

**Using the Artmaking Experience to Promote a
Feeling of Safety and Belonging for Students**

by

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Feeling of Safety and Belonging for Students**

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Dedication or Acknowledgement

This capstone is dedicated to my family. Through my experiences in this master's program, and through my research for this capstone, I have learned the importance of my connection and relationships with them on a deeper level. Special thanks to my Dad, for sharing his passion for learning and seeking to understand the big picture, and to my Mom, for her eternal optimism and unconditional acceptance. I would also like to acknowledge Sarah Alexander and Aaron Sikhosana, my counselling mentors. They have both provided me with the time and space, and most importantly their trust, to work with adolescents and their families. They challenged my perceptions and encouraged my strengths with gentleness and understanding, allowing me to grow in the ways I needed.

Abstract

The trauma-informed perspective is becoming increasingly popular in education, with the realization that our schools need to be safe places for students to find connection and belonging above all else. The intent of this capstone is to explore that need for a felt sense of both safety and belonging, and how it can be supported in a school environment through connection and creativity. Research indicates that meaningful connection with teachers and counsellors can help repair insecure attachment, help strengthen the neural pathways of presence, and maintain feelings of safety through coregulation. Artmaking can be an integral part of creating safety and belonging for students, as it allows students to have the actual therapeutic experience of the creative process. This includes art as a safe space for the individual to externalize and express their emotions, as well as engage in nervous system regulation through the senses. The recommendations are outlined for creating safety and belonging in both relationship and environment through the artmaking process, including a shift to a more reflective style of self-assessment, which allows students to experience the therapeutic benefits of artmaking. This information will benefit teachers, counsellors, school administrators, and families.

Keywords: trauma, trauma-informed, artmaking, safety, belonging, connection, art therapy

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Using the Artmaking Experience to Promote a Feeling of Safety and Belonging for Students

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Since childhood, I have enjoyed the artmaking experience, and have always felt certain that it helped support my well-being but have never understood why I experienced a sense of wellness during the creation process. Unfortunately, like many children, I was exposed to traumatic experiences in my childhood and adolescence. Through expressive arts I found consistency and comfort. It was something I can, and still do, return to. As adult who now teaches secondary school art, as well as works with adolescents as a student counsellor, I wonder more deeply about the benefits of expressive arts and how the act of artmaking can create a sense of safety, comfort and belonging for students. In most art classrooms, the product is always prized, but do we provide enough of an opportunity to explore the process? Can the process of artmaking itself support and promote feelings of safety and belonging, more than appreciating or interpreting the product could? How much of the art-making experience is therapeutic, and how much relies on the connection to the facilitator of that experience? Perhaps both are equally important in creating that safe space. These questions lead me to wonder how art could be effectively and intentionally used in a school setting, either in a classroom or counselling setting, to support students and contribute to their overall wellbeing.

Background Information: Framing of the Problem

Being trauma-informed has become a daily topic of conversation in many educational settings, and this shift in practice has become the norm in many care-based organizations, such

as healthcare and government services (Poole et al., 2017). In my professional experience, I am part of a collaborative learning group with teachers and special education assistants who all have the desire to learn how to create trauma-informed classrooms. It seems as if the topic drew interest from those of us who want to support students who have experienced trauma, and perhaps those of us who know we ourselves have experienced trauma. We seek a better understanding of our own experiences, but also have the desire to shift our focus in the classroom from content and assessment to creating connections and a feeling of safety for our students.

It is possible that our students come to our classrooms having faced traumatic experiences, and as their teachers and counsellors we often do not know the extent of what they have been through. According to Statistics Canada (Heidinger, 2022), 27% of Canadians over the age of 15 have experienced childhood victimization. That includes at least once instance of physical or sexual abuse by an adult, before the age of 15. Other examples of trauma may include emotional and verbal abuse, violence at home, parental mental health issues, addiction, divorce, parental absence, prison, death and homelessness (Lester et al., 2019). Research links these types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) with a range of mental and physical health challenges over lifetime (Pataky et al., 2019). The amount of trauma that a person has faced creates future challenges in the area of mental health, including addiction and potential victimization, such as abuse, to carry on in adulthood (Heidinger, 2022). By fostering connection with our students and creating a safe environment for them to engage in creative expression, we can help them feel that they belong.

In my time as a secondary school art teacher, I have observed a variety of styles of art classrooms and the types of projects students work on. With professional obligations such as

assessments and reporting, I have been mostly focused on the finished products of my students. Although I have encouraged them to enjoy the process of art making, the majority of my assessment has been of their final work. With the expectation of thorough and transparent assessment, I fear that the artmaking experience for students is bypassed in order to meet learning standards, and students are potentially missing out on the therapeutic benefits of art, with an emphasis on the feelings of refuge and security it offers. Research suggests that adolescents who have faced several instances of trauma, or severe trauma, will experience greater challenges with their cognitive ability, academic success as well as social, emotional and behavioural issues (Pataky et al., 2019). It is clear that our students who have faced trauma need more support in every area that affects their experience at school, not just academic, and that this support needs to be addressed holistically.

As a teacher, I have witnessed feelings of fear, uncertainty, isolation and withdrawal in the classroom and have wondered where the therapeutic opportunities lie in the artmaking experience. And yet, as a student and artist, I have returned to art time and time again as part of my own healing process. It has been a place of refuge and peace for me. How can art be used intentionally to shift away from prescriptive and rigid outcome-based, to a more meaningful tool to self-regulate and process or cope with emotions? My hope is that teachers and counsellors can develop a better understanding of how to support their students through expressive arts, especially those who have faced trauma, in feeling safe and connected in their educational space.

Purpose Statement

Through this research, I would like to establish the ways in which the art-making experience can support the feelings of safety and belonging for students, and how this can be

facilitated this in a school setting. Whether art is being used in a counselling setting, or in an art classroom, I aim to discover a new perspective on both how and why students should have time and space to create art. I also intend to make some tangible recommendations for art interventions, groups, programs, or structures that could be implemented in a school setting to support this perspective and help shift towards a trauma-informed practice.

Research Question

How can students feel a greater sense of safety and belonging at school through the artmaking experience? This paper explores the need for safety and belonging and how art can be used to facilitate connection, integration, emotional regulation and presence for students.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to help reframe and redefine the way in which we approach our relationships with students in our schools, with the focus being on their wellbeing. Typically, from a teacher or administrator perspective, there is a slightly greater emphasis on assessment and achievement in the school setting, and less on the day to day emotional and physical experience that students face. It seems as if at times, there is no way around this prioritization of academic goals and learning outcomes. The very structure of schools, from the rigid bell schedules to learning objectives and reporting guidelines, we are focused measuring achievements. My aspiration with this paper is to help shift the priority from the routine classroom experience meant to produce learning, into a more holistic view of the student's daily experience and feelings of connection with the people in their school community. This outlook aligns with the Indigenous perspective of education, and how students learn best in a holistic environment (Ledoux, 2006). More specifically, this paper will explore the utilization of art in a

school setting, through a trauma-informed lens, as a means to create space for that connection and an overall sense of safety and belonging for our students.

Students will be impacted by this shift in focus on their feelings of safety and belonging, as it may help them learn what it feels like to be in a regulated state, as well as learn the importance of connection with adults and peers in their schools. Students may also benefit from learning how to use art as a coping tool for regulation, which may help them manage their overall wellbeing and find acceptance of themselves as they shift and change through adolescence.

The intended audience for this paper is art teachers in addition to school counsellors. The information explored may also be valuable for any adults who take on the role of forming safe relationships with students, which may include youth care workers, special education assistants, and administrators. Parents of students could also benefit from these insights around safety and belonging, as well as attachment and how that may inform their relationship with their children.

The school district may also be able to utilize the information presented in this paper, as a means to encourage the support of arts-based elective courses through funding, as well as district wide initiatives that may use art as a form of connection, including partnerships with community agencies. This paper may also validate the importance of the school district being relationship-focused with our students and their families. Lastly, this paper may also highlight the need for safe-feeling physical spaces in our schools that can help facilitate the art making experience for our students and the adults that work with them.

Theoretical Frameworks

This capstone is rooted in two theoretical frameworks: Attachment Theory and Polyvagal Theory. In this section a description of both theories is clarified for the reader, with an emphasis on safety, connection and relationship.

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby's attachment theory can help us make sense of our physical and emotional need for connection with one another. According to Bowlby (1988), "Attachment theory was formulated to explain certain patterns of behaviour, characteristic not only of infants and young children but also adolescents and adults, that were formerly conceptualized in terms of dependency and overdependency" (p. 118). The author further states that it is a basic part of our human nature to create these bonds with our parents, but most significantly with our mothers. These bonds offer protection, comfort, and support, and as we shift into in adolescence and adult life, this same behaviour pattern shifts to friendship and romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1988, p. 118).

There are three main types of attachment that develop, based on our caregiver experience in early childhood. Children with a secure attachment have confidence that their parent is available, responsive, and helpful (Bowlby, 1988). They display emotional stability and a healthy sense of autonomy that is supported by parents. There are two types of insecure attachment, anxious resistant and anxious avoidant. A child with anxious resistant attachment feels uncertain as to whether or not their parent is available or responsive if they need help (Bowlby, 1988). There is a theme of inconsistency and abandonment at times with their primary caregiver, so the child faces difficulty with separation anxiety from them. The anxious avoidant child not only lacks confidence in their parent, but also has the expectation of being rejected when needing help

(Bowlby, 1988). This caregiver has often turned their back on the child repeatedly, and the child has no choice but to become emotionally self-sufficient and in more extreme cases, narcissistic.

There is a strong connection between attachment theory and polyvagal theory, which will be discussed in the next section. One of the main components of attachment theory is that it is rooted in the automatic control the nervous system has over the body (Bowlby, 1988). Flores and Porges explore this connection between attachment styles and the body's autonomous nervous system in a 2017 study with group psychotherapy participants. They found that participants engaged in neuroception, where the nervous system, automatically and unconsciously, evaluates risk in the environment (Flores & Porges, 2017). These group participants were exercising neural pathways through social engagement, learning how to regulate their emotions, and developing resilience through their participation in this group, thus slowly developing a secure attachment and an ability to self-regulate their nervous systems even in times of conflict (Flores & Porges, 2017).

Polyvagal Theory

The basis of Porges' polyvagal theory is that human behaviour is guided and adapted by our autonomic nervous system (ANS) as a means to keep us physically and emotionally safe. From a place of feeling safe, our nervous systems support balance in terms of our health, growth and restoration, and connect with those around us to encourage the feelings of safety on a subconscious level (Porges, 2022). This prioritization of safety reflects the essential processes we as a species have relied on for our survival.

When faced with an emotional or physical threat, or even in the absence of safety cues, our sympathetic or parasympathetic nervous systems will respond automatically. The sympathetic nervous system triggers either fight or flight response, and the dorsal vagal nerve in

our parasympathetic nervous system triggers a freeze, immobilization or disassociated response (Flores & Porges, 2017). We need to prevent the ANS from being triggered in order to have optimal social interactions, but we can't help but gauge our safety nonverbally through facial expressions and tone of voice. It happens on a subconscious level through a process called neuroception. Our body is constantly interpreting and trying to regulate through signals, identifying safe and unsafe situations rapidly (Flores & Porges, 2017).

Through social engagement, when our ventral vagal nerve is activated, we are in a calm and relaxed state. Humans use connection with one another to encourage those feelings of safety through coregulation (Porges, 2022). This coregulation happens on a physiological level, through non-verbal communication. Examples of this in the group psychotherapy study by Flores and Porges (2017) have indicated that even in times of conflict, body movements such as leaning in and making eye contact can't be ignored. These cues help dysregulated people move from a state of anger, anxiety or depression to a state of calmness and clarity, through the promotion of safety and secure attachment.

Definition of Terms

Art

In the paper art is defined as, "...characterised by the expression of sensations, perceptions, feelings, thoughts, ideas and experiences non-verbally through images, using art media" (Lusebrink et al., 2013).

Art therapy

Dilawari and Tripathi (2014) outline art therapy as a "projective technique that uses the creative process of art making to improve and enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-

being of individuals of all ages” (p. 85). (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015) specify that art therapy is “the purposeful use of visual arts materials and media in intervention, counseling, psychotherapy, and rehabilitation” (p. 12).

Artmaking process/experience

The “creative process of art making ... is a form of nonverbal communication of thoughts and feelings” (Malchiodi, 2012).

Belonging

Belonging is expressed a basic human need, where an individual will “hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group” (Maslow, 1943, p. 381).

Safety

Safety, or safety needs, are defined as basic human needs that act as “organizers of behaviour” based on the “appearance of the threat or danger” (Maslow, 1943, p. 376). Olson and Cozolino (2014) outline safety as both physical and emotional: “The most basic layers of being safe are the physical measures (locks and alarms) installed for safety. Feeling safe depends on our interpersonal environment, possibly more so than our physical environment ... Emotional safety depends on mutual trust” (p. 41).

Trauma

Poole et al. (2017) define trauma as “exposure to harmful and/or overwhelming event(s) or circumstances, the experience of these event(s) which will vary from individual to individual, and effects which may be adverse and long-lasting in nature” (p. 4).

Trauma-informed

Trauma-informed practice is defined as “integrating an understanding of trauma into all levels of care, system engagement, workforce development, agency policy and interagency work... plac[ing] priority on the individual’s sense of safety, choice, empowerment and connection” (Poole et al., 2017, p. 10).

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

In Chapter 2, I will examine the need for individuals to feel safety and belonging, and how that can be supported through attachment and polyvagal theory. I will emphasize the importance of building relationships and focusing on both physical and emotional safety in the school setting. Then, I will examine therapeutic art and the benefits of the art making process, with attention to the therapeutic relationship between students and teachers or counsellors. I will also explore decolonizing art education with regards to assessment. Finally, in chapter 3, I will make recommendations for both teachers and counsellors to approach their interactions with students from a trauma-informed perspective, including specific recommendations for integrating therapeutic art in the classroom or counselling setting.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review will explore the importance for students to feel both safety and belonging through a trauma-informed lens, as well as different ways in which this can be fostered in a school setting. It will also examine therapeutic arts as a means to support students in the creation of a trauma-informed space.

Importance of Safety & Belonging

In this section, the importance of safety and belonging for will be discussed, with a focus on both physical and emotional safety. The importance of safety and belonging will also be explored in relation to polyvagal and attachment theory. There will also be consideration of how fostering safety and belonging can positively impact students in a school environment.

Being versus Feeling Safe

The need for humans to feel safe has been directly linked to our survival. It is essential, second only to physiological needs such as water and air to breathe (Maslow, 1943). Safety is a felt sense, in the physical body, not just the removal of a threat as one might think (Gendlin, 1997 as cited in Porges, 2022). Apart from physical safety, an internal felt sense of being safe is needed as well. Olson and Cozolino (2014) define this as emotional safety. We have evolved to rely on social engagement with each other in order to feel safe (Porges, 2022), most notably starting at the beginning of life with mother and child. These feelings are established through a series of nonverbal cues from those around us, where we scan our environment and the people we are in proximity to. We synthesize this information in combination with our previous life experience (Olson & Cozolino, 2014).

When we feel safe, we are in a state of regulation where we are in a calm place of grounded awareness. In essence, if humans feel secure, their nervous systems encourage the internal functions that maintain a stable and healthy state. This also allows them to connect and interact with others without sensing or demonstrating any danger or sensitivity (Porges, 2022). Through this calm state, we are more able to connect with others and further reinforce our feeling of safety and belonging.

Through the lens of Porges' polyvagal theory, we can understand that this biological need for safety is a constant, subconscious process that our autonomic nervous system is responsible for. Our natural preference of being is in a state called ventral vagal parasympathetic, which allows us to be in connection with others and helps us maintain emotional balance through coregulation with each other (Olson & Cozolino, 2014). However, the sympathetic nervous system state engages when our feelings of safety are threatened, and we may enter a fight or flight response. This is our body's way of preparing us for what we think will be a strenuous or stressful experience (Flores & Porges, 2017). As previously mentioned, dorsal vagal nerve of our parasympathetic nervous system can also be triggered, creating a freeze response, which is also a stress reaction in some individuals. This reaction is more extreme and indicates a disassociation, as the body feels almost as if it needs to prepare itself for death (Olson & Cozolino, 2014).

We can become aware of these extreme responses over time, and work towards a more balanced state of being, but it can be challenging when we consider attachment styles as well as possible developmental trauma – both are deep-rooted lived experiences. However, we can work towards establishing a greater sense of calm and safety by trying to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system and reduce the effects of the sympathetic nervous system (Geller, 2017). Geller's view of a regulated state, called "calm alertness" can be sought after

through mindfulness practices like yoga, music or art, as well as quite powerfully through co-regulation with safe individuals (Geller, 2017).

The Power of Connection

Feeling connected, and as if one belongs, is another basic human need that directly follows feeling safe (Maslow, 1943). One of the most immediate and accessible ways to find a sense of safety and belonging is through connection to others. Not only do humans consciously and subconsciously help regulate each other, but they also help rewire each other's neural pathways through consistent experience with one another. This keeps the sympathetic nervous system quiet and encourages a natural state of calm and well-being (Olson & Cozolino, 2014). Olson and Cozolino also state that "Maslow's hierarchy shows us that physical safety is a necessary part of the foundation of a school and the sense of belonging and connection, providing the additional layers that help all members of a community settle into a comfortable openness with one another" (p. 48). It is essential to be in physical proximity to others, in community, for students to feel connected and that they belong.

This connection and proximity to others can also promote internal attunement, which then supports interpersonal attunement, or integration, which Siegel et al. (2016) explain as an individual's balance of being differentiated from others, yet still feeling connected. Through coregulation, over time individuals can develop a sense of safety in their relationships with others and experience improved feelings of well-being and connection (Geller, 2017). With the creation of new neural pathways, the trauma response can be deactivated over time, which encourages brain and body integration. This type of connection is cyclical, as through personally integrating we can more fully resonate with others. When individuals are attuned with themselves, and not in their fully emotional or rational minds, they can find a greater sense of

connection and belonging to others. As Geller (2017) states, “the nervous systems of individuals are in constant communication, and so our bodies, brains and ultimately our functioning can be changed through relationship” (p. 52).

That being said, it isn’t so simple. So many adolescents feel isolated, like outsiders, are struggling with mental health issues and are emotionally dysregulated (Flores & Porges, 2017). It isn’t enough to just be in proximity to others and know that coregulation will occur. This is where teachers and school counsellors are on the front lines, standing on the edge of opportunity to begin this process of coregulation with students. At the core of a trauma-informed practice is the focus on connection and relationship, more than any one specific modality or strategy (Poole et al., 2017).

Both teachers and counsellors have an opportunity to develop relationships with students through building connections, or in other words, demonstrating therapeutic presence. With an emphasis on being trauma-informed, teachers and counsellors can “place priority on the individual’s sense of safety, choice, empowerment and connection” (Poole et al., 2017, p. 10). We know that there is a range of consequences from exposure to trauma, including attachment, emotional regulation, and social development (Poole et al., 2017). The importance of building this trusting relationship between teacher (or counsellor) and student is connected to attachment theory; it mirrors the child-parent relationship and supports the emotional regulation of kids, which in turn, enhances their learning process (Olson & Cozolino, 2014). Through focusing on building relationships, we can help children find a genuine feeling of safety and belonging.

Neuroplasticity plays a role in therapeutic presence, and our ability to coregulate with one another. Subconsciously and consciously, we search for familiarity in others to find regulation and understand that we are safe, therefore keeping our sympathetic nervous system quiet (Olson

& Cozolino, 2014). In experiencing the therapeutic presence of a safe adult, such as a teacher, the neural pathways of presence and calm in the student are reinforced. “Being attuned, receptive, accepting, calm and engaged with our clients allows them to feel heard, felt, and calmed” (Geller, 2017, p. 54). Over time, this regulated functioning extends beyond the classroom into the student’s other interpersonal relationships, where their trauma response may eventually deactivate and they may feel a greater sense of safety and belonging (Geller, 2017). This could include relationships with peers, parents, and siblings. It is also important to note that this learned presence can lead to attunement, both internally and externally, forming the basis of a secure attachment (Siegel et al., 2016). By being attuned with themselves, they are in a balanced state of mind, accessing both their emotional and rational parts equally (Geller, 2017), and through this balanced state are able to attune to others. This practice of presence and supporting each other through coregulation allows those who have experienced trauma, or who are often in a state of dysregulation, to discover what regulation and their brain-body connection feels like. This can support all areas of development, but most importantly, it instills that felt sense of safety and belonging so everything else can fall into place.

Emotional and Physical Safety & Belonging in a School Setting

When exploring how to create a sense of safety and belonging in a school setting, it is important to recognize that there are both physical and emotional components to these felt senses. Although schools are structured by nature, with schedules, class lists, and rules, there is an element of unpredictability with the large volume of individuals under one roof at any given time.

Physical Safety

Teachers and school counsellors can facilitate a feeling of safety through establishing routine and predictability, as well as a classroom or space setup to facilitate connection. Creating a serene atmosphere, chairs or desks arranged in a circle, consistent routine, maintaining a peaceful environment, and punctuality with the beginning and end of class are some of the physical elements that promote calmness, comfort, and a sense of security. (Flores & Porges, 2017). Although those suggestions were gleaned from a group psychotherapy study, the same sense of community among classmates exists, in the sense that they are often meeting daily for an entire year or at the least, a semester. These routines can support students in developing a sense of safety in the form of secure attachment with each other, as well as give them the opportunity to coregulate through neuroception (Flores & Porges, 2017). The nature of classrooms being busy, vibrant spaces gives students the opportunity to constantly practice social engagement, even on a subconscious level. Through these connection opportunities in physical space, they can help each other rewire their brains in a sort of neural exercise, and shift from feeling unsafe to safe, eventually without activating the sympathetic nervous system (Olson & Cozolino, 2014).

An important part of trauma-informed services is to establish a setting that reduces the risk of future traumatization or re-traumatization (occurring events that mirror the past feelings of helplessness and loss of authority) and allows students to learn and develop at a secure and comfortable pace. (Poole et al., 2017). It is critical that we offer an environment for students that encourages them to be in the ventral vagal state (Olson & Cozolino, 2014) because of the saturation of information students are faced with on a daily basis, as well as the traumas they have experienced. According to the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2007), learning is experiential and connected to a sense of place. Paying attention to sensory and

energetic aspects of a space can support those who face hyperarousal or dysregulation, where they may be over-stimulated and overwhelmed just entering a space that is not attuned to them. This focus on the structural aspects of the classroom or counselling space help reinforce the sense of belonging in a positive and inclusive class culture (Olson & Cozolino, 2014). This may include having the space sensitive to light and sound, and as previously mentioned, having the furniture and overall space set up in a way that feels open and welcoming. This is another example of where a teacher or counsellor can demonstrate therapeutic presence and allow that attunement to flow into every aspect of interaction with their students.

Emotional Safety

We are setting the tone when students enter our space, especially those who are dysregulated or are in a heightened state. Building feelings of trust takes time, which is why the emphasis with students needs to be on connection and building that relationship before anything else. Olson suggests that “we have such a preference for interpersonal connection that our fear system does not activate nearly as much when we are accompanied by someone we trust” (Olson & Cozolino, 2014, p. 54). If students feel a sense of safety with others in that space, they are more willing to take risks, whether it be with their creative expression or answering a question without knowing if they are right. By setting things up for our students to be in a regulated state, with an adult they trust close by, they are more open to the experiences waiting for them in the classroom. They are likely more willing and able to participate fully. On the opposite side of safety are feeling of shame and humiliation. These feelings activate the dorsal vagal parasympathetic system, and everything in their body slows down, as if the body is preparing itself for death due to the incredible feeling of helplessness and danger the students are experiencing (Olson & Cozolino, 2014). Maintaining connection with each other is the first step

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in creating a safe space, where individuals can begin to move out of their trauma responses, and ultimately so they can feel that they belong.

It is also important for us to acknowledge that our school spaces need to meet the socio-emotional needs of students before we can meet the educational needs, and that our Eurocentric way of pursuing education has too often been fear-based (Province of British Columbia, 2015). Students are used to deadlines, assessments, and pressure around decision making for high-stakes things like post-secondary, which while necessary, are not contributing to the emotional balance and regulation our students need to leverage their strengths and grow as individuals.

Therapeutic Art

In this section, therapeutic art in an educational setting will be explored. The benefits of the art making process will be examined, with an emphasis on the therapeutic relationship between teacher or counsellor and student. There will also be a focus on the utilization of the art making experience with students in a school setting, with a brief exploration into how we can decolonize art education with regards to focus on assessment.

Therapeutic Benefits of Art for Students/Adolescents

Malchiodi defines art therapy as the “purposeful use of visual arts materials and media in intervention, counseling, psychotherapy, and rehabilitation; it is used with individuals of all ages, families, and groups (Edwards, 2004; Malchiodi, 2012b as cited in Malchiodi, 2015)”. The intention behind the usage of the art materials, as well as the relationship between educator or counsellor and student is what sets art therapy apart from the regular art making process that we are so familiar with in educational settings. Therapeutic art is a broader way to explain a similar intentionality behind artmaking but does not need to be facilitated by an art therapist or

counsellor, whereas an art therapist would also include verbal expression from their client to assess and develop treatment plans (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015). For the purpose of this paper, I will use art therapy and therapeutic art interchangeably.

There are two general schools of thought in art therapy, based on the work of Edith Kramer and Margaret Naumberg. Dilawari & Tripathi (2014) outline Naumberg's philosophy as psychodynamic art therapy, which gives insight into the client's subconscious (p. 81), whereas Kramer's focus was to facilitate clients on an emotional journey of discovery and self-actualization (p. 83). Although the psychodynamic focus has benefits for use with children because of limited verbal expression, in my opinion, Kramer's outlook lends well to working with all types of children in a school setting, by teachers and counsellors who may not have certifications in therapeutic art. The experiential artmaking process is in harmony with Indigenous ways of learning, as it is hands-on, intuitive, and accesses an individual's internal wisdom (Tabor et al., 2023).

There are a multitude of benefits in creative activities such as artmaking. Malchiodi and Perry (2015) list outcomes such as enjoyment in creating, innovating, playfulness and an increase in confidence via expression. From a more therapeutic perspective, art can be a place for us to contain and process emotions. The authors suggest that, "essentially, child clients are encouraged to use creative self-expression as a repository for feelings and perceptions that can be transformed during the course of treatment, resulting in emotional reparation, resolution of conflict, and a sense of well-being" (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015, p. 15). In an educational setting, this can be applied in the sense that students may be able to process and work through emotional issues without entering into a deep explanation of their work, or having a talk therapy session. This is particularly important because many students who need space to process emotions may

be in an art class, but not connected to their school counsellor. Understanding these therapeutic benefits and being able to facilitate them in a classroom setting provides an opportunity to improve the well-being of multiple students in an accessible way.

Specifically, art therapy has been known to prompt the body's relaxation response, which assists in calming and lessening the impact of stress reactions. (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015,). The soothing, rhythmic and tactile nature of artmaking can feel familiar and comforting. Malchiodi and Perry (2015) also state that expressive arts help ground people in the present moment, which can also support emotional regulation (p. 305) and further access to co-regulate with those around them. Utilizing expressive therapies such as artmaking gives us the opportunity to support a wide range of students at once, meeting them where they are at. This modality is highly adaptive, suiting a variety of styles of students, who may have varying levels of trauma, mental health concerns, learning abilities, and whether they are neurodivergent or neurotypical.

The Trauma-Informed Art Experience

For students to access the therapeutic benefits of artmaking, we now know the importance of building relationships with them, as well as creating a safe-feeling environment for creative expression to occur. Often times, we will not know the level of trauma or the emotional state our students are in, yet instinctually we know art can be highly impactful or even transformative for them (Dunn-Snow & D'amelio, 2000). This reinforces the need to approach our classrooms and counselling spaces from a trauma-informed perspective, where the emphasis is on empowering our students with choice and ensuring they feel safe and connected (Poole et al., 2017). An article exploring trauma-informed schools indicates that schools are in a special position to address childhood trauma at a critical developmental time, before certain issues develop over late adolescence and adulthood (Pataky et al., 2019). We have a unique opportunity

for gentle intervention in our classrooms and counselling spaces, and to possibly mitigate the long-term consequences of trauma which include “brain development, attachment, emotional regulation, behavioural regulation, cognition, self-concept, and the progression of social development” (Poole et al., 2017, p. 6).

In their book *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children*, Malchiodi and Perry (2015) explain that for trauma survivors, creative expression offers control over intrusive memories, reduces hyperarousal, encourages participation and feeling of feelings all through the ability for people to place their traumatic experience within the container of artistic expression. Artmaking can be therapeutic for those who have faced trauma because it allows the participant to create a safe holding place for their emotions and expressions, using their art as a means to process and transform perceptions and emotions, which can be healing and allow for moving forward (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015). By nature, trauma is stored as bodily or somatic sensations, as well as images (Malchiodi, 2012) and creative arts can offer a pathway for sometimes difficult expressions to be accessed. The experiential nature of art allows participants to be empowered through their own actions and allowing a level of control to exist. Art therapy interventions are “brainwise” and can support students based on the way trauma has affected their brain. Brainwise characteristics support using the right hemisphere of the brain more than the left and offer the opportunity for externalization from problems or emotions, processing through the senses, reducing hyperarousal and dysregulation, and encouraging positive relationships (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015). Externalization, or creating some separation between the person and the emotion they are experiencing, in combination with the sensory experience of artmaking, could be just a few ways that our students could access emotional regulation and a felt sense of

safety and belonging while participating in artmaking without engaging in deep conversation about their work.

Supporting the Artmaking Experience

There are similarities in creative and therapeutic processes, with facilitation by a trusted person being of utmost importance. In the art classroom or counselling setting, artmaking experiences can be free, or more prescriptive and the process remains similar. However, instead of solely focusing on using art materials for teaching and learning, there is an emphasis on using them for therapeutic gains. In the creative process, there are 3 stages as outlined by (Dunn-Snow and D'amelio (2000) where students encounter, destroy, and reconstruct their creative expression. For example, the process of destroying or accepting artwork that feels ruined, students can grow through the challenge and find integration and reconciliation, sometimes in the form of "happy accidents" (Dunn-Snow & D'amelio, 2000, p. 50). Teachers or counsellors can set the stage for students, but if the students feel supported, they themselves must take the leap with courage and find insight in their own experiences (Dunn-Snow & D'amelio, 2000).

Process Versus Product

In an educational setting, focusing on the creative process is more therapeutically beneficial than focusing on the final art product. This is not necessarily an art teacher's fault as manufacturing artwork is often what an overwhelmed teacher who is trying to engage a diverse range of students with high needs, including dysregulation and existing trauma (Kramer, 2001). Teachers and counsellors are better equipped to support students through the creative process rather than focus on the meaning of the final product, because they can tap into on the inner wisdom of the students through therapeutic presence. By allowing students to define what their art is about, and by not placing meaning on or interpreting it, art teachers are encouraging

creativity and independent thought (Dunn-Snow & D'amelio, 2000, p. 50). Teachers and counsellors can also ask and listen with empathy, demonstrating therapeutic presence and attunement, and showing the students their work has meaning. This reinforces the neural pathways of presence and the feelings of safety as outlined in the previous section. This demonstration of therapeutic presence also supports Kramer's (2001) outlook on artmaking, and how it should bring about "the synthesis of emotional freedom and structured expression" (p. 6). Unfortunately, a lot of artmaking in education has shifted to predictable and dull, with a loss of freedom of expression, and it has become superficial and generic (Kramer, 2001). This undoubtedly goes against a trauma-informed artmaking experience, as it lacks presence, meaning, and individual connection. Too much focus on the product could interfere with the student's ability to self-evaluate and reflect (Rubin, 2003) but by trusting and accepting whatever artwork the child creates, they are liberated and allowed an opportunity to observe themselves as empowered creators (Kramer, 2001).

Another aspect of the artmaking experience that needs to be considered is the use of materials and the level of instruction provided. Kagin and Lusebrink (1978) developed the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) as a way to synthesize multiple approaches to art therapy in a consistent way. The three areas of the ETC are Kinesthetic/Sensory, Perceptual/Affective and Cognitive/Symbolic, and these 3 areas have since been hypothesized to connect to 3 different areas of the brain (Lusebrink et al., 2013). Using the ETC as a framework can help teachers and counsellors understand that there are different approaches to the artmaking process for students depending on what they need. For example, using a fluid vs. resistive medium, or doing something simple vs. complex could each serve students in a different way. Dunn-Snow and D'amelio (2000) describe an example of working with emotionally sensitive

students, and how a fluid medium (e.g., watercolour) may not be ideal if a student is feeling emotional and close to tears (p. 51). This reinforces the importance of an adaptive, individual art experience as well as connection rooted in presence with each student. Another relevant example to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities would be to structure an art experience with very simple, minimal steps, where they still had freedom of choice. Alternatively, for students who need support externalizing and reflecting, allowing them to create art with an experience such as mark-making, where there is a greater distance between the student and their art by means of a tool to make the art with (Dunn-Snow & D'amelio, 2000). Through facilitating the artmaking process, teachers and counsellors are privy to nonverbal expression. This insight into a student's world can act as a preventative checkpoint, helping us discover potential issues and intervene with appropriate support (Dunn-Snow & D'amelio, 2000). Of course, there are ethical boundaries to consider, ensuring that the safety of students remains our priority.

De-Colonializing Art in the Classroom

In art education, if the focus remains on the final art product, rather than the therapeutically beneficial artmaking process, it continues us down a path of rigidity and structured assessment, which is a colonial and Eurocentric way of approaching education. This perspective is not trauma-informed and is not offering our students the opportunity to experience presence, coregulation, and develop those feelings of safety and belonging through connection with their teacher or counsellor through the practice of artmaking. From an Indigenous perspective, we need to recognize our students as “physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual being[s] ... who learn best in a circular, holistic, child centered environment” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 270). In Canada's history, schools have been used to oppress and indoctrinate Aboriginal people, imposing a Eurocentric educational system (Ledoux, 2006), and many of these structures in

pedagogy still exist. British Columbia's redesigned curriculum prioritizes Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, offering explicit and implicit references to culturally rooted arts education through an indigenous lens (Government of British Columbia, n.d.).

There is a challenge for educators to fulfill obligations that are mandated by the provincial government, at the same time as they are providing a meaningful and relevant education to their students (Ledoux, 2006). In a document titled *Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives: Moving Forward* (Province of British Columbia, 2015) educators are encouraged to trust the internal wisdom of the student in order to support a more strengths-based and learner-centred practice. By shifting towards a more holistic "two-way" perspective, where both Eurocentric and Aboriginal perspectives are incorporated (Ledoux, 2006, p. 279) we can accommodate all types of learners and cultural differences at the same time.

This shift in ways of interacting and assessing in the classroom can help us build that feeling of safety and belonging for our students through an Indigenous and culturally rooted perspective. Tabor et al. (2023) encourage us to "consider asking students what art means to them, how it fosters coping, self-expression, or how they may want to integrate it into the classroom and school projects" (p. 98), which reinforces the importance of a trusting and safe connection between teacher or counsellor and student and preserving their autonomy over their artmaking experience. The importance of focusing on holistic ways of knowing, especially for Aboriginal students, has also been suggested by ensuring we use adaptive modes of assessment, including performances, portfolios, demonstrations and exhibitions (Barnhardt, 1990 as cited in Ledoux, 2006).

Summary and Positioning

Utilizing art to create a feeling of safety and belonging

By focusing on a trauma-informed environment, authentic relationships, and creating space in which students can engage in therapeutic art, we can help support the development of resilience, self-regulation, and a felt sense of safety and belonging. Meaningful connections with teachers and counsellors create genuine relationships that can help repair insecure attachment styles and also help strengthen the neural pathways of presence and feelings of safety. This therapeutic presence that teachers and counsellors offer can assist through coregulation, and keeping students in the ventral vagal parasympathetic state, where there is no desire to fight, flight, or freeze, and safety is felt (Olson & Cozolino, 2014). Over time, these internal shifts for students create personal integration (Siegel et al., 2016) that ripples out to relationships beyond the classroom. Meeting these basic needs of feeling both safe and as if they belong can create positive change in their interpersonal relationships with friends and family.

Artmaking contributes to a feeling of safety and belonging for students through allowing students to have the actual experience of the creative process. The experiential nature of artmaking supports brains impacted by trauma through externalization, or the creation of separation between the person and their emotions. The sensory experience of artmaking is also helpful for regulating brains and bodies impacted by trauma. Students can also use expressive art as a container for emotions, thoughts, and ideas, which can serve those who have limited verbal expression or who don't feel they need or want to discuss their challenges.

As humans, we need to feel connected to others in order to feel safe and as if we belong. This is the basis for our students to be able to learn, take risks, be vulnerable, and be confident in their daily lives and relationships. Both polyvagal and attachment theory are very well-

researched, with countless studies indicating the importance of fulfilling the need for a felt sense of safety through relationship and environment, and how art is a means to support that.

Future areas of research may include how trauma-informed practices can integrate with the current curriculum and with Indigenous ways of knowing. It would also be helpful to have data that follows up on the impact of some of these trauma-informed practices in school settings. For example, if we are to use things like self-assessments and reflections instead of traditional teacher-centred assessment, what is the impact on students and their wellbeing? Additionally, if teachers use connection and relationship as their guiding priority in their classes, studies showing the impact on a student's overall sense of safety and belonging in these classes could be interesting.

It is time to look at our schools in a different way – as teachers and counsellors, we are relationship builders and connection makers. We create emotionally safe spaces for students to learn what safety and belonging feels like, so they can move forward with resiliency and confidence.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary

The aim of this capstone was to explore the literature on safety and belonging and the experience of artmaking, to advocate for greater opportunities for creativity and connection in the school setting. Through creating a sense of connection, integration, emotional regulation and presence, the well-being of students can be prioritized. Based on the findings in the literature, this chapter includes implication and recommendations for schools from a trauma-informed perspective.

Implications for the School Community

Both attachment theory and polyvagal theory help us understand our biological need for connection and the ways in which we feel safe or unsafe. Through a trauma-informed lens we can work towards creating an environment for students that supports regulation, presence, and authentic relationships. We can utilize the process of artmaking to access these therapeutic benefits for students, enabling us to reach a diverse group of students regardless of if we know their history of trauma or challenges. If our students feel safe and a sense of belonging, they will feel more comfortable in the school setting in general. They will be more willing to take risks and challenge themselves in both their learning and social situations. Another outcome of this comfort with the school environment may be better attendance and a greater chance they will reach out if they need support. By giving space to connection and safety, our students can be vulnerable.

Teachers may have more autonomy by feeling confident in prioritizing wellbeing and working from a trauma-informed lens. It is possible that this perspective shift would allow them

to make decisions for wellbeing of students, and not feel as much pull place things like assessment as top priority. Rather, teachers would more closely follow the curriculum by engaging with Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing. Furthermore, this shift could ripple out ultimately create more harmony in the school setting, which means a reduction in issues where administration intervention is needed. The following recommendations could also support counsellors by allowing them more theoretically focused interventions they can use with students, as well as reinforcing the importance of the relationship with their students above all else.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are rooted in attachment theory and polyvagal theory and are all filtered through a trauma-informed perspective. Generally speaking, schools should prioritize the creation and maintenance of a culture where students and staff have a felt sense of safety and belonging. These recommendations, for both teachers and counsellors, may be implemented and integrated by individuals, regardless of systemic and structural challenges within the school or district as a whole.

Create Opportunities for Connection

The first step towards helping students feel safety and belonging at school is through cultivating relationships. With our understanding of both attachment and polyvagal theory, we know that creating a trusted and consistent relationship through therapeutic presence with our students can help develop a secure attachment style, as our nervous systems are in constant communication with each other, and we coregulate in social contexts. Both teachers and

counsellors can implement skills like empathetic listening, and ensuring they are in a calm and mindful state when engaging with students to help them regulate.

Teachers can implement activities or dedicated time in classes, specifically in the first few weeks of school, including facilitating informal get-to-know-you conversations with each student and finding out what is important to them or what helps them learn best. The small act of establishing familiarity by learning names quickly could also be the starting point for students to feel a connection. Rapport can be developed by showing genuine interest in students and what is going on in their world by checking in multiple times per week. Teachers can also thoughtfully arrange students in classes, playing matchmaker of sorts, placing students in proximity to those they are comfortable with, or work well besides, in order to facilitate coregulation. Allowing input from students on the types of projects or class norms they prefer to implement also aid in the feeling of class culture and belonging.

Teachers may also like to employ a soft start in classes but maintain structure and consistency. This may look like starting class with an independent activity and making announcements or delivering lessons 10-15 minutes into class. By consistently doing things like this, it would allow for students to settle into the space, especially those who are entering the class in a state of hyperarousal or dysregulation. Over time, the same routine class can help keep the nervous systems of students at ease. In learning coregulation, eventually the students' nervous systems learn to self-regulate.

By and large, many school counsellors are focused on getting to know the students on their caseloads. The findings in this capstone validate the importance of connecting with these students, and that counsellors are doing what they can to create that feeling of safety for students from the beginning. Some accessible ways to ensure these connections are being made include

popping into classes to introduce themselves as school counsellors, reaching out on platforms such as Teams with individual messages, hosting drop-in or open house times in the counselling centre, and having counsellors in larger schools dedicated to an alphabetical section of students (to ensure consistency throughout time in school, as well as familiarity of families with multiple children).

Both teachers and counsellors have the opportunity to collaborate and meet the needs of students through establishing a weekly art club. This club could be aimed at connection and creating relationships, with the secondary goal of using art as a tool to regulate. Students could be invited by teachers or counsellors who think they would benefit from this type of experience. Ideally the club should be small in scale, 10 students or less, so rapport and familiarity with each other can be established quickly. The club could run for anywhere from 8 weeks to an entire semester, whichever fit with the number of students and the school calendar. This is another way of implementing a routine and creating more time with safe adults, but also allows students to have a space to create and connect, free of assessment. Counsellors could co-facilitate this group, or periodically drop in with occasional psycho-education for the group about how we process emotions, and how our nervous systems regulate.

The recommendation of a periodic art club leads towards the possibility of having a more designated space in schools. Ideally fundings would be make available to support a permanent drop-in space for students to connect and engage in art. Once boundaries and expectations are established about the use of the space, students could come and connect, have some quiet time (with the close-by company of a school counsellor or teacher who was available), or book appointment times in advance to meet with a counsellor and create art at specific drop-in times. This open invitation for students to create freely, paired with structure and familiarity of how the

space would operate and which adults would be there, would be a great fit for a school that is edging towards creating more trauma-informed spaces for their students.

Focus on Artmaking Process, not Product: Art for Emotional Regulation

Another area of recommendation is how we approach artmaking in the school setting. Historically, the emphasis has been on the final product, which has then been assessed. The amount of success that a student may feel hinges on the interpretation and opinion of their teacher, bypassing the therapeutic benefits of the artmaking process. Therapeutic art is a way we can help students process difficult emotions and experiences, and regulate their nervous systems, in a safe container that the student is in control of.

In the art classroom, teachers can utilize the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) and offer projects or activities with a balance of structure and choice. For example, students could all engage in creating a self-portrait, but be given the choice of using fluid (e.g., watercolour) or resistive (e.g., oil pastel) media, based on their own intuitive decision making. Offering these choices can help students develop their own inner wisdom, as well as aid in the creation of a more authentic and meaningful expression. Equipping students with these choices can help support their nervous system regulation, as they continue to develop personal integration by being present and engaged in their artwork through a sensory experience. Counsellors may approach artmaking with students in a similar structure, but perhaps have an art kit for their counselling space, accompanied with ETC based guidance or prompts for artmaking. Some suggestions might include prompts about emotions: students can name an emotion, then choose a medium and colour that might help express that emotion through their creative expression.

Another teaching modality that art teachers can utilize is Teaching for Artistic Behaviour (TAB). TAB is a choice-based art education framework that emphasizes trusting the inner

wisdom of the student, seeing them as an artist, and focuses on the artmaking process. One of the guiding principles of TAB is that the art classroom should operate as a studio space. This allows for structure and predictability but maximum freedom of exploration and expression for students. Through this experience, students can refine their artmaking process and be met at their individual developmental levels (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). Teachers can set up their art classrooms as studio spaces, and have supplies organized into centres, much like a learning centre in a classroom. This could maximize the time spent in the artmaking process, allowing for a supportive and trauma-informed balance between structure and freedom. Through this approach to teaching art, students are provided with a predictable and safe environment where they can choose how and when they take risks through their artwork. TAB also supports the teacher's position as a facilitator of the student's experience, which can strengthen connection and authentic relationship (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009).

Teachers in the art classroom can also emphasize self-assessments, artist statements and reflections by students about their work. This ensures that students take the lead on expressing what their art means to them, without the unnecessary interpretation or projection by teachers. This supports the student-centred learning that aligns with British Columbia's redesigned arts curriculum as well as Indigenous principles of learning. Teachers may also invite local artists, with attention to including Indigenous artists, to create space for students to learn from others through connection as well as hear about the creative process and how it supports them individually. Many artists hold wisdom to share about how creating art is a way to process thoughts and feelings, and cope with challenges including their mental health (Tabor et al., 2023).

Conclusions

Many of our lives have been impacted by trauma, and the reality is that we may not ever know the depths of what has happened to each other, or even understand the significance of what has happened to ourselves. Because of this big unknown, the best way we can move forward with care for each other is to approach our schools from a trauma-informed perspective. By starting with building connection and showing our students that they are safe, and that they belong, we can begin to satisfy that basic human need of safety and acceptance. Through our presence with students, we are all healing ourselves. We are strengthening our own neural pathways for presence, regulating our own nervous systems, and decreasing our own trauma responses. On a conscious and subconscious level, this is cyclical and beautiful. Art is one of the ways individuals can create space to feel. It can be a container for emotions and experiences, where we can distance ourselves from our emotions and experiences enough to process them safely. In a school setting, this is so relevant because we don't always know what happened to each student, but we know we need to find a way through it. To be a witness, or to be present for someone who needs our steadfast support is a great privilege and demonstrates the power of connection and safety that we all hold within us.

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