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THE EFFECTS OF REGULAR PARTICIPATION IN VISUAL ART CLASSES ON MATURE ADULTS

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Keywords

Art education; mature learning; social participation

Introduction

In 2018, I embarked on Master of Education research to investigate how mature adults were affected by regular participation in visual art classes. New Zealand is one of many countries with a significant ageing population. At the time, the number of persons aged over 65 years of age was predicted to outnumber those under 15 within five years (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Given this reality the mental and social health of the older population is increasingly important. Continued or renewed contribution to society in the form of active social participation, relationships and personal growth is beneficial to this sector as well as to society as a whole (Reynolds, 2010). Visual art education is reported to have a positive effect on the cognition of mature adults in various contexts (Schindler et al., 2017; Wali et al., 2001). I set out to research whether social participation in a structured, creative class in an everyday community setting could promote such change.

My interest in the topic developed after working with the local council in 2017 on a public artwork project. I noticed that many successful participants were mature artists who appeared confident, driven and opinionated. I wondered whether people like this were naturally drawn to be creative or whether engaging in creativity engendered this behaviour.

For the study I ran a series of art classes that concentrated on developing drawing, painting and design skills and culminated in each participant creating a painting of a person close to them. This ensured that each student was personally invested in all stages of the process and in the final outcome. The classes were open to anyone who signed up, regardless of age, but the research focused on adults aged over 50. The five students who met this criterion ranged in age from early 50s through to early 80s. None of them regarded themselves as competent artists.

A qualitative approach allowed me to dig deeply into motivations and experiences of the participants. The participants were coincidentally all female, came from a variety of backgrounds and most had not engaged in art education within the past 20 years. Two were employed, one full-time and one part-time. One participant lived alone, two with their spouse, and two with other family. They were unknown to each other and me as their tutor prior to the class.

The research focus was on the potential benefits of visual art education on the skills and social capacities of the participants. The findings fell into three main categories: changes in self-efficacy and self-concept, social bonding and growth, and educational outcomes. The first category, self-efficacy, reflects how an individual perceives their ability in a particular area (Bandura, 2012). Self-efficacy can affect self-concept but only if the individual places importance on the skill in question (Bong & Clark, 1999; Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). In other words, if you feel that you lack skill in visual art, but you do not place any importance on your visual arts ability then it will have little impact on your sense of self.

After engaging in the six art sessions, the research participants perceived an increase in their visual art competence and confidence. Bong and Skaalvik (2003) indicate that self-concept increases as individuals build skills and this was borne out during my research. Initially anxious about their arts abilities, many participants revealed previously negative experiences with art years prior and typically at school. Being involved in a class with others who had similar experiences and self-concept seemed

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to help. Over time, most of the participants realised they could achieve each stage of the art making process and gained confidence.

Social bonding and growth, the second area of findings, appeared strongly linked to self-efficacy and self-concept. Two participants who were initially identified as having greater artistic skill revealed that as the social cohesion grew, they too valued the further reassurance of the cohort. This commonality led to a culture of positive feedback, and noticeable gains in task confidence and self-efficacy for most of the group.

The development of genuine friendships across the group was apparent as they supported each other's efforts in learning new skills. Many participants began to arrive early and stay on well past the end of the class to talk. The growing conversation between the participants expanded to include advice and support for one another beyond the remit of the class. Bong and Skaalvik (2003) and Puente-Diaz (2015) discuss the positive impact of engaging with others who are deemed trustworthy, knowledgeable and capable. When discussing their ongoing art project, they demonstrated increasing self-efficacy, whether they were the giver or receiver of feedback, and this in turn impacted their social bonds.

There were other elements of social growth within the group as students began to socialise together outside of the class. A couple of the participants began attending other classes together during the week and continued to meet for coffee at the community centre well after the art classes had concluded. I did not, however, anticipate that the impact of the social engagement motivated by the art class would extend to their home lives.

It became evident that the arts engagement had impacted participants' families. The students described improved interactions at home and, where relevant, work. Research points to the influence of creative leisure activity as a source of relaxation and stimulus for enhanced communication with family members, friends and colleagues (Kelly, 1993; Pearce, 2017; Reynolds, 2010). One student mentioned that her grandchildren now wanted to draw with her when they came around. Most students commented that their children had regularly asked about the classes and expressed a feeling that they now had knowledge and experience to share with others.

The final finding relates to the development of art education outcomes. This brief art course contained a variety of tasks which meant that although skills were developed, the primary focus was on the expression of ideas through the series of visual art tasks. A shift in student attitude and confidence towards new tasks provided the most significant educational outcome of the classes.

At the start some participants said that they felt out of their depth. One participant noted that she had actively disguised her fears of inadequacy by minimising her own expectations of herself. Over the weeks, participants became aware of their capabilities and less reliant on feedback before making creative decisions. They became more confident with their ideas, sometimes working out how they could achieve an outcome in their own way. Lawton and La Porte (2013) comment that learners gain confidence to problem-solve in art projects when given the chance to make decisions. Typical of arts processes, this work relied upon a certain level of trial and error (Nelson & Chandler, 1999). This capacity to problem-solve may translate to greater problem-solving capacities in other contexts, and participants described applying newfound skills in other areas of their lives.

Since the completion of my Master of Education in 2019, I have been involved in teaching longer series of visual art workshops with a franchise organisation. Class sizes vary and I have experienced the outcomes of art education in both small and large groups. In my current teaching, I recognise similar impacts of engaging in visual arts classes. Everyone comes with a different background and experience with art and different tasks challenge participants in different ways. The common theme, however, is a development of personal style, increased self-confidence and the development of relationships between participants. When the group exhibits their work in the final week, they each invite friends and family.

Through my research and experiences as an art tutor, I have a strong belief in the benefits of visual art participation. Art classes do appear to promote confidence with new tasks, creative solutions, and social cohesion, both within a group of learners and beyond. The answer to my original question, of whether the art engagement stimulates the confident behaviour I noticed in the mature artists that I met in 2017,

is that I believe it does. It would appear to be a valid strategy that deserves application to ensure we thrive and age more successfully as a society.

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