age from 18 to 79 years old completed a survey and the scales, and found that a majority of participants reported that "nature induced relaxation and acted as a relief from stress...and being responsible for feelings of peace and calm...as was re-grounding and created feelings of fulfillment" (Martyn & Brymer, 2016, p. 1441). Results showed that participants who reported spending an average to significant time in nature also reported lower levels of anxiety and stress compared to those who spent no to little time in nature who reported higher levels of anxiety and stress.

Reese and Myers (2012) define nature as, “the elements of the natural world and has been associated with many measure of wellness including reduction in symptoms of stress...and improvements in positive outlooks on life, concentration, and productivity” (p. 400). They believe that integrating nature and natural elements into therapy, which they call EcoWellness, can promote an individual’s well-being. Exposure to nature can contribute to the development of the self, spirituality, and community” (Reese & Myers, 2012, p. 403). The EcoWellness theory proposes a person’s connection with nature can help them find a sense of community and belonging through interacting with something (nature) larger than themselves.

#### *Expressive Arts Therapies in Nature*

Cathy Moon (2010) had experience with a dual outdoor/indoor nature studio, and describes the space’s purpose as:

The emphasis of the indoor studio is to display textures and abstract representations of nature made from various art media, rather than showcase illustrative of pictorial representations of nature. This emphasis encourages the generation of new ideas about nature’s representation, so that the textures and elements of any one natural materials can be reworked to abstract or conceptualize its staging within art therapy. A branch, for example can contribute to a sculptural form or be used as a mark-making implement. Its function within art therapy is not inherently about representing an actual tree. The branch can be used as a medium for tactile and creative exploration of both a tree’s nature and one’s subjective engagement with the sensory activation inspired by its qualitative features. (p. 121)

She believes engaging with materials and conditions of nature reflects the changeable quality of encounters people have with their surrounding world, and brings them into an indoor therapy setting.

She also finds it important to engage in an outdoor therapeutic space as it alters daily, causing individuals to respond to the physical changes around them. The outdoor studio space also “inspires people to transcend routine responses and connect with the greater biosphere inhabited by all living things. It provides a sense of the bigger picture and an occasion to embark upon a passage into regenerative thoughts, movements, and activities, which takes natural phenomena as its inspiration” (Moon, 2010, p. 122). A person can engage with and reshape their surrounding through the use of nature, which can be carried over to their life beyond art therapy.

Berger & Tiry (2012) also found nature an ideal place for expressive arts therapy sessions as “it illustrated how the therapeutic process can focus on a non-verbal, creative experience” (p. 415). They examined expressive arts therapy sessions that took place in several different natural settings. Interventions such as meditation and sand mandala-making were analyzed to see how effective they were in a natural setting. The researchers found people felt safe in an outdoor setting and were able to shed anxieties or fears of being with a group easier than in a traditional indoor setting. Berger & Tiry (2012) also discovered people’s “reconnection...to nature can help restore the connection of self and other, while widening their sense of belonging” (p. 415). The research showed people felt able to connect better with their surrounding world, something larger than themselves, when engaged with nature and the arts therapeutically.

## **Adolescence**

### *Self-Concept Formation*

Adolescents start to seriously consider where they see themselves fitting in with the world around mid-teenage years, which corresponds with high school in the United States. This time in life can be viewed as stressful for many adolescents, though Powell (1971) believes the “heightened vulnerability to stress is not inherent. Rather, it has been suggested that adults evoke this maladaptive behavior by expecting it and by modeling inadequate values and attitudes...and is intensified by the fact that many adults are also baffled by similar problems” (p. 175).

Adolescents are exploring options in their life, what they want to do, who they identify as, that solely are about themselves. Yet, they still feel influences by peers and adults on how to shape their identity. Stress can be unhealthily placed on adolescents due to adults imposing their own expectations on them both in the home and at school. The result from discord between how an individual perceives themselves and what adults expect from them can lead to anxiety and difficulties entering adulthood (Powell, 1971, p. 185).

Ashmore & Jussim (1997) believe the discord between personal identity and the roles society assigns to an individual are experienced by everyone and ultimately shapes the values the individual holds throughout their life (p. 191). Recognizing that the concept of self is influenced by cultural and societal standards and finding a balance between personal & societal values is a crucial part of identifying selfhood. In adolescence, an awareness of a hidden, inner self evolves as a standard way to think about selfhood (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997, p. 197). The self is viewed as a secret entity and accessing self-knowledge can be difficult if the individual feels it opposes values in their society. The continued discord between self and society can lead to self-deception and lack of self-exploration, which can ultimately lead to dissatisfaction and a feeling of inadequacy. To foster a healthy relationship with the self, one should learn “strong self-love, the enjoyment of unique individuality, belief in inner realities, and the belief in self” (Ashmore &

Jussim, 1997, p. 214). Finding comfort, confidence, and connection with the self are often goals addressed in therapeutic practices to help individuals find ways to cope with living in their society.

### **School-Based Setting**

#### *Counseling in Schools*

Burnett-Zeigler & Lyons (2011) conducted research on children and adolescents experiencing diagnosable psychiatric conditions, and quickly learned that a majority of these children and adolescents were not receiving treatment outside of their schools. They chose to change their research to focus on school settings, as they are a key part of youth's lives and where treatments for mental & behavioral/emotional issues were taking place. The study was based on public middle and high schools in Chicago, and found that students who continued to receive treatment in school six months after the initial evaluation were able to better manage their life in school compared to those who discontinued in-school counseling. Students who continued with in-school counseling were also more likely to receive additional supports in finding and continuing with counseling outside of school. Researchers found that students who were able to continue with both in and out of school supports were better able to cope with in and out of school stressors. The study suggested that receiving in-school counseling could assist youth practice and maintain an awareness of their own mental health and were more likely to seek help as adolescents and young adults.

#### *Art Therapy in Schools*

Kantor (2017) explored eighteen different art therapists in school settings to better understand the roles, work, and goals of art therapists and compare these findings with art therapists' roles in healthcare settings. The responses from art therapists showed that therapeutic

goals were geared more toward health promotion, personality development, experience, and social functions in schools compared to in healthcare institutions which primarily focused on pathology and its mitigation or elimination. The study found that art therapists in schools operated with a focus on in-school stressors and behaviors by working on goals and interventions to better support the student's functioning while in the school. Many of the art therapists reported also working with groups in addition to working individually with students. Therapists described how running groups within classroom settings helped alleviate anxiety surrounding schoolwork and/or interactions with peers for students.

An additional study on art therapists' perspective in school settings focused on the benefits, difficulties, approaches, and role of the school in art therapy in an educational institution (Regev, Green-Orlovich, Snir, 2015, p.47). Art therapists reported the benefits of using art as a way to engage a student in communicating in a nonverbal manner and a way of making the practice more accessible to children and families by being in the school. Many of the therapists reported families concerns with affording therapy outside of the school for their child, or that their child responded more positively to artmaking as opposed to talking.

Therapists also reported feeling integrated and supported by schools as part of a team in caring for the student. In most of the therapists' schools, they worked in conjunction with teachers and staff to understand a student in different settings and to learn how to better support them across different avenues within school. Therapists described cases where they would run groups in a classroom with the teacher, and they would learn educational language and paradigms and in return demonstrate to the teacher therapeutic language and practice in group settings. Art therapy is becoming more recognized in schools as a beneficial alternative or supplement to students' in-school supports.

### **Method**

For my capstone project, I chose to work with two students, each in individual sessions, at my internship site. The site is a high school located in an affluent and predominantly white suburb of Boston. Students receive in-school counseling services for a variety of reasons such as support in the classroom and/or working on social and emotional growth. The development of the method for the project was inspired by the two chosen students receiving in-school counseling due to difficulties with navigating their own emotions, connecting with peers, and handling stressful situations. I selected the two students for their challenges surrounding self-concept as I believed having them create and use their own art materials would be beneficial toward feeling more connected with themselves. I also selected the students as I had been working with each of them individually for four months prior to introducing material making to them. Having a standing therapeutic relationship beforehand was important as I had insight into what each student's baseline mannerisms and presentation were like prior to the project to be able to note potential observable changes throughout the process.

I had prefaced the project by talking with each student about learning to make their own art materials and provided them with visual resources I use for my own art material making to help them independently select a material to make. Student 1 chose to make paints and Student 2 chose to make modeling clay. I decided to collect data over the span of three forty-five minute sessions with each student as that would provide enough time to make materials and create an art piece with them. After each session, I would write down the observable layout of the meeting such as what was made, how it was made, memorable quotes, noticeable changes in the students' presentations, and moments where I had a strong reaction or feeling to what was happening. To help comprehend and process my own understanding of the students' and my experiences, I



made art in response to my written entries of each session. Finally, after having reflected through art, I would journal more speculatively about how I thought the material and art making process was affecting the student.

During the individual sessions, it was important to allow the student to determine how a majority of the time was spent. I setup a loose structure for sessions by beginning with a brief verbal check-in with the student, then would move on to show the materials available to use for the day (followed on the first day by a demonstration of how to make the art material), allow the student to explore and create as they pleased, and ending with a clean-up and another verbal check-in. After setup, check-ins, and clean up, each session allotted around thirty minutes for creating either art materials or artistic pieces. I thought it important to provide a semi-structured schedule for sessions. That way, the student could potentially feel more comfortable with the reliability of a routine in order to engage with the art materials in a genuine and authentic way.

I collected data by writing down what I witnessed during each session, then would re-read them and journal about what I interpreted as notable or interesting observable moments within the session. For Student 1, I then made an artistic response to the notable observations for each session and for Student 2, I created one single artistic response after all three of the sessions. I was limited in the information I could collect from the student; I could not include direct quotes from them nor could I provide them with surveys to include their perspective during the process. I was only able to use observable information from the sessions as well as my own interpretation of what the experiences was like for the student.

## **Results**

The students met with me separately and chose different art mediums to make and use, therefore they are separated in this section to focus on each individual student and session

independently. The semi-structured routine put into effect by the facilitator was used for the separate individual sessions with both Student 1 and Student 2.

### **Student 1**

After going through natural artistic material resources together, she had selected to make paints by using egg yolks and various powdered pigments. She had seldom used paints in previous art therapy sessions together and had mentioned how it would be interesting to see what kinds of colors could be made from different spices, rocks, and other found objects.

#### *Session 1*

For the first session, we had met in a private kitchen within the school which was equipped with a stovetop, large working table top, and ample tools needed for mixing the paint. This was not our usual meeting place for sessions and she appeared to be tentative of being in the space at first. Upon a verbal check-in she reported feeling okay and a little overwhelmed with schoolwork that day. I sensed her feel more comfortable in the kitchen as we navigated the space and went through the cupboards gathering bowls and utensils to mix the paints with. Materials that were available that day to make paints were: one dozen eggs, hibiscus powder, cayenne, aleppo, cumin, grey & brown rocks, arrowroot, and matcha. I explained to her that the pigments could be mixed in with the yolk to make the paint, and she said she wasn't sure how to separate the yolk from the whites. We practiced separating with the shell on a few eggs, and she selected the hibiscus powder to first mix in. She was concerned she put too much pigment in as it became a thick paste and asked if she could add in water or another yolk to thin it out. After getting it to a consistency she liked, she selected a medium-sized brush and started painting a group of three small parallel lines on a large-sized paper (24" x 36").

She continued adding different pigments into the bowl she originally had hibiscus powder in to experiment with color. With each new color made, she would add another set of parallel lines to the paper. She asked fewer questions on what to add to make a certain color or what to add to thicken/thin the paint as time went on and would move forward with paint-making independently.

With about five minutes left, we began cleaning up. I asked what she thought of making paints and she thought it was fun to be able to control the colors she was using and liked the texture some of the pigments left on the paper. She asked if there could be more blue pigments for next time and started brainstorming things to bring in to experiment with. She thanked me and said she felt more ready to handle her last classes of the day before leaving the session.

### *Session 2*

The kitchen wasn't available to use for the second session, so we met in the art therapy studio (where we met for the previous four months) which was a space she was familiar with. Upon check-in, she reported feeling slammed with homework and almost didn't come to our session, but she really wanted to try making paints out of objects she had gathered over the last week. She had brought with her light grey rocks and dried purple, red, and pink flowers. In addition to the same materials from the first session, blue rocks and dried cornflower & lavender were added pigment options.

Before mixing any paints, she went to the cupboard where her art is stored and selected the piece of paper she had used during the first session with the groups of parallel lines on it. She asked how to turn the rock into usable pigment, and I showed her how to grind it down with a mortar and pestle. She mixed the rock powder in with an egg yolk and set it aside, proceeding

to mash some of the dried flowers she brought in with her. Continuing with this process, she made four paint colors in varying shades of grey, blue, and purple before starting to paint.

She painted over her smaller lines from the previous session by making long lines that crossed over the previous lines in a perpendicular pattern. Up until this point, she said very little. Once she started painting, though, she started telling me about an unpleasant encounter she had with a peer in class the other day. I asked her if she would like me to intervene and talk with the teacher together privately. She declined the offer, and said she was thinking about talking to the teacher herself. She remained quiet while she continued carefully painting lines in the same direction on the paper for the remainder of the time.

When it was time to start cleaning up, I asked how trying new materials were. She said it was a lot more effort than using powders, but she liked the colors the flowers gave and that she could see bits of petals in the painting. She shared she was feeling good when asked how she was feeling at the end of the session.

### *Session 3*

For the last session data was collected from, we met in the art studio again. She came in with a lifted energy about her and she shared she was excited to paint that day. She asked if she could play music from the speaker while she painted and went to get the paper she had been working on from the previous two sessions. No new materials were introduced for this session and she selected pigments to make three bowls of yellow, orange, and red paints. She was talkative while mixing the paints and shared about her past week. She hadn't mentioned the peer in her class, so I asked if anything new had happened. She said he had bothered her again and she had talked to him. She thought he seemed annoyed but had left her alone since and she felt more comfortable in the class.

She transitioned to talking about her painting after the paints were mixed. She thought it looked too rigid with the cross-hatched lines and began painting over them on one half of the paper with the yellow she had just mixed in large sweeping strokes. As she painted, she would alternate from talking about what the painting needed to extended moments of silence. She stopped painting for the day and I asked her if she would want to title the painting. She responded by saying she wanted to continue to work on it next week and wasn't ready to title it yet. The painting at the end of session three was comprised of several layers: the right part of the paper depicted several groups of short parallel lines in varying shades of pink, green, and brown; those lines were overlapped with long extending lines in blues, purples, and grays; the left side of the paper was a burst of warm faded reds and soft yellows that swirled together in sweeping circular patterns. Her hope was to cover the remaining gridded lines in our next sessions.

### *Interpretation*

After the first session, where I observed Student 1's exploration of the medium with her primary use of color and line, I wanted to reflect her curiosity with paints in my own response art (Fig 1.1). I chose watercolors for their similarity in fluidity to the texture she made and gravitated toward bright jewel-tone colors similar to paint some of the colors she created. I let my own curiosity with the medium take over and focused on the color, the way the paint pooled and spread on the paper, and the different types of strokes the brush could leave on the paper. I lastly chose to add jagged lines with colored pencil to reflect the structure and containment her painting showed after the first session.

Seeing her work in the second session inspired me to continue with the same painting just as she had. I continued to use watercolor as I wanted the painting marks from the first week to be visible underneath the second layer; again, just like her painting showed both weeks' efforts (Fig

1.2). During the second session, I noticed she was quieter than usual and appeared to be deep in thought while she painted. I felt there was something more about the interaction with her peer that she was not sharing verbally, but was thinking about as she was painting. For my response art, I chose a gray/blue paint, similar in shade to a paint she created that day, and thought about her thoughtful demeanor as I painted what looked like a hazy veil over my response painting from the first session.

During the third session, I was surprised by her continuation with the painting from the first session as well as her decision to paint over it with loose and sweeping brushstrokes. I had the impression she was using the painting to metaphorically move on from the previous incident. I felt a shift in her mood through her artwork that day, and wanted to reflect the change in my response art (Fig 1.3). I chose to use bolder colors and marks to stand out over the already existing painting. I also added white watercolor to the painting to lighten up certain areas in a reflection of the student wanting to continue to work on the painting. I interpreted her interest in continuing the painting as her interest in continuing to reflect and work on other areas of her life.

Throughout the process, Student 1 was interested in making her own paint colors—so much so that she brought in her own materials for specific hues. As the observer, I felt she was able to take control of the process by making her own colors before using them in her painting, and I believe her ability to take control in the sessions was reflected in her ability to independently handle a negative interaction with a peer. I also found the way her brushstrokes changed to be notable. Prior to talking with her peer, the lines she made felt uniform and constricting; after talking with her peer her brushstrokes became looser and unrestrained as they swept over her marks from the previous two weeks.

**Student 2**

After going through natural artistic material resources together, he chose to make a reusable modelling clay from beeswax, olive oil, lanolin, and powdered pigments. He looked forward to the sensory experience of making and using the clay as he usually preferred the sensory feedback from using the sand tray in our previous sessions before the project.

*Session 1*

To make the clay, we used a private kitchen in the school with a stovetop and oven. The materials used for the clay were beeswax, olive oil, and lanolin. He was interested in the process of using a double boiler for melting the beeswax and took over the melting once he understood the steps. He paid close attention to the wax melting as he was concerned about it burning in the pot. Once the ingredients were liquid and mixed together, I asked him if he wanted to add any pigments to color the clay. He took his time considering the question, and ultimately decided to split the batch and make one red with cayenne powder and the other yellow with cumin.

When the clays were colored, he carefully poured the liquid into silicone molds to reharden. If any dripped or spilled he stopped pouring and immediately wiped it up. The pouring took a few minutes and once it was finished he wiped down in between each individual mold so no residue was left on the mold's edges. While waiting for the clay to reharden, I suggested we clean up in the kitchen. He asked if he could dry the dishes we used rather than washing them as he didn't like the feeling of the wax when it was dried. Little conversation was had for the last few minutes of the session; I asked what he had thought about making the clay and he said it was okay and was more interested in seeing it next week after it had hardened.

*Session 2*

We met in the art therapy studio for the second session and when he entered the room he sighed and sat at the sand tray and began digging into the sand with a small cup. We sat in silence for a few minutes before I set out the silicone trays with the clay he made from the last session. When he saw the two trays he immediately left the sand tray and said how he had forgotten about the clay and wondered how it turned out.

He sat at the table and carefully took out the red clay squares from the tray. He commented on how hard they were and quickly noticed they would soften up from the warmth of his hands. He softened each of the squares up and combined them together to form one large ball with the red clay. The remainder of the session was him exploring the clay in a sensorial process. He alternated between rolling the clay out into a long strip, pressing it down into a flat circular shape, and then molding it back into a ball. The few times he talked were to express a thought about how the clay would respond to a specific external factor (i.e. being pulled apart). At the end of the session, he wanted to make sure the clay was stored properly so there would be no chance of it drying out. He had left the yellow clay still in its silicone tray mold.

*Session 3*

The third and final session was again in the art therapy studio and the clay was already set out when he came into the room. He immediately opened the bag of red clay to see if it was still moldable or if it had hardened. He was impressed to find the clay still soft once he worked it in his hands for a few moments, and set it aside to carefully remove the yellow clay from the silicone mold. He kept the yellow squares separate from each other and started molding them into different animal shapes. Wooden clay tools were used to add details to the animals as he worked on one animal before moving on to the next. He referred to them as creatures and began



telling stories about one in particular and how the other creatures were involved with the original creature's life. With the red clay, he created props or details as the stories unfolded. He was very careful not to mix the two clay colors together.

With a few minutes left in the session, I asked if he would like to keep the creatures he made. He shook his head no and began to press the yellow clay pieces back together into one ball and then did the same with the red clay pieces. He stored them in separate bags and asked if I could place them in a drawer so no sunlight would hit them and potentially dry the clay out. Before leaving the session, he asked if we could make one more batch next time so he could have blue clay as well.

### *Interpretation*

With Student 2, I found it difficult to create an art response after our first session as he hadn't interacted with the clay, yet. I decided to create one art response piece after all three of our sessions together (Fig. 2). I had noted in my post-session writings how careful and neat he was in the process; continuously cleaning any spilled wax, keeping the two clay colors separate, and periodically wiping his hands on his jeans to get any clay residue off. In response to his cautious behaviors with the material, I wanted to create something messy in contrast. I used acrylic paints in black, white, and brown as I wanted to focus more on the sensory aspect of painting, rather than colors, since he chose a hands on and sensory-focused material. I started out by using my hands to paint to be in direct contact with the materials.

The more I painted, the less I wanted to be in contact with the materials directly and switched to using a brush for more controlled lines. I ended by using a pen to make slow lines in the shape of abstract creatures on top of the paint. My transition of materials and how I interacted with them was a reflection of Student 2's journey with the clay. He began by exploring the clay

as a sensory material, then in the last session was using it to create creatures to symbolically share information about his own life. Prior to making clay, he had not been able to openly share much personal information either verbally or through art. I learned through my art response how he was able to work partly through the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Hinz, 2009), by first creating the clay himself, which is a kinesthetic process, then exploring the clay on a sensory level, and transition into using the clay symbolically to reflect and share his internal emotions and thoughts.

## **Discussion**

### **Effects of Making Materials**

For the students, the art materials became part of the creative process. Having the ability to choose what kind of material to make and being able to alter its color and consistency allowed for a more active and personal role in the therapeutic art process. Additionally, being able to engage with art materials without the immediate pressure of creating a product I believe helped them feel more comfortable to engage with art in a more organic and exploratory way. As Cathy Moon (2010) suggested, when a person is able to explore art materials and engage their senses therapeutically, they then can enhance their cognitive, sensory, and motor awareness which can lead to deepening the connection to the self.

For Student 1, I observed a different way of how she handled herself in the space by the third session. Her asking to play music was significant to me, as she had never altered anything about the space previously. She typically would come in and sit at the same seat in the room and rarely asked for materials or explored the space. During the third session, she appeared to me to feel more comfortable in the room and wanted to make her presence more noticeable while in there by playing music she selected. I also thought it significant that she had independently

addressed an issue with her classmate during the time period of our sessions. I believe her ability to have control over the paints she made allowed her to see where she could have more influence over different areas in her life.

Observing how Student 2 interacted with the clay was something I considered very important in better understanding him. He was meticulous in handling the clay, making sure not to make a mess, immediately cleaning up spills, not letting the two clay colors intermix, and continually wiping/washing his hands after directly touching the material. In previous sessions, he did not often talk about how he is feeling or stressors in school; he does not like feeling 'messy' emotionally or physically. I thought it significant how on the third session, he used the clay in a playful way to share information about himself metaphorically through the clay creatures he created. Using characters and metaphor has been something I've tried to unsuccessfully introduce to him through figurines and the sand tray in the past. I believe him being able to make the material had an impact on how he was able to engage with the clay on a more personal level.

### **Effects of Making Art from Self-Made Materials**

Though each student chose different materials that resulted in different artistic outcomes, both were able to use the art as a metaphor for a situation in their lives. Bruce Moon (2009) believed artworks act as mirrors—meaning they reflect an internal state, reaction, or emotion. The artistic process and product allows time for the person to engage with their internal state and process from a different perspective. Both students were able to use their art as a way to reflect an internal concept that I believe was deepened by creating their art materials prior to making an art piece.

The choice for Student 1 to continue working on one painting during and beyond the sessions I gathered data from was a choice I was surprised by. I was even more surprised by her observation of the painting during session three in that it looked too rigid and covered it up with large sweeping brushstrokes to create a visibly softer image. I viewed her interaction with her art piece as her realization of her own ability to change and grow. I interpreted her choice to continue with one painting as her acknowledging pieces of herself that she wants to change and being able to make those changes by adding additional layers. As Hinz (2009) believes, incorporating a sensory element where the focus is on an external sensation can lead to the realization of an internal state or emotion (p. 67). In addition to the sensory component of making paint, I believe her ability to select and mix the materials used as well as altering their color and texture allowed for her to connect with herself through the painting. I believe making the paint was beneficial in connecting Student 1 to herself through both its sensory component and the ability to manipulate the material to her own individualized preference.

I viewed Student 2's choice to use the clay to share parts of himself and then return his creations back into balls of clay as an important information in what the art piece meant for him. He does not often reflect externally on his internal state, and I believe using an impermanent material such as the clay was a comfort for him. Hinz (2009) suggests that kinesthetic experiences, like when working with clay, can be soothing and the rhythm of the material can be healing and more meaningful than words. Student 2 engaged with the clay nonverbally the second session and then used it to form characters to talk through during the third session. I believe he found comfort in the kinesthetic quality of the clay, and was able to engage with it on a more personal and internal level during the third session due to him having created it himself. He had the ability to physically and emotionally engage with his clay creatures and on his own

terms was able to break them apart into a nondistinctive clay ball to end the session. I believe using the clay he constructed himself was an empowering experience for Student 2 as he felt secure in containing the 'messiness' and connection to his creations.

### **Implications**

A major implication from the project is the need for further research being conducted on the effects of making art materials, both from natural and synthetic sources. Though much research has been done on the effects of different art materials, little has been explored on making art materials in a therapeutic setting. The study, while being a small sample size and a limit on one art material per person, showed awareness around aspects of self-concept. The expressive arts therapy field should examine the effects of making natural art materials on clients, as the field is already aware of how art materials can greatly affect an individual in therapy.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations existed for this study. First, I have bias toward making natural art materials as I often make them in my own artmaking practice. I am aware of the benefits and effects making art materials has on myself, and could have influenced my interpretation of the effects on the students. Second, self-concept is an internal and personal notion that can be difficult to solely observe as a facilitator. I had considered running a group to create further observable data in how students interacted among each other, though for the study it was important to give each student the ability to choose which art material they make; this would have been too complicated to facilitate in a group setting. Lastly, the study was conducted over three forty-five minute sessions in school which limits the amount of data I could collect. I was

collecting data from one location and within one month of time; self-concept is an intricate concept that would require more time to be understood from a facilitator's perspective.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Witnessing the curiosity and exploration of the students while making their own natural art materials was an enjoyable experience. They were both excited to learn how to create a usable art tools from nontraditional and natural materials, and were able to focus on the process rather than the product. Moving forward in my own clinical practice, I intend to incorporate art material making from found and natural objects for several reasons: making art more obtainable and less product-focused, connecting better to the self & the surrounding world, and increasing self-esteem by forming functioning tools to create an art piece.

**APPENDIX**



Figure 1.1 Response art to Student 1 after Session 1



Figure 1.2 Response art to Student 1 after Session 2





Figure 1.3 Response art to Student 1 after Session 3



Figure 2 Response art to Student 2 after all three sessions



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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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

**Thesis Advisor:** Raquel Stephenson