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Development of a Method: Self-Directed Self-Expression through Digital Storytelling for Students with Behavioral Concerns

Stephanie Sabins

Lesley University, ssabins@lesley.edu

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Development of a Method: Self-Directed Self-Expression through Digital Storytelling for
Students with Behavioral Concerns

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Stephanie P. Sabins

Expressive Arts Therapy

Donna Owens

Abstract

Digital storytelling is an accessible and adaptable gateway for self-expression. There has been much research done exploring the benefits of using it within therapeutic and educational contexts, as it offers an alternative, semi-structured opportunity to freely create. Utilizing this form of expressive therapies with children with behavioral concerns can offer control and autonomy in a world where they get more attention for their problematic behaviors. This study was intended to provide a digital platform for children with behavioral concerns to direct their own self-expression through digital storytelling. The children chosen for this intervention attend a therapeutic behavioral day school and the intervention was carried out during school hours. A methodology was constructed offering four different modalities of digital storytelling, within two different thematic interpretations, over an 8-week period. The project did not result in what was planned, however, as the project's only participant self-directed the intervention using only the piano and no digital material was created. This result echoed the literature in how vital it is to be flexible when working with children and within the expressive arts therapies.

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Students with Behavioral Concerns

*“The definition of success depends on the student and their circumstances”
(Podkalicka and Campbell, 2010, p. 211).*

The Trailer (Introduction)

Children with behavioral concerns have generally been pegged as the troublemakers in the classroom. They are the kids that often cannot sit still, call out of turn, or walk out of class. They have been described as not caring about learning because of their disruptive behavior. Generally, these children are moved to special education classrooms, but they can also end up at therapeutic schools where behavior intervention and modification takes precedence over academics and creativity.

Therapeutic day schools aim to help these children learn the necessary coping and regulatory skills to be successful in the classroom, and also in society. This behavior management approach is an important part of their education, but does not leave much space for exploration of personal identity and individual self-expression. It is my belief that emphasis is placed more upon successful transitions from activity to activity and less on transitions into self-actualization.

I witnessed in mainstream schools, within mainstream classrooms, that students are afforded more opportunities to discover their creative strengths. When staying in the classroom and not displaying disruptive behavior is not a struggle, children are able to dive more deeply into their academic learning and peripheral creative pursuits. The teachers can spend more time facilitating the holistic personal growth of each student. In a therapeutic behavioral school, however, the amount of time spent on aiding self-regulation and follow-through of behavioral plans largely makes up the individual attention that students receive.

With this consideration in mind, my goal is to create a creative outlet which may start to fulfil the need for self-expression. Within a narrative therapy framework, I will provide a few children attending a behavioral day school the time and space to create their own self-directed, self-expressive digital story. The Center for Digital Storytelling defines digital storytelling as “a short, first person video narrative created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds” (as cited in Wawro, 2012, p. 50). My hope is that the opportunity to engage in their own self-actualization process will empower them, embody them, and ignite their self-confidence. This could be a crucial step in not only self-regulation of their behavior, but also provide a medium for processing and navigating their socioemotional setbacks.

Having any amount of success in these children’s days can prove to be valuable fuel in their growth as people. When given the opportunity and proper support, every child may rise to the challenges that are given to them. It is my understanding that the more they believe in themselves as powerful, meaningful individuals, the better equipped they will be to handle life, starting with their own emotional and physical regulation. During the course of this thesis, I hope to discover options and interventions for facilitating this growth within the existing behavioral school models, so that all children have access to their own individualism regardless of their behavioral issues.

Screenplay Research (Literature Review)

To understand why and how digital story telling can be helpful, it is important to understand why children with behavioral differences require more support. It is also important to explore how a school setting can be a beneficial environment to facilitate that support. The following literature review will expand upon the importance of emotional health, the school

setting as a fitting intervention space, and the benefits of employing digital storytelling as a useful intervention.

Emotional Regulation

Children with behavioral concerns are habitually labeled and treated for their behaviors. These needs can originate from a myriad of factors such as grief, trauma, or neurological impairment. Externalized and internalized problematic behaviors are expressed because of a students' various social, emotional, and behavioral needs (O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins 2011).

According to Swick, Knopf, Williams, and Fields (2013)

approximately five million children experience some form of traumatic experiences each year . . . in the United States [including] physical or sexual abuse . . ., living in the terrorizing atmosphere of domestic violence . . ., natural disasters, car accidents, life-threatening medical conditions, painful procedures, [and] exposure to community violence. (p. 181)

These experiences can have a negative effect on a child, thus potentially causing discordant behavior.

These, of course, are not the only reasons that a child might display problematic behaviors, but research connecting these experiences to behavior is widely available. This review will not dive into the individual reasons that behavioral differences occur, but it is worth noting that behavior presentation is as complex as its underlying causes.

The common thread of all externalized and internalized behavior, then, is the inability to regulate emotions in a flexible and healthy manner. Children with behavioral concerns tend not to be able to manage their emotions and therefore cannot cope with the shifts in life. One strategy of developing emotional regulatory health is using psychoeducation.

Conducting a psychoeducational intervention study about cognitive emotion regulation (CER), Claro, Boulanger and Shaw (2015) describe how “cognitions (i.e., conscious mental activities, thoughts, and processes) allow individuals to regulate their own emotions in order to process and manage difficult events and situations” (p. 331). To retrain at-risk high school students’ cognitions, psychoeducational lessons, followed by self-report questionnaires, were administered to measure the efficacy of the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Intended for Youth (CERTIFY) program model in reducing risky behaviors. Claro et al. (2015) found that while positive reappraisal and planning increased, there were no significant improvements in reducing “maladaptive CER strategies or risky behaviors” (p. 330). It could be concluded from this study that psychoeducation alone is not enough to improve emotional dysregulation.

Prior research from Garnefski et al. indicates that “individuals with poor emotion regulation have increased aggressiveness and delinquent behavior” (as cited in Claro et al., 2015, p. 330). Research from Blum and Libbey, and Macklem point out that students exhibiting this dysregulation also demonstrate “poorer academic performance, increased school disengagement, and greater conduct problems” (as cited in Claro et al., p. 331).

In considering that these factors hinder academic success, school can subsequently become a stressful place to be. Given this stress, “students cope by suppressing [their] anger and other emotions, which paradoxically can lead to violence” (Gibbons, 2010, p. 85). This violence only continues to get in the way of their academic presentation and continues this cycle of problematic behavior.

In general, one way of creating engagement with school is through electives and extracurricular activities. Jolivette et al. finds this to be especially true with children with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) because it provides an opportunity for positive

experiences where “they often have a history of school failure” (as cited in Ennis & Katsiyannis, 2018, p. 215). These extracurricular activities are therefore essential in creating a positive bond with school but can be limited depending on accessibility.

Schools designed for children with EBD make great strides in teaching coping skills for emotional regulation, but curriculum, electives, and extracurricular activities can be limited or unavailable (Ennis & Katsiyannis, 2018). These activities, and the amount of time spent at school, give way to a critical opportunity for healthy socialization and support around preventing the continuation of behavior problems (O’Connor et al., 2011).

School as the Location of Change

A school is an institution for learning, and Regev, Green-Orlovich and Snir (2015) maintain that “one of the major benefits of providing therapy in the school system is the ability to have a therapeutic environment within a larger system” (p. 54). Being able to work with all major people within a child’s life (e.g. teachers, parents, friends) helps to better pinpoint the needs and meet the goals of therapy (Regev et al., 2015).

The school setting indeed is, according to Chethik, “a meeting point of three central systems: the educational system, the personality of the child, and the child’s family” (as cited in Regev et al., 2015, p. 47). This intersection yields the perfect therapeutic access to enacting change within an individual because all facets of a child’s life collide in some way in this setting. The school setting is also a natural place for intervention because of the “normative context” (O’Connor et al., 2011, p. 121) it holds for children and the fact that children are legally mandated to attend school.

Not without its difficulties, it is worth understanding why school interventions can also be challenging because of the nature of a school setting. As cited in Regev et al. (2015), Ofer-

Yarom and Wengrower explore how privacy and confidentiality can be hard to maintain within a school given the many points of contact in a school system. Wengrower also recognizes that the breaks and happenings in a given school calendar does not afford the “flow and continuity of therapy” (as cited in Regev et al., 2015, p. 48), and Moriya rightly points out that “therapy sessions are shorter to accommodate school lesson times” (as cited in Regev et al., 2015, p. 48). With all these things considered, a therapist must accept that “working as a therapist in the school system requires flexibility and the ability to understand that it is a complex system oriented toward educational goals” (Regev et al., 2015, p. 53).

When emotional regulation is part of the discourse, studies have shown that school-based socioemotional learning programs improve students’ academic performance and behaviors (Claro et al., 2015; Regev et al., 2015). More specifically, arts-based interventions, such as art therapy, allows students to better understand their challenges and increase their ability to resolve their own emotional problems (Gibbons, 2010; Regev et al., 2015). Freilich and Shechtman and Spier ascertain that art therapy helps at-risk children and children with learning disabilities to better adapt to the school system (as cited in Regev et al., 2015) which would decrease the stress and negative experiences of going to school, as previously stated would be beneficial.

By therapeutically utilizing creativity in a school setting, Bruce describes how “creativity is crucial in developing positive coping skills . . . because it empowers the individual, promotes new ways of thinking, bridges different learning styles, and heals the effects of cultural trauma” (as cited in Gibbons, 2010, p. 88). Creativity can provide an alternative way handling emotions and stressors in life.

Beauregard (2014) reviewed nineteen articles referring to eight different classroom-based, arts intervention programs where well-being of children was tested (e.g. emotional and

behavioral problems). In one study, participation in an art and storytelling program led to a decrease in externalizing and internalizing behaviors for some of the children. Alternatively, however, a previous study using a different sample of adolescents, but a similar intervention, yielded no improvement (Beauregard, 2014). This difference in results may suggest that each program should be catered more specifically to the sample of children participating. It also suggests that not every intervention is guaranteed to work every time.

Digital Storytelling as the Locus of Change

The article “Digital Storytelling as a Signature Pedagogy for the New Humanities” by Benmayor (2008), follows a professor’s journey of facilitating cultural meaning through digital storytelling. She utilized over 200 of her students’ stories in her research, relating their exploration stories of their cultural identities to the teachings of her Latina Life Stories class curriculum. Concentrating on one student’s digital story, she examined the digital storytelling process as a means to explore identity, as community building, and as a means to allow each student to critically and creatively dissect their own process of identity formation. The creative complexities of the assignment also afford each student the opportunity to exhibit their specific strengths.

I believe that this structured intervention for college students is a good model of using narrative therapy through digital storytelling because it highlights cultural sensitivity, as well as individual development. Cultural considerations are essential when working in settings that may be different from the clinician or the researcher (Beauregard, 2014; Benmayor, 2008) because of the bias and gaps in awareness that can occur.

Hull and Katz (2006) understand that self-determination is “tempered by the constraint of specific social, cultural, and historical contexts . . . especially for [people] of disadvantaged

groups” (p. 47). This considered, Benmayor (2008) describes how “digital storytelling is an assets-based pedagogy . . . [and that] the multiple creative languages . . . – writing, voice, image, and sound – encourage historically marginalized subjects, especially younger generations, to inscribe emerging social and cultural identities...” (p. 200). The same idea can be applied to children with behavioral concerns in understanding that “digital storytelling mirrors and enables the conceptual work of constructing new understandings of identity and places of belonging” (p. 200). For children that have been habitually labelled for their problematic behaviors, this platform could provide more positive autonomy.

This intervention utilized a person-centered approach and illustrates how significant that model is. Benmayor notes that “both product and process in digital storytelling empower students to find their voice and to speak out...” (as cited in Benmayor, 2008, p. 188; Wawro, 2012); meaning, no matter what is created, the creative process is as important as a potential product. The sharing and disclosure that naturally happens in the digital story process can also aid one in understanding their own social identity, where sharing also creates alliance (Benmayor, 2008; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010). The facilitation of this project in a classroom-setting also denotes how structured, socio-emotional learning can be successful.

Willis et al. (2014) utilized narrative therapy with twelve young adults, ages 18-22, who are all HIV-positive and attend Africaid support programs in Zimbabwe. Two groups of six participants attended a 10-day digital storytelling workshop. One group focused their narrative on how their HIV affects their life, while the other group focused on certain themes revolving around their HIV diagnosis (Willis, et al., 2014). They used audio (music and verbal narrative) and visual (artwork and photos) to create a digital story on computers. The short films were then

viewed by the entire twelve participants and each of their caregivers, with the consent of the participants.

Willis et al.'s (2014) study aimed to acknowledge and validate the HIV-positive individuals' journey and feelings through encouragement and facilitation of the telling of their own stories. The project was based on "the assumption that people experience problems when the stories of their lives, as they or others have invented them, do not sufficiently represent their lived experiences" (p. 130). Children with behavioral concerns share a similar stigmatic role in society, as they are commonly seen as the *bad kids*. White and Epstein explain that this narrative therapy approach then "assists an individual to re-story their life in ways that promote healthy development rather than keeping the person dominated by negative perceptions of themselves and their lives... as other people would have them believe" (as cited in Willis et al., 2014, p. 130; Hull & Katz, 2006). The researchers exemplified understanding, compassion, and sensitivity to each participant's needs surrounding their diagnosis. In paralleling a cognitive therapy approach, digital storytelling improved their self-awareness, self-understanding and self-control, thus being able to identify dysfunctional thoughts that were based in other's perceptions of them (Willis et al., 2014).

Hull and Katz (2006) describe a similar process as part of a turning point that features "a connection between external events and internal awakenings, and agentive activity" (p. 45). These cognitive behavior-type interventions lend themselves to reformation of problematic behaviors in children, as well.

The intervention conducted by Willis et al. (2014) created autonomy in young people in dire situations and experiencing little to no hope. It created a space to validate their experience and helped to show them their value (Willis et al., 2014). Children with behavioral concerns

need this same space. The results of this study are overwhelmingly supportive of using narrative therapy to cope with major traumas in life. The therapeutic process allowed the participants to redefine how their circumstance define their lives, authenticate their existence in this world, helped them find their voices and gave them a platform to use it (Benmayor, 2008; Hull & Katz, 2006; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010; Willis, et al., 2014).

In a 2010 study, Podkalicka and Campbell tracked an organization called YouthWorx and their pedagogical work using digital storytelling. YouthWorx is a community-based, youth media program for youth at risk. After examining some of the creative works from the program, the researchers noticed that the self-expressive voice of an individual's digital story lent itself to broader social contexts. They sought to critique this process using comparative existing studies and analyzing the complexities of communication opportunities in the digital storytelling process.

While building technological knowledge and skills are important, they should not overshadow the drive to find voice. Like the youth at YouthWorx, children with behavioral concerns are adeptly sensitized to their shortcomings and "overemphasis on skills development can remind the young people of continued failure in mainstream education" (Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010, p. 213). There is a subtlety between the expression and the skill building, and the continual flow between the two goals allows for building upon strengths within the educational process. This tension and movement must be maintained by the facilitating adult, and "power from alongside" should not become "power over" (Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010, p. 213).

In considering how crucial power alongside is in voice and understanding, Podkalicka and Campbell (2010) point out how "careful attention to power relationships...is needed so that

the story teller remains in charge of their own story while incorporating external feedback about what and how their story communicates” (p. 213). Too much adult guidance strips the storytelling process down, negating the freedom of expression for the child. On the other hand, no adult guidance can result in little growth of the child because there’s no structure or encouragement to facilitate the process. Guiding and witnessing alongside a child allows for “confidence and competence [to] begin to emerge in the articulation of [their own] voice” (Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010, p. 215).

The idea of performative stories was seen to be positive addition to the digital story intervention in Podkalicka and Campbell’s (2010) study. It was observed that public screenings of the participant’s work provided a “spirit of community belonging and mutual support...in a genuine experience of connectedness that sustains difference” (p. 215).

In an article focusing on improving digital media skills in at-risk youth, Hughes (2017), also discovered that through the process of digital making and performance, the students’ confidence and perseverance improved, in addition to their digital media skills. The students created an “All About Me” book and were extended the opportunity to “make discoveries about themselves, their likes and dislikes, and to uncover who they are, explore how they feel, what they think, and to express these answers through a variety of activities and technologies” (Hughes, 2017, p. 106). It was a multimodal approach to learning.

Hughes (2017) recognized that literacy is more than just reading and writing; it is also about meaning-making with sounds, images and movements. Hughes (2017) also recognized that this is particularly true of children who have difficulties engaging in the classroom (such as children with problematic behaviors), thus utilizing digital and multimedia tools helps to reframe the thinking about how to successfully engage struggling learners (p. 103).

Hughes (2017) found that the use of technology, such as iPad applications (apps), remove pressure from the students and allows them to develop their abilities to interact to

- build trust, commitment, self-confidence;
- develop a feeling of self-worth;
- develop an ability to effectively communicate thoughts and feelings;
- develop listening and cooperation skills and, the ability to compromise; and
- participate in a safe, secure, comfortable, nonjudgmental learning environment. (p. 110)

This suggests that using technology as a vehicle for decentering can bring a more authentic sense of self. Hughes (2017) also describes how exploring technology is a way to help problem solve through unfamiliar technology. The navigation, reflection and communication required to do this is important in academics and future work environments (Hughes, 2017, p. 110).

The students learn to “draw on a variety of skills including interpersonal skills, coding skills, troubleshooting skills and more” (Hughes, 2017, p. 104). Hughes (2017) notes that building upon existing skills, while “immersed in a rich media setting, allows for the students to shape and perform their identities using media to present themselves to the world” (p. 105).

Offering the chance to self-express based on where they are currently at is a perfect opportunity for children with behavioral concerns to shine their brightest.

During the digital making process, it is important to monitor the emotional needs, as well as the educational needs, of the students. Hughes (2017) addressed this concern by facilitating discussion and debriefing with the students, while asking the students to write reflections on their learning each week (p. 109). This reflective component fostered articulation development in intrapersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and for future goals (Hughes, 2017). Exploring the

process through dissection of it provided a type of cognitive therapy approach which also led to better self-awareness.

The process and benefits of digital storytelling with students, as well as youth that are at-risk, has been well researched. Parallels can easily be formed to apply to children with behavioral concerns, as the competencies formed during the digital storytelling process are important factors of self-regulated, behavioral management (e.g. self-awareness, self-confidence, communication, collaboration, and reflection). By taking into consideration the main plot points that past researchers have scripted, a successful intervention with children with problematic behaviors can be produced.

The Plot (Methods)

Based on what I learned, I used the process and product of digital storytelling as a method of intervention to improve emotional health by building self-confidence and self-awareness. Affording children with behavioral concerns the space to represent themselves and share their own story through a self-directed, creative framework reflected a person-centered foundation and can celebrate their inner selves without the tarnish of an adult's prescribed perception of them.

Setting the Scene

I facilitated an arts-based intervention at a therapeutic day school. The day school serves children ages 4-14 and is comprised of students who are no longer successful in their home school district because of their presenting behavioral issues. The diagnoses of the students range, but much of the student body can be categorized into one or more of the following: neurodevelopmental disorders; trauma- and stressor-related disorders; disruptive, impulse-control, and conduct disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

I served as a clinical intern at this school for the 2018-2019 school year. I created an intervention with this population because of the accessibility being an intern provided. More importantly, working with children with behavioral concerns has been a passion of mine for many years. I was employed as a special education paraprofessional at other mainstream elementary schools and therapeutic, behavioral schools. I understand that any amount of success can be a huge learning opportunity for any child, but it is especially important for misunderstood children experiencing problematic behaviors. I have witnessed little, every-day feats of victory build into mountains of change. I also have experienced how time-consuming behavioral management can be for teachers and students. Time that could be put towards creative discovery of self and identity.

The goal for this intervention was to provide children with behavioral concerns a digital platform of self-expression as an outlet for their socio-emotional needs and an opportunity to harbor growth. I originally chose the digital arts as a medium because of its accessible nature to older children and vast possibility for creative story building. It is assumed that these children are not regularly afforded the opportunity to do so, and that they may have trouble engaging in a self-expressive project without guidance and facilitation, based on their more extreme behavioral needs. I addressed these needs by scheduling weekly sessions in a consistent, private space, providing support as necessary and supplying all needed materials to complete the project.

Showtime

Casting. I originally selected three students, ages 11, 13 and 14, to participate in this project. I chose them because they exhibit severe behavioral difficulties that are noticed more than their warm personalities. All three of the students have a natural inclination to be creative but do not present as comfortable engaging with creativity on their own. Unfortunately, due to

continued unsafe behavior in the classroom, two of those students were unable to participate in the project.

The student that participated in this intervention is one of my weekly individual clients. I gained permission to do this project from his teacher and my clinical supervisor, then scheduled for him to complete the project during our weekly meetings over an eight-week period.

My participant is an 11-year old boy and has been diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, and dysthymic disorder. He is a warm, caring boy with a sarcastic sense of humor. He enjoys art class but always needs extra time and support to simply begin a project. Last year, he wrote and performed a rap with his friend in the talent show at school. His friend did most of the writing.

The participant struggles with low self-esteem and is significantly bullied at home. Although he has made great strides since transferring to this behavioral school last year, his behavior at home is still destructive and aggressive. He frequently destroys property and verbally and physically assaults his family. The police have been called on him many times because of this behavior.

Prologue. I printed a couple of copies of an interactive poem called “Where I Am From” (Nguyen, 2016). The poem is meant to be created by the writer and blanks are filled in accordingly to build a poem about where the writer metaphorically and physically comes from. The poem was to be completed as part of the brainstorming session by the participant.

I borrowed a school-owned Apple iPad for the duration of the project, where I downloaded different story-making software (i.e., GarageBand [Apple, Inc., 2018a] for audio recording, digital instruments, and beat machines and iMovie [Apple, Inc., 2018b] for video recording). I also gained access to the school’s pianos and drums. The school also provided a

variety of art supplies for any potential visual art making (i.e., markers, colored pencils, crayons, oil pastels, chalk pastels, paint and paper).

I chose the library for the intervention location because it is a small room in a more secluded location of the school building. There is a natural containment of the space because of the intimate size of the room and because it is generally away from the distracting noises of the upstairs classrooms.

I met with the participant weekly for his usual session for about one hour. Before every session I checked in with the participant's teacher to get an understanding of what the classroom's dynamic was that day. I picked up the student from his classroom and walked with him downstairs to the library. I checked-in with him about his day to gain a sense of what mood he was presently in. Depending on his mood, I adjusted my tonality and demeanor as necessary.

Action.

Act One. Upon entering the room, I had the participant sit down at a chair of his choice. For the first meeting, I told him he was chosen to do something special and that for the next 8 weeks we were going to be doing something a little different. I explained that he had an opportunity to create a story about himself or his life. I told him that he would be doing the project at our usual session time and that I would help keep the timeline and assist with any problems or questions so that he may finish in the allotted time.

I further explained that this special project was a chance to speak his truth using digital media. I asked the participant to create a digital media narrative based on one of these themes: a problem he was having ("the trouble is...") or his life ("the story of you"). "The trouble is..." was to be centered around a problem he was currently facing in his life. "The story of you" was

to be a representation of who he is and/or where he came from. We talked about the differences between those story lines, and I gave him the option to do something different if he wanted.

I told the participant he would be creating one of the following “mini-movies” based on one of the themes he picked: a comic book story (or graphic novel), a narrative story (such as a fairytale or a documentary), a song and music video, or a poetry-based story (including slam poetry and spoken word poetry). The participant stated that he liked the idea of doing a music video.

Besides introducing the project, the first session gave the participant time to brainstorm ideas. Before picking a theme or mini-movie to create, I offered the participant the “Where I Am From” (Nguyen, 2016) poem, to help get him started with his brainstorm. He did not want to complete the poem. Instead, we discussed the benefits of choosing one theme over another. The participant did not like the idea of talking about a problem he currently had. He felt uncomfortable bringing something up that was causing him strife. When I offered “the story of you” option, he immediately shied away and told me he did not want to tell the story of himself. Rather than forcing him to choose a theme, we moved on to the mini-movie he was most interested in creating: a music video.

We went over all the visual art supplies he could use to make art for the video. I suggested location shots outside or at other places around the school. I showed him the iPad and the apps he could potentially use, including GarageBand (Apple, Inc., 2018a) and iMovie (Apple, Inc., 2018b). He also showed interest in using the piano in the school cafeteria to make his song, which I encouraged. With the participant’s help, an individualized timeline was created for him to help map out and organize the work to be done.

To monitor the participant's process through this intervention, I offered him choices of keeping his own check-in journal. My hope was that this journal would include any thoughts or feelings about the project or his current state of mind. With facilitation, I also wanted it to contain where he creatively ended that session, what he would like to accomplish the next session, and what I could do to help facilitate his experience. The journal was intended for processing what came up and keeping the project on track and accountable.

I proposed a video diary, voice recordings, a journal written by him, or a journal dictated by him and written by me. He did not like any of these options but agreed that I could take notes on my observations of his process. At the beginning of each session, I offered to share these notes with the participant, and each week he declined.

Act Two. Since the participant chose to do a music video, the second, third and fourth sessions were intended to be dedicated to the writing and recording of the song narrative. Upon meeting for the second session, the participant wanted to do nothing on the iPad except for play a previously downloaded game that was not part of the software for this project. I offered him the "Where I Am From" (Nguyen, 2016) poem again, which he declined. I offered another writing prompt worksheet entitled "All About Me" (van de Vall, n.d.), which focuses on attributes of the self. He also declined this. I understood quickly that the participant did not want to talk about himself, other than our usual check-ins. Even during those, he had very little to say about himself or his behaviors.

He was having a rough day in the classroom and at home and he denied every redirection to start a writing process. The participant only wanted to play the piano. After 10 minutes of a stalemate, I decided to let him play the piano. To my knowledge, the participant had no official training on the piano. He agreed to let me audio record the session on the iPad for future use.

He started playing the piano, making up his own song. He free-played in a rhythmic way for almost two minutes straight with no direction from me. He wanted to listen to what I recorded so we listened together. After we discussed which parts we liked, he played again and was able to play almost the exact same song he had just made up. At the end of the session, I offered time to create a video, audio or written journal entry and again, he declined.

Act Three. The third session started slow. His teacher had informed me that he had a rough night at home where the police had to be called because of his extreme aggressive behavior. I checked-in with him about this and he did not want to talk about it. When I suggested he write about it, he just stared at me. I offered to dictate while he talked and again, he just stared at me. To bridge the sessions and keep the project in awareness, I reminded him of the awesome music he had created the week before. I reminded him of how excited he was to make a music video and of our timeline that we co-created, and again he just stared at me. I told him this was a perfect opportunity to get his thoughts out of his head. He shook his head at me.

He would only talk about benign details of his school day and after some back and forth conversation, he asked to play piano. It was clear at that point that he was not going to do anything during this session except play piano, so I agreed when he asked me again. He was able to recall what he had played the week before and play a very similar tune. He asked that I audio record him playing on the iPad. He then played something similar but in a higher range. I offered to layer the two tunes I had recorded for him. He said he wasn't sure how that would sound and told me not to do it.

At the end of the session, I observed him smiling when he was able to replay exactly what he had done earlier in the session. After the session, I decided to layer his two tracks to see

how it sounded. I anticipated showing the participant later as an example of what he could do with his recordings.

Act Four. During the fourth session, the participant was calm and quiet. It had been reported that his grandmother was ambulated to the hospital two days prior with the beginnings of congestive heart failure from complications of the flu. I asked him about it, but he told me he did not want to talk about it. I suggested we start to write something down and offered to dictate for him as he talked. He did not like the idea. I checked-in with him about the eight-week project and asked if he still wanted to do a music video. He wasn't sure anymore but stated that he liked playing the piano. I asked him if he wanted to play the piano this session and he said no.

I knew his grandmother's illness was weighing on him, but he was unable to express anything yet. Given his unusually distant demeanor, I wanted him to engage in the *mirror game* with me. My hope in utilizing this exercise was that the participant would become attuned to our space and time together.

The mirror game is an activity done with two people where they stand face to face about four feet apart. The first person (the "mirror") literally mirrors what the other person (the "leader") is doing. Eye contact is made during this process usually and the partners switch roles after a few minutes. The participant was able to engage with me in the game, although he had more trouble leading than he did following. He stated that he wasn't sure what movements to do and would verbally second guess himself after he started any movement.

Afterwards, we made Playdoh animals and knocked down Playdoh towers together. I actively did not engage with the project that week as it was more important to support his immediate needs of being present with where he was.

Act Five. The fifth and sixth sessions were to be reserved for filming of the music video. At this point, however, we had only recorded some audio and nothing else. On the fifth session, it was reported that the participant's grandmother had returned home from the hospital and was feeling better every day. After checking-in with the participant about his grandmother, I reminded the participant again of our timeline. He insisted that he play the piano again but did not want to write anything. It was clear that piano was the most important part of this project to the participant. I realized during this session that this may be as much as he can do at the current time. I knew I would have to shift our plan in order to continue to support his trajectory of his project. I also had to embrace the possibility that the project's outcome would be totally different than I had imagined.

I spoke with him about just recording a song. He didn't say no. I replayed all the things we had recorded thus far, and he seemed proud of it, as demonstrated by his smile and positive self-talk about the recordings. I played the layered tracks I compiled. He listened to it but stated he didn't think it quite matched up. I offered him the opportunity to create a different tune to layer with, but he declined. I knew that his grandmother's health was still on his mind, so I suggested we play the mirror game on the piano to continue to ground him in that session. He agreed to play.

We began the game on the same piano, leading and following on different ends (in different octaves) of the piano. After a few minutes, he asked me to use the other piano in the room and continue playing. I moved to the other piano, and we started again without looking at each other. The participant showed an exceptional ear for playing what he heard without seeing the piano keys I played. He effortlessly mirrored exactly what I played. This round went on for about five minutes, continuously and smoothly. It created a beautiful song of our attunement.

We switched roles and he became the leader. As in the previous session, it was more challenging for him to be in this role. He hesitated before playing the notes and sometimes stated that he messed up, even though he was the leader. This round was musically choppy and had a shorter duration than the first round. After we finished the game, we discussed which role was harder for him. He stated he liked mirroring better but that I wasn't very good at mirroring him. I praised him for how focused and aware he was when he mirrored.

Act Six. Upon picking up the participant for his sixth session, I could visibly see he was not in a happy mood. His head was lowered, the hood from his sweatshirt was up, and his face displayed his emotion. When I checked-in with him, he stated his video game console had been confiscated (again) because of his behavior at home. He did not want to talk about it, so I acknowledged his mood and then moved on. I let him know we would have to wait a little before we could use the piano because a class was using the space it was in. He was not pleased with this request but was willing to play a quick game with me while we waited. He made up the rules as we tossed a chunk of Playdoh back and forth to each other. After about 10 minutes, the space had cleared, and I thanked him for being patient.

We went to the piano where he requested to learn an actual song. Using the YouTube (Google, Inc., 2019) app on the iPad, we searched for a beginner's piano tutorial for a song he liked. Upon finding one, we watched and practiced the first minute of the song. The participant was easily able to play what he heard and watched. We played together and then he played by himself. He asked that I record the new song, which I did. He seemed very pleased with himself and when I walked him back to class his head was raised and he was smiling.

Act Seven. The final two sessions were to be set aside for the merging of the recorded song and video, last minute changes, and final editing. During the seventh session, the

participant was very eager to play the piano. He talked about it as soon as I picked him up from class. I checked-in with him about the part of the song he recorded the week before and he told me he wanted to continue to practice it. He played it repeatedly until he deemed it perfect. He asked me to record it. He also started practicing using both hands to play the song, something he had not attempted to do before. The participant was noticeably proud of himself, as he was smiling and playing with fervor.

Before the end of the session, he stated that he wanted one of his classroom teachers to hear it. The participant had a trusting relationship with this teacher, as he sought her out when he was having a tough day. I told him I could record it again and show her later. He declined that option and asked me if we could go get her so she could listen to it right then. I was surprised that he volunteered to play live. I agreed that we would go see if she was available but prepared him for if she couldn't come right away.

The teacher was available to come listen to the participant. We walked back down to the library together. I subtly prepared her for how important this moment was in this project. I told her that the participant really wanted to share something he had been working hard on. I knew that this moment was especially poignant and vulnerable for the participant, so I was extra encouraging. When he sat down at the piano, he hesitated before he started. I offered to play the song with him, but he said he wanted to use both his hands instead. I stood next to him as he started playing. He rushed through the first couple of notes and played a wrong key. He cursed to himself, stating that he messed up. I told him he was doing great and to try again. He started again and played the entire part that he had learned.

The teacher and I clapped and praised the participant. He sat for a moment with a small smirk on his face then immediately stated that he sucked and looked down at the piano. His

teacher and I continued to encourage him and reiterate how hard it can be to play in front of others, especially after only a couple of rehearsals. In order to get extra reinforcement without my input, I asked him to walk back to class with just his classroom staff. I knew the teacher would praise him all the way back to class. I found this session so pivotal because the project had shifted from being a digital story of self-exploration, to the story of the participant's musical journey of self-expression.

Act Eight. The eight session was originally allotted for final editing and to schedule a final viewing during school hours, allowing the participant to invite whomever he selected. The participant had not digitally created anything finished in his 7 weeks working on this project. He, instead, found solace and confidence through his piano playing. I asked him if he wanted to shoot any video or layer any of the tunes he had created already. I reminded him of the project that we had set out to do. He told me that he liked playing the piano and was happy he was able to do it so much with me.

Upon checking-in with him about his mood, he reported that the police had to be called on him the night before. We talked about what had happened and how he was feeling during that moment. That session he shared more information about what was happening at home than he ever had before. After about 10 minutes, he asked to play the piano. His class was doing a lesson in the room where the piano was. I told the participant that he would be playing in front of his classmates and asked if he would be comfortable doing that. He shrugged his shoulders and stated that he didn't care.

He sat at the piano as I stood next to him. He started by playing a bit of the very first tune he made up in our second session. Three of his friends gathered around the piano, asking him what he was playing. He told them that he made it up with a smile on his face. He then

moved on to the beginning of the song that he memorized. His peers recognized the song. He played the wrong notes a few times, but he didn't get overly frustrated. With encouragement, he just started over.

After he finished playing, he asked me to look up another song on YouTube to learn. I found one he liked, and he very quickly learned the first couple bars of the song. I gave him praise for his good ear, because he learned it with such ease. His peers continued to watch him play and gave him positive feedback.

After about 12 minutes, his classmates returned to their classroom. After they left, I checked-in with him about his experience of playing in front of his friends. When I asked him if he liked it, he shrugged his shoulders. When I asked if he didn't like it, he shrugged. When I asked if he was nervous at all, he stated "no" very clearly. When I asked him if he would do it again, he nodded "yes". He continued to practice the beginning of the new song until the end of the session.

Since this was the last session of our project, I talked with the participant about the progression of the previous eight weeks. He stated how good he became at playing the piano. He also wanted to listen to all the recordings I had made. After we reviewed the recordings, I asked him if he wanted to create his own song out of what we had. I opened the GarageBand app in the iPad and showed him ways to add different instruments to what he had recorded. He opened the beat machine part of the app and played along to his recording. When I asked if I could record everything together, he said no. While he enjoyed playing around with the tunes he created on the piano, he preferred the famous songs of others. Before returning him to class, he looked at me and asked what he should play for the end of the year talent show. I smiled and told him we could learn the rest of one of the songs he had started. He liked that idea. I asked

him if he wanted to continue working on the song the next week as part of our regular session, and he agreed that would be best, so he was ready for the talent show.

Behind the Scenes. In order to track my observations, I wrote notes after every session alongside creating an artistic response. I reviewed my notes before every session to notice any punctuated themes or information that may have aided me in facilitating the next session. I evaluated my art before each session to notice any transference or counter transference happening between the participant and I.

On some days, I recorded a video diary before the sessions. On other days, I recorded a video diary after the sessions. At the end of the 8 weeks, I created my own digital story to reflect my thoughts and feelings of the process. I synthesized my visual art, my recordings and my notes to create a fairytale-type story of my journey facilitating the intervention.

Curtain Call (Results)

The Actor/Director

Despite careful planning and considerations of potential variables, my intervention did not go as intended. The participant was originally very eager to do the project, but he rapidly changed his mind in the first couple sessions. The result of what did happen, however, was a positive example of self-directed, self-expression.

Before starting this intervention, I established a few goals for myself and for the participant. Since he was already my regular client, a therapeutic alliance had been previously formed and afforded me his initial trust in starting a new project. I sought to continue to facilitate a welcoming conceptual space by being consistent in my therapeutic approach and demeanor. By being flexible and understanding of the participant's process and resistance to the project, I allowed for a successful transformation of the intervention.

This initial goal was met, as evidenced by the participant's ability to engage in potentially vulnerable activities, such as playing a new instrument and playing the mirror game with me. Maintaining a familiar, physical space and meeting time also likely contributed to the participant's ability to take healthy risks.

Although I created a platform for the participant to self-express through digital storytelling, he chose his own approach to this product goal. Instead of utilizing the digital software I provided, the participant found his voice through playing the piano. He created his own avenue of self-expression in a modality that he chose. The participant told his story of perseverance through learning a new skill and creating melodies. This is an indication that my therapeutic process goal for him was met.

I had hoped that this intervention would boost his self-confidence and based on his sustained interest in playing the piano, I believe his intervention helped to meet this goal. As seen from the narrative of the intervention, the participant did not like to discuss his feelings and personal desires. Over the 8 weeks, however, he was increasingly able to voice his needs. On the last session of this project, he vocalized wanting to play the song he was learning in the end-of-the-year talent show. Simply stating this request out loud and making his desire known to me was a vulnerable move and a representation of the confidence he gained during the intervention. An actual performance in the talent show would have been a more product-oriented finale, but I believe it is a moot point in the scope of this intervention since the participant self-initiated his whole project.

The Producer

Before I started the intervention, I anticipated some resistance. In mapping the intervention, I allowed for flexibility in certain areas of the project's structure to accommodate

for fluctuations of the participant's interests and needs. I had not, however, planned on the participant's complete refusal of the process.

Initially, the participant was eager to be a part of the project. During the first session, he agreed to the terms and even helped plan a timeline around his work. I did not expect that his interest would wane so quickly, and I subsequently had to adapt. Indeed, I found myself resistant to the change of trajectory of the project.

It was frustrating to recognize how feasible and beneficial this project could be for the participant and then observe the participant's disinterest in trying. Over the course of the first four sessions, I had to remind myself several times that this intervention was for his benefit and I was not to push the project on him for the sake of this thesis.

I struggled with changing the intervention plan during its progression, even though it wasn't fundamentally working. I was convinced that I needed to stay with my original agenda, and it was only after I let go of this notion that I was able to notice and reflect on what the participant had started to create for himself.

In watching the participant build and test his own boundaries through piano, I was reminded of the magic of expressive arts therapy work. Sometimes careful planning of an intervention facilitates a client's flourishing, and sometimes letting the spontaneity of the expressive arts take over is where the work happens.

The participant, my client, found his own path through the intervention space we had created. Every note he played on the piano was his own small victory of allowing himself into a vulnerable place. By accepting that this invention was no longer my undertaking, and was in fact his, I was able to identify and celebrate the participant's journey and progress.

By continuing to encourage his choice of expression and keep some structure in our sessions around his choice, the participant gained confidence and momentum during the 8 weeks. This process served as a reminder that clinicians are merely guiding voice in therapeutic work, not the therapy itself.

Post-Show Talk (Discussion)

This intervention started as a project to produce a digital story. Although the participant was initially excited to take part in the project, he quickly started refusing any facilitation to create a digital art piece. The resistance he exhibited led him to self-create his own project. He explored playing the piano as a means of expression and spent most of the 8 weeks creating his own music and learning famous songs.

The intervention transformed into the participant's journey of self-directed, self-expression. Before the implementation of an intervention, Hughes (2017) points out that students often struggle with difficult tasks, give up and then refuse to try again. With encouragement and instilling that mistakes were an opportunity to learn, however, perseverance is developed (Hughes, 2017). The participant empowered himself, with continued encouragement, to learn a new skill and articulated the desire to share it with others. In reflecting on the process of this intervention, I noted many areas of improvement to augment this kind of digital project in the future.

The participant was my weekly client and I made the choice to do this intervention during our regular scheduled meeting time. I think it would have been more beneficial to make a separate time to meet for this project, so that our usual sessions were kept for processing his day-to-day concerns. Having a different allotted time for this project could have increased his chance

of creating a digital piece because it would have further identified the project as a special undertaking, increasing his engagement in the process.

When initially introducing the participant to this project, I could have created my own examples of digital stories based on the themes and mini movie choices. I would have been better able to walk him through each step of the process. Hughes (2017) also noted this reflection during her digital making interventions with students that the “opportunity to familiarize themselves and play with technology prior to planning [the students] stories was extremely important” (p. 108). It is possible that the participant’s resistance to the project was because I failed to thoroughly explain how to create using the software provided. He also might have been more connected to a process that he knew I was already involved in myself.

I could have expanded the themes of the project to include creating a digital story based on a problem that the participant already faced in his life and how he overcame it. It would have provided him “an opportunity to consider retelling their story within a framework which encourages focus on positive transformation, rather than on the difficulties in their lives” (Willis et al., 2014, p. 134). In reflecting on the participant’s emotional development, he may have been resistant to the process because exploring a problem he was currently facing was too much for him while he was still in the middle of it. Exploring a past problem that was more decentered from him could have provided the inspiration and engagement that I was hoping for. Podkalicka and Campbell (2010) also point out that sometimes younger people find it difficult to talk about themselves and that focusing on facts (e.g., age and hobbies) could be more a fruitful direction. I also could have changed the mini-movie options to better suit his interests.

In reflecting about my role in this process, it may have been advantageous to take a more active role in facilitation by catering this intervention directly to the participant. I had initially

set out to try this intervention with two other students as well, but they were unable to participate. After learning of that change in my project, I could have molded my intervention to better suit the needs of my individual client, especially given that I was more familiar with how he operates.

If given the permission, I would have recorded all our intervention sessions together. Perhaps if he was willing to review his own progress, he may have been inclined to use the video and audio footage to create something digital. I specifically think the recording of our piano mirror game would be quantifiable material to boost his self-confidence and create something out of his spontaneous music.

In considering the additional benefits of using technology, Hughes (2017) points out that “teaching students how to navigate their way through unfamiliar technology, to reflect on the process, and to communicate effectively, are important in both academics and future work environments” (p. 111). Given that technology is only getting more advanced, it would be valuable for students to learn how to problem-solve within the technology they are given.

Clinical Implications

As with any therapeutic work, a clinician must be flexible. This project was an example of how flexibility and patience are especially important in maintaining a therapeutic space. Podkalicka and Campbell (2010) note the importance of “the necessary flexibility of the pedagogic approach and the subtle ethical considerations that underlie creative processes” (p. 212) to increase success when working with young people’s voices.

When working with children, especially adolescents, it is vital to understand this because teenagers so often are unwilling to buy in to an idea that isn’t theirs. When considering work with adolescents, the significant hormonal and neurological changes happening can impede a

teenager's ability to have flexible thinking and perspective taking (Goddings, 2015), regardless of the logic or reasoning an adult provides, therefore negating any effort on behalf of the clinician. For work with adolescents to be fruitful, they must be an active part of the therapeutic process, perhaps more than other age groups, because they are in the biological process of establishing themselves as autonomous individuals (Goddings, 2015).

The mindful presence of a clinician to not be blinded by their own intentions for their clients remains the utmost important factor of any therapeutic session, especially when using storytelling. "Careful attention to power relationships in the process is needed so that the story teller remains in charge of their own story" (Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010, p. 213). The individualized process is always more significant than the product. A client's progress depends on their own work and if clinicians do not recognize the subtleties of that progress, they may miss the gains the client is communicating.

This project's implications also suggest that while it is not conceivable to prepare for every possible outcome as a clinician, it is imperative to expect anything and to dynamically maintain the fluidity of support for the client's sake.

En Fin (Conclusion)

The research I have found has showcased digital storytelling as an excellent co-facilitator of self-expression and autonomy. For my client, it was a gateway (and perhaps permission) to begin the process of self-actualization. More than anything, it is clear that providing him an alternative way of expressing himself and providing support and encouragement made the difference more than the digital storytelling modality itself.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Expressive Therapies Division
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Student's Name: Stephanie P. Sabins

Type of Project: Thesis

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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: Donna C. Owens, PhD