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## Becoming: How Expressive Arts Nurture Self-Esteem, Identity and Empowerment, Development of a Method

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Becoming: How Expressive Arts Nurture Self-Esteem, Identity and Empowerment,  
Development of a Method  
Capstone Thesis  
Lesley University

May 5, 2020

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Expressive Art Therapy

Elizabeth Kellogg

### Abstract

A vigorous art-centered curriculum was created and implemented amongst elementary students in a community-based program. The curriculum primarily involved step-dance incorporating movement and music therapy, while also including visual arts, music and aspects of drama therapy. These interventions were included to measure and test if the use of the arts within a community could help improve the participants self-esteem, confidence, sense of identity and empowerment as aspects of their *becoming*. The participants consisted of six elementary students (four girls and two boys), who were referred by their mentors to receive additional support surrounding their social-emotional development, self-advocacy, timidity, and low self-esteem. Results illustrated a great increase in the participants confidence from the first to the last group session. Several themes emerged such as disengagement, awareness and advocacy. Further research on how these interventions positively impact older young people in a group setting is recommended.

*Keywords:* expressive art, expressive therapies, expressive art therapy, dance/movement therapy, music therapy, art therapy, drama therapy, becoming, community, identity, self-esteem, confidence, empowerment

## Introduction

As a first-generation immigrant citizen of this region, I discovered the healing benefits of creative arts. From early childhood, there was an innate desire toward creativity; from orchestrating and participating in homemade plays, recreating music, and even dancing. Being part of a low-income family, the means to pursue these passions were limited, causing me to engage in extracurricular activities provided by my local public school. These extracurricular activities not only provided an escape from home issues, but also provided a community and external social support which set me on a path of self-exploration. In the journey of life, a great deal of time is spent learning and understanding who we are as individuals. With billions of people actively walking this earth and our social interactions influencing parts of our identity, no two people share the same story. In search of our true selves, various encounters and experiences are had, each shaping unique perspectives towards our becoming. While on this journey, interaction with the arts can positively impact individuals on the road toward their becoming, primarily impacted during early childhood.

For the sake of this paper, *becoming* will be defined as stepping into the best self by growing in self-awareness and pushing through discomfort to enrich various aspects of the self, improving life overall. As individuals, we often operate through the idea of double consciousness, looking at ourselves through the perspective of others (DuBois, 1903). Double consciousness adds additional stress to individuals as it pertains to their performed identity and social interaction. There are two realities constantly present; one being an individual's need to appease others as a constant stressor and the other being the internal battle to remain true to their identities. This is complex as these perceived external perspectives also aid in identity formation. In essence, interactions also serve as constant pressure to perform and appease others while

attempting to remaining true to one's identity; at the same time, having those identities be shaped from these external perspectives causes us to be aware of others' thoughts and perspectives towards us continuously.

External consciousness, when aggregated with internal reflection, brings about "feelings of inadequacy, depression, shame, and a host of other cognitive distortions" (Reynolds, 2019, p. 18). As these sentiments arise, part of reaching becoming is learning methods to address these feelings to propel towards healing properly. Expressive therapies are a primary source of non-traditional treatment and are often used to establish psychological treatment, while also focusing on how to communicate through non-verbal expression (visual art, music, drama, and dance movement) (Levine & Levine, 1999). Expressive therapies can also serve as a psychotherapeutic means to work through underlying difficulties related to identity (Malchiodi, 2005). Within those difficulties, various art mediums can be utilized to foster recovery, hope, self-confidence, coping mechanisms, and a sense of purpose. Developing these assets can also encourages an individual's emotional expression, which can enhance an individual's overall physical, mental, and emotional well-being, especially children; addressing these difficulties early on.

Not only can the use of the arts promote these assets but creating collectively within an intentionally formed community, these assets can also serve as an additional contributor to the process of becoming. Community is defined as a group of individuals who share commonalities and, through those commonalities, work to interact and overcome challenges collectively. Some common examples are school, place of work, appearance, gender, cultural ethnicity, interest, and more. The purpose of these communities is to encourage, provide social support to one another, and "to alleviate loneliness" (Jackson & Sinclair, 2012, p. 2). As individuals endure hardship, people often isolate themselves rather than join in supportive communities (Jackson & Sinclair,

2012). I believe this is observed and absorbed by children, who then perpetuate the cycle. In creating collectively, members of an artistic community can grow collectively and also heal collectively by practicing compassion to, in turn, impact aspects of their becoming: self-esteem, identity, and a sense of empowerment. Moore, Straus, Dev, Parish, Sueko, and Eycler (2017) thoroughly explained how a lack of social supports and community contributed to an increase of loneliness, which predicts an increase in morbidity and mortality. This highlights the significance of constructing a healthy community in interpersonal relationships.

This paper outlines how the expressive arts aid individuals, specifically elementary students exposed to trauma, by improving their emotional well-being, ability to empathize, and find their voice for self-expression and advocacy. This was achieved through the building of artistic healing communities that create collectively, using expressive therapies to improve mood and treat negative symptoms of mental illness. A vigorous art-centered curriculum was created and followed, fluctuating between modalities. Through the incorporation of the arts, the shame and doubt which cause dissonance in one's identity and hinder one's *becoming* can be reframed. There are various ways in which the arts can improve one's quality of life and embolden the process of becoming. The present research will aim to answer if expressive art has the ability to reframe negative narratives embedded from external voices and experiences through community formation to in turn improve aspects of their becoming.

### **Literature Review**

There are various components of one's life to consider in measuring fulfillment towards becoming, which include emotional well-being, mental wellness, personal awareness, and positive social development. Emotional well-being ensures one's ability to control their thoughts and feelings to cope with the difficulties of life effectively. This then translates to mental

wellness to properly manage stress and battle anxiety and depression, in turn, realizing their abilities while fueling their personal awareness in the form of self-esteem and empowerment. Doing this amid community also nurtures empathy, alleviates loneliness, and instills hope to overcome, each component fueling the other.

### **Increasing Wellbeing with Expressive Therapies**

Expressive therapies (ET), according to Rogers (1993), are “a process of discovering ourselves through any art form that comes from an emotional depth” (p. 4). It provides individuals the opportunity to experience and express the depth of themselves through any art form (art, music, drama, movement, play and more) while not focusing on the product but rather the process to create “a supportive setting to facilitate growth and healing” (Rogers, 1993, p. 2). The following paragraphs describe several studies conducted to demonstrate the positive affects ET has on promoting health and well-being.

Lyons, Karkou, Roe, Meekums, and Richards (2018) studied this within a community of adults over the age of 65 diagnosed with dementia by observing their memory, thinking, behavior, and ability to perform daily functions. Dance movement therapy was the primary focus used for this study, as dance movement therapy is the interpretation of body movement as communication while reducing cognitive barriers and improving external and internal confidence and self-esteem. To collect data and monitor progress, a series of video sessions were collected over a series of times to process clients’ progress practically. Lyons et al. (2018) reviewed footage, analyzing rhythmic synchrony, the spontaneity of expression, and mirroring; these were primarily focused on as the clinical processes to observe the contributions made to the clients’ wellbeing. These techniques helped the clients through a series of stimuli come to a place of self-identity, all through the use of non-verbal communication. As a result, it was recorded that

clients “grew in self-esteem and confidence, connecting with the past and brought those positive feelings into the present” (Lyons et al., 2018, p. 38).

Similar to dance movement therapy, drama therapy primarily aims to offer individuals with a secure and safe experience. However, drama therapy encourages the full expression of their emotional voice via lively, dramatic activity. The intended objective of drama therapy differs for each participant, although the basic concept was designed for promoting growth and healing through the use of role reversal, as well as dramatic interactions (Lyons et al., 2018). According to Leckey (2011), drama therapy as a practice aims to enhance positive change of behavior, improve social relationship skills, integrate emotional and physical well-being, attain self-awareness and personal growth, and enhance the overall quality of life. Overall, drama therapy enables participants to express themselves non-verbally by “playing” and “pretending.” Through the creation of distance from real-life actions, roles, circumstances, patterns, events, and experiences, participants have the chance of acting in new ways, experimenting with alternatives, and gaining new insights. Additionally, role reversal can be understood as a liberating experience, which allows a person to expand their present role in life or put themselves in other peoples’ shoes.

Moore et al. (2017) conducted a study using drama therapy to highlight how empathy and compassion are essential contributing factors in measuring one's well-being. For this particular study, three stages of drama therapy were used to gauge participants’ growth in the areas of empathy, compassion, and well-being. This was measured in two groups; a drama workshop group (DW) where the participants underwent intense training and participated in a series of exercises to execute a final performance, and a backstage pass control group (BP) where participants mostly witnessed and posed questions to theatre experts. Both groups completed pre

and post-treatment assessments. The study hoped to demonstrate a significant effect on the participants' empathy and compassion measured after undergoing intense acting training. While there was no significant difference between the DW and BP post empathy and compassion measurement, the drama workshop did report positive changes in their happiness, confidence, and self-esteem.

The literature reviewed highlights the importance of art in improving the life of an individual by demonstrating how the lives of different participants in these studies were enhanced through different forms of ET. For example, in the study carried out by Walsh, Martin and Schmidt (2004), the participants in the role of caregivers demonstrate a great decrease in stress, reduced anxiety, and better positive feelings after participating in the art therapy intervention. They also exhibit increased positive interrelations with patients and healthcare providers. Furthermore, in the research by Abbotts and Spence (2013), the participants in the Out of the Box initiative, a public mental health action initiated by community leaders to build confidence and improve well-being, who initially displayed poor mental and physical health and later reported experiences of traumatic life events later displayed drastic improvement in happiness, outlook and confidence. The participants believed that the Out of the Box initiative had enhanced their friendships and social interactions. Similarly, in both studies by Lyons et al. (2018) and Moore et al. (2017), the participants reported to have been able to connect with their past memories stored in the body and bringing them into the present. These studies show the positive effect of ET and individual's ability to cultivate communally and flourish individually; growing in confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem and feeling empowered through the challenges faced which in turn affect their overall well-being. These are examples of how various populations, primarily adults, across different literature benefited from the various forms

of ET they engaged in. Evidently, these studies could be thought about and extended towards children and adolescents as the impact of these issues are initially developed during childhood. Therefore, in young people learning these essential skills early on, this allows them to be proactive rather than reactive in their healing.

### **The Impact of ET in Community**

MacLeod (2006) contributed to the correlations between the arts and overall health by closely focusing on a specific population; socially isolated individuals in rural areas. He examines how the expressive arts enhance health and overall well-being through the observation of volunteers. This approach was used due to the authors understanding of “the arts being used to communicate the emotional and social complexities of vulnerable people to inform critical debates using their own voice” (MacLeod et al., 2006, p. 17). With this fact, the authors sought to train and enable volunteers in expressive art to permit meaningful art engagement amongst the socially isolated. The participants consisted of 16 individuals: eight older female volunteers ranging from 55 to 75 years old, and eight cognitively well, yet isolated adults ranging from 65 to 95 years old; two of which were men and six women. The participants within the volunteer role trained to create trusting relationships, to facilitate expressive art, debrief and collect data. The trained volunteers were then placed in dyads with the participants based on geographical proximity, artistic interest and similar life stories where individual sessions lasted a series of 10 weeks. This person-centered approach proved to be personally empowering to participants. The positive interventions heavily influenced their well-being especially in relationships building, personal development, self-appreciation, which all extend beyond the duration of the program.

Creativity is part of human culture. Art brings community members together and evokes different reactions and emotions. More importantly, the different modalities pose healing

abilities, which can improve the wellbeing of individuals within a community. A modality frequently used and researched to administer healing is music. Researchers have emphasized music's soothing ability as well as its capacity to provide similar benefits as scientific care therapies (Aldridge, 1993). Notably, music therapy has been demonstrated to help reduce feelings/symptoms of anxiety. The pleasure which participants shared in the course of healing via a music therapy session also aided in restoring emotional stability (Aldridge, 1993). Without the sentiment of emotional stability, a young person's mental health, clinical difficulties and well-being are at-risk which then affect the kind of adult they become. Psychological and behavioral problems can negatively impact a young person's educational and development potential (Cortina & Fazel, 2015). To combat this, a safe and supportive wrap around social support is essential for the child thrive (Cortina & Fazel, 2015). To address emotional and behavioral difficulties within children, Cortina & Fazel (2015) implemented an Art Room intervention, the implementation of visual art for young people between the ages of 5-16, where individuals displaying difficulty in mainstream education receive additional support. Student were referred by their teachers as a result of major challenges evoking stress and anxiety surrounding their families, friends and peers. These stressors were negatively displayed in the classroom by way of class disruption and disengagement. Findings showed that The Art Room combined with consistent positive support from the school, the group, as well as individual and group counseling, significantly improved the young people's emotional and behavioral problems.

Furthermore, in a TED Talk by Elanor Longden (2013), the speaker shares how the aspect of community played a drastic role in her mental health healing journey. She says:

Many people have harmed me in my life, and I remember them all. But the memories grow pale and faint in comparison to the people who've helped me. The fellow

survivors, the fellow voice hearers, the comrades, and collaborators. The mother who never gave up on me, who knew that one day I would come back to her, and was willing to wait for me for as long as it took. The doctor who only worked with me for a brief time but who reinforced his belief that recovery was not only possible but inevitable and during a devastating period of relapse told my terrified family, 'Don't give up hope'. I believe that Eleanor can get through this. Sometimes you know it snows as late as May, but summer always comes eventually..... those good and generous people who fought with me and for me, and who waited to welcome me back from that agonized lonely place. But together, they fought a blend of courage, creativity, integrity, and an unshakable belief that my shattered self could become healed and whole. I use to say that these people saved me, but what I now know is they did something even more important in that they empowered me to save myself, and crucially they helped me to understand something which I would always suspected. That my voices were meaningful responses to traumatic life events, particularly childhood events, and, as such, were not my enemies but a source of insight into solvable emotional problems.

ET also helps individuals to better express their experiences endured, which may be too difficult to express verbally to those with a severe physical and mental diagnosis. Walsh, Martin and Schmidt (2004) carried out a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental study aimed at testing the effectiveness of creative arts intervention with 40 family patient caregivers. The independent variable was the engagement in the creative arts intervention, while the dependent variables were emotions, anxiety, and stress. The study was conducted for six months and was carried out at a local treatment center. The intervention comprised various creative arts actions intended for

bedside provision. The creative arts intervention was shown to foster short-term wellbeing among caregivers. Caregivers showed considerably decreased stress, reduced anxiety, and better positive feelings after participating in the intervention. Also, they exhibited a surge in positive interrelations with the healthcare workers (Schmidt, 2004).

Further, Abbotts and Spence (2013) performed a study in which they assess the Out of the Box program by exploring any effects on the wellbeing of participants. The study was aimed at the general adults' population, and the Out of the Box consisted of one social group and two art-oriented groups, under the leadership of a community social worker. The researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with 14 members of a group, which included six males and eight females aged between 36 and 71 years. The data was analyzed thematically. The results of the study showed significant benefits of happiness, outlook, and confidence in individuals who had poor physical or mental health or adverse life events (Abbotts & Spence, 2013). Also, Leckey (2011) explored how effective creative activities were on the mental wellbeing in a behavioral health setting. The evidence from extensive literature indicated that creative activities might possess a healing as well as a protective impact on mental wellbeing. Creative activities have therapeutic effects that enhanced relaxation, offered a way of self-expression, and minimized blood pressure while reducing stress and improving the immune system.

### **Well-Being**

Studies by Lyons et al. (2018) and Moore et al. (2017) contributed to the findings that creating and providing a sense of community, improved participants' well-being. It suggests "that stepping out of one's comfort zone may lead to greater empowerment in the future" (Moore et al., 2017, p. 7). Moore et al. (2017) demonstrated that amid participants feeling the pressure to perform well week in and week out in the drama workshop group, the individuals who reported

negatively every week due to the feeling of discomfort were the same individuals who shared that they grew in the areas of empowerment (e.g., confidence, self-esteem and overall happiness) due to the resilience demonstrated. Lyons et al. (2018) also affirm this in the collection of dance movement videos. It was demonstrated over time that the client's self-esteem and confidence grew. This was made possible through the participants connecting their memories stored in the body and bringing them into the present. These studies show the positive effect ET has on an individual's ability to cultivate communally and embellish individually; in growing in confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, and feeling empowered through the challenges faced, which in turn affect their overall well-being.

Greaves (2011) sought to support how creative art therapy can enhance one's life in various aspects using measurable data. Greaves explained the arts as being a potent tool, having various benefits such as means to work through underlying difficulties, foster hope, generate a sense of purpose, rebuilding identity while also developing new coping skills. To demonstrate this, Greaves' (2011) literature review emphasizes the effects of drama therapy on stress relief, effective coping mechanisms, and internal insight. To measure this, qualitative data was collected from five participants who identify as white British people. The participants had previously received psychotherapy services and long-term psychiatric medication for depression, bipolar disorder, and other severe mental illnesses (SMI). The qualitative method consisted of participants completing self-reporting questionnaires using a Likert scale, both pre and post-intervention. The questionnaires administered served as a baseline, as well as a means to collect follow up data, with the author and facilitator present. The questionnaires used are as followed: the outcome questionnaire (OQ) measuring symptom distress, interpersonal relationships, and social role functioning, Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSE) measuring global self-esteem, Scale of

Body Connection (SBC) measuring body awareness and body dissociation, and Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation-Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) measuring subjective well-being, symptoms, functioning, and risk.

Also, a research journal of group sessions, reflections, puppet making, and performances led by a drama therapist and other drama therapy exercises using photo and film. These sessions provided “the opportunity to engage in artistic creativity, drama, and self-expression, and facilitated group support and social interaction” (Greaves, 2011, p. 46). As a result, there were mixed results as it pertains to the quantitative and qualitative results. Reviewing the qualitative findings, participants experienced significant positive change referencing an increase in confidence, self-acceptance, and gladness in awareness and appreciation for the challenge. One participant, in particular with “a history of PTSD, self-harm, depression, and social isolation,” expressed seeing the “importance of connecting with others, especially men, and the opportunity to renegotiate their identity and discover new abilities (Greaves, 2011, p. 61). This finding demonstrates that there are appreciation and overall improvement of well-being, which recognizes the need for human connection and the positive influence of the arts.

However, with the use of technology increasing, there seems to also be correlating decrease in overall well-being. Several large studies have attested to adolescents spending more time on digital media reporting lower psychological well-being, lower life satisfaction, and less happiness while feeling experiencing more sentiments of loneliness, social isolation and depression (Twenge, 2019). This was studied further by measuring low psychological well-being and its correlation with those born in the era of the internet and smartphones. To measure this, four criteria were reviewed; time sequence, the large number of individuals impacted in the group, cause of direct daily impact, and personal impact while also reviewing the effects on an

individual and group/cohort level as it pertains to depression. The findings demonstrate the significant decline in adolescent's well-being between 2011 and 2018 with a simultaneous increase in depression and suicide attempts. At the individual level, some may choose to exclude themselves from social media reducing social media usage, this will cause them to be excluded from interaction also affecting mood due to the lack of social interaction.

Ramirez (2013) sought to address this by investigating the benefits of art therapy on individuals affected by this. His population focus is on high school freshmen males, and the effects art therapy intervention have on their social-emotional development; primarily anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, as a mean to enhance their academic lives. The participants were students from an all-boys private school in New York City classified as low-income. Before being enrolled, the participants were required to provide an academic profile through testing. Based on the results of this test, students are categorized as Honors, Average, or At-Risk. Within these categories, one class from each academic track was arbitrarily selected to participate in group art therapy for the duration of 12 sessions; the remainder were labeled as the control group, which was not provided artistic expression or therapeutic process. To measure this, the Behavioral Assessment System for Children Second Edition (BASC-2) which gathers compiled information on "school problems, internalizing problems, inattention/hyperactivity problems, emotional symptoms index and personal adjustment" (Ramirez, 2013, p 61) was administered pre and post-intervention. Following the 12 interventions, participants in the experiential group responded to five open-ended prompts concerning their artistic creations, which were collected for qualitative measures. The result demonstrated that participants in the honors track decreased significantly on anxiety, depression, self-esteem, school problems, internalizing problems, emotional symptoms, or personal adjustment. Within the other tracks, however, there was no

significant difference in the data; school problems are the only category that displayed significant improvement consistently throughout each track.

From the data collected from the opened prompts, common themes of a sense of ownership, introspection, cathartic relief, and ventilation of negative affect, expression of positive affect, future projection, concrete descriptors, symbolic language, and change in effect emerged. Participants in the Honors Track classified into four themes of ventilation of negative emotions, expression of positive affect, concrete descriptors, and the use of symbolic language. Those in the Average Track classified into a sense of ownership, ventilation or negative feelings, expression of positive affect, and concrete descriptors. Within the At-Risk Track, the common themes are a sense of ownership, cathartic relief, introspection, and ventilation of negative feelings, expression of positive affect, future projection, concrete descriptors, and change in effect. Themes that consistently improved within each track are an expression of positive affect and concrete descriptors. Overall, “participants expressed negative feelings while in the school, including anxiety, anger, loneliness, and envy. After creating art within a structured art therapy setting, participants reported feeling relaxed, proud, relieved, and confident (Ramirez, 2013, p. 97).

This information is helpful in that though the quantitative data did not reflect significant change, the participants were able to advocate and share their experiences. Both studies demonstrate positive change experienced through the arts. Greaves (2011) shared how a participant expressed the appreciation and need for human connection after suffering from social isolation long-term. This is also beneficial within an academic setting with those battling generational change. In students learning skills through the arts, they are in turn, increasing in their sense of self-worth, which will positively enhance their academic learning. The positive

influence of the arts and overall improvement towards well-being is recognized within both a clinical and academic setting, which demonstrated the arts are beneficial across various demographics.

### **Identity**

Reynolds (2019) examined social expectations which place men in what he has classified as a “man box.” Within this box, “men are supposed to be: powerful and dominating, fearless and in control, strong and emotionless and successful – in the boardroom, the bedroom, and in sports” (p. 2). The restrictions of this box limit individuals’ perceptions of men and men’s identities. In an attempt to re-define men’s emotional capacity, Reynolds (2019) conducted an art-based research centered on dance/movement therapy with 20 participants between the ages of 23 and 49. The purpose of this project is to rid participants of a subdued society that hinders them from living authentically. This was done in a community engagement project where participants provided narratives and poetry to expose the internal and external constraints which impact the formed male identity on daily living. A total of 112 males of various ethnicities, sexual orientations, and spiritual beliefs completed survey questions surrounding identity, sexuality, and opposition were posed, which later governed the discussion and creation of the participants’ performance along with the dance movement performance came mirroring. In the participants being aware of their external appearance along with the stereotypes and misconceptions this accompanied, the majority realized the effect their male exterior had on others' perception of them, regardless of their true alternative identity. As a result of people’s perception, many felt the need to emulate to fit in. This was made evident during the various personal narratives embodied in response to questions or prompts. All participants experienced a level of discomfort when asked to stand in their presence regardless of preconceived notions.

Once completed, participants shared a common expression of relief to seen and heard without judgment. Not only did this arts-based research bring individual enlightenment and freedom, but it also built a sense of community. Dance movement therapy, combined with personal narratives and poetry, presents as a positive for increasing one's overall quality of life while building healthy connections as the initial step to break the cycle of performing masculinity and stepping into their authentic selves.

### **Conclusion**

The studies mentioned above contribute to the evidence that the use of the arts provide a sense of community, while also improving participants' well-being. An ongoing theme in the literature is the power of self-reflection. In exploring through various art forms, a level of self-actualization occurs, which assists in reframing how participants view themselves, to later grow in self-compassion, which in turn fuels their confidence, self-esteem, and other aspect of their becoming. The influential experiences lived built a sense of community which both groups desired to carry out beyond the model of the study.

Today, real time social interaction is decreasing as “the shift in teens’ free time toward technology and away from face-to-face social interactional [which] affects most teens’ day-to-day lives”, suggest there should be a greater influence on personal mental health (Twenge, 2019). Due to social interactions being primarily engaged through technology, many adolescents are missing the human interaction component and therefore, making depression more likely. With this fact, and the known positive benefits of ET, the need for the arts is high amongst young people. Currently, this is only being sought out amongst those in special programs or identified as problematic in the classroom.

### **Method**

This study aims to address children in need who often go unnoticed due to their cooperation in the classroom while still experiencing trauma. As one experiences much shame and doubt, this can often be displayed in several ways; being reserved, quiet and timid. I believe students who often display these characteristics, perhaps also lacking confidence and self-esteem, have been fed negative narratives which they have internalized. As a result, a vigorous art-centered curriculum was created and followed, fluctuating between modalities to reframe the dissonance instilled. This method navigates through step dance encompassing music, creative, writing, drama, and visual art scaffolded weekly, with each modality nurturing various aspects of their becoming.

### **Participants**

A total of eight elementary students ranging between the ages of five and six were selected to be a part of a closed group. All participants were selected from a program which provides long-term mentorship and support from the first grade until the completion of high school. Those accepted into the program are children facing high risks: “born into poverty, are at risk of dropping out of school, substance abuse, incarceration, teen parenting” and as a result in need of additional support to evoke generational change (Friends of the Children, n.d). Within this non-profit organization, mentors of the elementary cohort were prompted to select individuals within their caseload which they believed could benefit from additional support. Of the referrals received, eight of the eleven displayed similar issues with social-emotional development, self-advocacy, timidity, and low self-esteem; of which the six were selected to be participants in a closed group. The group consisted of eight individuals: two males and four females.

## **Curriculum**

To measure the level of improvement in the individuals' journey toward becoming, an intervention was created following a precise curriculum. To address the issues of the group, the overarching objective was to increase a sense of community, while simultaneously empowering each individual within this community to increase their self-esteem and feel empowered on their journey towards becoming. To achieve this, the primary modality of focus was movement in the form of step. Step is an African tradition that invites individuals to create rhythms through stomping, clapping and spoken word/chant. This can be done individually but is primarily conducted in groups who learn and rehearse a created routine which may or may not be performed. However, similar to the drama workshop in Moore et al.'s (2017) study, these participants were learning a step to perform. Step has the ability to empower participants while also helping them to feel grounded. These reasons lead in the decision to use step as the primary intervention. In the participants learning something new, being persistent and learning the intricacies required in step, while also learning additional disciplines to be applied weekly, the participants should feel empowered. Similar to study done by Moore et al. (2017), in the participants being primarily exposed to something new, and challenged, over time, mastering this new skill will provide a sense of empowerment. In addition to step, other modalities were also incorporated; creative writing/poetry, and visual art in the form of painting and crafts.

The group lasted for a series of six weeks with each week addressing one of the initial presenting problems, while also covering different aspects of their becoming: community, affirmations, identity, and perseverance (Table 1). To provide safety and consistency, the group was held at the same time, in the same room, following the same format: an opening ritual, a warm-up affiliated with the topic of the week, the main activity (step), secondary activity,

revision and a close. Below is a synopsis of which component each week covered, followed by the ET intervention used to address these components.

**Table 1**

|               | <b>Topic:</b>              | <b>Artistic Intervention:</b>  |
|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Week 1</b> | Community                  | Movement                       |
| <b>Week 2</b> | Affirmation & Independence | Movement   Art                 |
| <b>Week 3</b> | Affirmation & Identity     | Drama   Music   Art            |
| <b>Week 4</b> | Identity                   | Drama   Creative writing   Art |
| <b>Week 5</b> | Identity & Community       | Poetry   Movement   Music      |
| <b>Week 6</b> | Self-Esteem                | Music   Art   Movement         |

As the weeks progressed, each topic was scaffolded as the participants propelled forward; continuously expanding their knowledge by implementing what was taught the previous weeks into their current week. To incorporate this successfully, each session began with a recap of the previous weeks posed to the participants. The previous topics are also incorporated into the present-day group through a physical symbol or through an activity. Table 2 is an example of the curriculum midway through the end of the group. To monitor the participants engagement and progress, a journal of observations on each individual was completed following each weekly session. A discussion was also held with my site supervisor who also served as a participant to aid in behavior modeling and engagement, and my modality supervisor who provided deeper insight on the impact of the arts. Additionally, the art activities were recreated for personal reflection.

**Table 2**

**Week 3: Affirmation and Identity**

| <b>Recap:</b>  | <b>Opening ritual:</b>   | <b>Activity 1:</b>  | <b>Activity 2:</b>   | <b>Close:</b>  |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| <i>Reviewing the topics previously discussed for better retention.</i>   | <i>To instill consistency and safety.</i>  | <i>A warmup activity associated with the new element being taught and placed into practice.</i>                   | <i>The primary intervention learned in increments while practicing perseverance.</i>                         | <i>Art activity associated with topic of the week to also be applied throughout their weeks (serve as transitional item)</i>   |
| Popcorn question   | Introduction<br><br>Chant<br><br>(scaffolded)  | Drama Game<br><br>(scaffolded)  | Musical<br><br>Movement/ Step<br><br>(perseverance)  | Create & Reflect   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community</li> <li>• Commonality</li> <li>• Affirmations</li> <li>• Define</li> <li>• Examples</li> <li>• Musical Movement</li> <li>• Making music with our bodies</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name</li> <li>• Question</li> <li>• Review chant “I am batman and I save the world”</li> <li>• Implement new line “I am awesome”</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bipidi</li> <li>• Boppidy</li> <li>• Boo (Power Pose Edition)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refreshers</li> <li>• Demo/New Part</li> <li>• Breakdown</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirmation fortunes with personal affirmations</li> <li>• Reflect on something done well</li> <li>• Affirm a friend</li> </ul> |

## Results

Watching the participants journey and progress was intriguing. All six participants were newly onboarded to the program, and therefore had new relationships with their mentors and each other. Every two participants shared a mentor; with six participants, there were a total of three mentors, in addition to my direct supervisor, equaling four adults. To provide comfort to the participants, the mentors and supervisor were requested to be initially present, to help place the participants at ease and over time became participants of the intervention themselves. During the first session, a mentor was ill causing two participants to be without their mentor and rather with my direct supervisor who also supervises the mentors. These two participants (boys) appeared to be the least comfortable of the group, seeing as they were at a disadvantage of not having their mentor present.

Each participant displayed their timidity in different ways; some were reserved, some were fidgety, and others were reluctant. I learned quickly that requesting an hour of one consistent activity is challenging for first graders. This was learned in the first session which was the most challenging. To establish rapport and safety, we shared our favorite superheroes and discussed our similarities passing around a batman emblem to speak (Figure 1).

This emblem quickly became our safety symbol, serving as the “talking emblem” for all participants. All participants were engaged while sharing however, one participant was extremely timid hiding behind her mentor and sharing by whispering to her mentor, for the mentor to communicate on her behalf. As step choreography was introduced, the participants seemed both excited and nervous. They displayed great interest in the movement and rhythm being expressed through the body, but also quickly became doubtful that they could learn and perform the routine. The step was demonstrated in full and broken down in every movement to

**Figure 1***Batman Emblem*

*Note.* The safety symbol used throughout our time together to reiterate the groups similarities, while displaying peer respect as the talking emblem.

be taught in a large group. Though step is used engage the body while practicing affect regulation and self-management, a couple participants had difficulties engaging. While learning in segments, opportunities to share what they had learned were presented (a solo). Of the six participants, three volunteered to display their work while two struggled to remain engaged; taking constant breaks and sitting aside. In an attempt to maintain and increase engagement, the large group was split into dyads; five groups of two in rotation, to practice and perfect what had been learned thus far, while empowering one participant to teach her peers. Those who struggled

in the large group did better in the intimate group, receiving the attention and assistance required. After a full round of rotation, the group once again convened as one where all the participants were fully engaged and participating.

Following this initial session, the decision was made to break the sessions out into four segments: introduction, warm-up games, main activity, and a closing activity. This served to maintain constant engagement throughout the full duration of group. In having four segments, the participants seemed more engaged while also learning various components of becoming. Practicing perseverance weekly through step, additional modalities were inserted into the curriculum to also help in practical affect regulation, expression, empowerment, self-worth, communal strength and personal strength.

As part of the introduction, an affirmation chant was built upon and recited weekly, with different participants volunteering to lead. The scaffolding of the chant incorporated with warm up games not only increased the participants individual self-worth and opportunity to be seen and heard, but also increased the sense of community. Incorporating the chant with movement and power poses learned from the warm-ups caused the participants to be eager to lead the group chant, with the remaining participants mirroring the leader's movement while chanting, to develop empathy.

Activities the participants enjoyed were bubble release (figure 2), night at the museum, affirmation fortune (figure 3), affirmation poems (figure 4) and suitcase collage. Each activity provided opportunity for self-expression in creating and sharing. The first of these was bubble release. The group was instructed to create a bubble wand using pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, markers, gems and letters.

**Figure 2***Bubble Wand*

*Note.* My version of the metaphorical wand individually created by participants to release negative thoughts while embracing positive ones to practice positive affirmations.

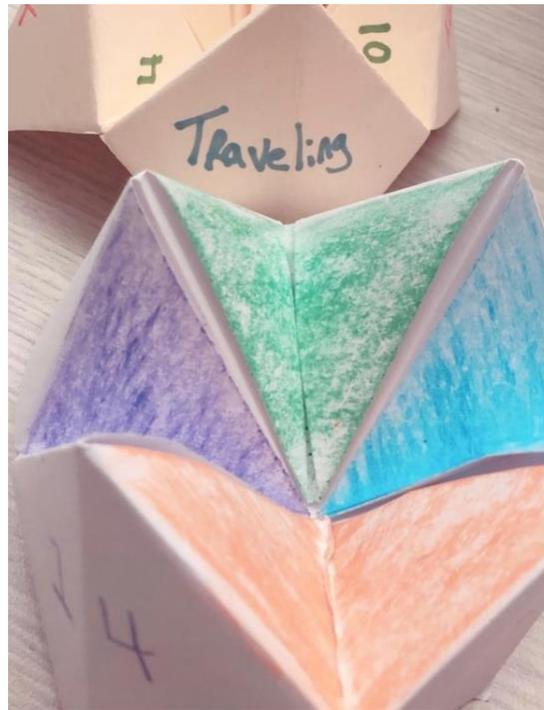
Once the wand was created, the participants were invited to metaphorically blow a bubble into their wand while sharing something positive they experienced during our session (a positive affirmation). This activity also taught affect regulation by practicing deep breathing incorporated with positive thoughts. All participants created their wand; however, two participants were reluctant to share but shared nonetheless.

An additional activity, which helped foster affect regulation as well as empowerment, was a warm-up game titled “night at the museum.” This game also aided in requirement for steps in controlling the body, empowerment, and strength both communally (in all participants playing

their part well) and personally (finding your voice in your role). Each participant was provided the chance to play the role of security guard. In this game, all participants are moving around and vocalizing the sound of their embodiment of choice. In the role of the guard, the participant flashed his light on a museum pieces which prompts the participant playing the piece to freeze like wax figures to avoid being discovered. This game became very popular and was often requested.

To aid in self-worth and continue building empowerment, participants created affirmation fortunes. All participants were provided a fortune teller and instructed to personally reflect and decorate the fortune with things which brought them joy; from the things, they enjoyed doing, their favorite color and the affirmations reflecting statement they could tell themselves when things became difficult. This was assigned to be completed in groups of three (the mentors and their two achievers). Many of the participants primarily used colors to decorate the exterior of their fortune while provided thorough explanations behind their color choices. In addition to the fortunes, the participants were also invited to create and “I am” poem, inviting participants to view different aspects of themselves to continue to view the self in a positive manner.

To bring our time together to a close, we created cardboard suitcases where the participants decorated pre-painted boxes by creating a collage of the things they felt benefited them the most during our time together. They were then invited to place all of the art created together into their suitcase as a reminder of what they’ve learned, and to take it with them wherever they go. The participants were elated to decorate these boxes. While engaging in this activity, a participant decided to share words of encouragement to their peers in preparation for their upcoming performance of the step they fully learned.

**Figure 4***Affirmation Fortune*

*Note.* Affirmation fortune created with intent of the things which bring personal joy. Here are two examples I provided for the group.

The finale of our time did not end with the suitcase collage, but with their final performance for the leadership team, older achievers from the program and other mentors. As the audience entered the space, the participants took their places in formation learned and perfected from playing “night at the museum.” With multiple eyes watching, they all participated well; following prompts and being loud. I believe this is a result of me repeating weekly “the way you practice is the way you perform.” As mistakes were made, the participants did not stop, but instead continued until the end. In closing of the performance and group, each participant shared their suitcase and commented on how they felt performing the step they initially believed they could not learn. All participants shared openly, with one requiring some encouragement. Words shared to express their experience were good, I finished, I did not stop, and safe.

**Figure 5***"I am" Poem*

**I Am...**

I am \_\_\_\_\_, I am \_\_\_\_\_  
me.

Quick as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Busy as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sweet as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Crazy as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Smart as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gentle as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Brave as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Wild as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Kind as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Strong as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Tough as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Joyful as \_\_\_\_\_  
 Precious as \_\_\_\_\_

I am \_\_\_\_\_, I am \_\_\_\_\_  
me.

*Note.* Filled out individually to highlight personal strengths, while also reframing any dissonance from external sources.

### **Discussion**

My hypothesis and treatment goal in utilizing these interventions was that the use of the arts would increase participants self-esteem, sense of identity and empowerment as sources of their overall becoming. It is important to note that though there was significant visible progress in three of the six participants, and all participants grew comfortable enough to lead various segments in our time together, it is limited due to time. Participant One entered the group very reluctant, appearing unengaged and uninterested for majority of group. An observation made about participant 1 is though he seemed unengaged, the opposite was true when in smaller groups, where he was deeply engaged: leading, expressing and displaying focus and attention to detail during the games and art activities. Dance therapy was used as the primary intervention

due to its demonstrated ability to improve internal confidence and self-esteem. In this study, the level of confidence and self-esteem is made evident in this particular participant increased engagement, frequent solo volunteering, and in the poise carried by each participant. The participants also displayed great enjoyment in seeing and participating in the finished product. Similar to the Lyons et al. (2018) study, the rhythmic synchrony of the unified step resulted in similar outcomes; participants confidence and self-esteem grew however, this was not from past connections but rather the present connect being made. Similar to the drama workshop reporting feeling positive change in their happiness, confidence and self-esteem (Moore, 2017), the group reported feeling safe, good, and accomplished following their final performance.

I believe the additional modalities incorporated contributed to the sentiments expressed by participants. Night at the museum brought in the drama therapy aspects. In playing and pretending together, the participants grew in their inter-social relationships which allowed them to practice empathy through role reversal subsequently enhancing positive behavior (Leckey, 2011). The group's interactions in the midst of other activities, depicted their growth in patience and engagement through providing encouragement to peers. A second reserved participant (Participant Two) who was soft spoken and initially participated in all activities began to become distracted by one of his peers and also had moments when he seemed uninterested. As opportunities came to share, he often refused, but later shared. I believe this was him discovering his voice by exercising when to use it through the sense of empowerment provided to make a choice; which is a form of self-expression. Regardless of the level of participation displayed by participants, an effort was made to include everyone by addressing and involving them in all activities and discussions.

As in Alridge's (1993) study, the rhythmic movements expressed through stepping, appears to have decreased stress and anxiety with my participants; which aided in an increase in internal confidence and self-esteem, also seen in Lyons et al. (2018) work. Though heart rates were not monitored to measure stress, the level of comfortability developed amongst the group served as evidence. It was amazing to witness how the participants built the community amongst themselves, and their ability to retain the knowledge gained to apply in future activities. In fostering this sense of community and empathy, many participants provided encouragement to their peers. While sharing during our opening questions, there would be moments where participants would struggle to provide an answer surrounding what they did well or something which made them strong. All participants were able to wait patiently for the person to answer while also being able to provide support by sharing their thoughts around their perspective of the answer for the participants (encouragement and compliment). Longden (2013) emphasized that people supporting and believing in her developed a sense of community which gave her the courage to heal and become whole. This sense of community was also provided to the participants. Not only did they support and encourage each other, as some grew disengaged in the group, the space was still kept for them to return; they were also still included in discussions, being allotted the opportunity to participate or decline, providing a sense of empowerment. In moments of sharing present activities, some participants also merged past activities. An example of this was in sharing the "I am" poems. In addition to completing the poem, participants three and four also took initiative to draw themselves on a power stance in the back of their poem. It was valuable to observe the entire group develop; from stepping, to creating and playing, each participant displayed a level of growth from this intervention however, the effect of the interventions outside of the group was unable to be measured.

Though there has been positive change in participants collective creativity affecting their identity, self-esteem and sense of empowerment, the evidence is not sufficient enough to demonstrate that the participants overall well-being were impacted. The interventions used increased positive coping strategies through activities like bubble release, the step and rhythms, positive affirmations and more; and advocacy skills through reflection, discussion and activities such as night at the museum. Connecting with others (Greaves, 2011) along with the positive influence of the arts renegotiated the participants identities, enhanced their ability to self-express and grow in self-awareness. It has been demonstrated in fractions that segments of their becoming were emboldened, however, several factors cause these finding to be incomplete.

### **Limitations**

The time allotted for the group was not sufficient to see the overall effects of this intervention. Though engaging the mentors to serve as models worked well, I would like to reenact this group with extended time to transition the mentors out. Of the four adults, one had inconsistent attendance which affected the participants behavior and group participation. In the reenactment of this group, I would like to provide each mentor the opportunity to be absent and to eventually transition out and observe the participants engagement without their mentors' present. There are also other components I would like to cover beyond the scope of this paper: for example, the subtle change in conducting this group with older individual participants to the younger population focused on in this study. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I was unable to complete a study with older adults, leaving room for further study in this area. In addition, I would also like to see the longitudinal effects of the current participants over the course of a few years. Nonetheless the results were very impressive. The largest impact of all was of participant six, who initially joined the group extremely timid, only speaking through her mentor. Within the

six weeks of working together, this participant was able to not only speak for herself but play an important vocal role during the final performance. In the participant's learning skills through the arts, her timidity faded, and self-advocacy and self-esteem improved. In creating collectively within an intentionally formed community the participants were able build positive cohesive relationships while overcoming challenges together. This empowered them, for a short time to step out of their comfort zone to overcome the dissonance previously instilled and not only learn the step but perform it.

### **Conclusions**

The evaluation of these various strategic modalities provides evidence of the positive impact the short-term intervention had. In the participants pushing through the discomforts of the group, finding their voice and developing the confidence to use it, aspects of their becoming were reached. However, these findings warrant for further exploration as the observations made were confined to the group. To solidify these findings, myriad observations in various aspects of the participants day over time should also be made and reviewed. Considering the influx of technology use and depression amongst young people, engagement through the arts should continue to be done in a long-term model. This is essential as becoming extends beyond the confines of a specific place and time. The hope is that the skills obtained during this group would have a lasting impact as their journey to becoming continues.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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**Student's Name:** Nikah Chevalier-Amy

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** Becoming: How Expressive Arts Nurture Self-Esteem, Identity and Empowerment,  
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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.

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