

## **What role does visual art play in the social emotional learning of adolescence?**

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### **Question**

What role does visual art play in the social emotional learning (SEL) of adolescence?

### **Rationale**

Visual art is a practice that began as far back as 16,000 BCE.<sup>1</sup> Art in school has been important in America since the inception of public education. Philip Yenawine argues that, 'Perhaps image-making is a basic instinct. Given the chance, children draw and paint as soon as they can hold the tools - certainly before they can easily talk.'<sup>1</sup> Yenawine continues by explaining, 'Thoughtful caregivers know they are responsible for creating visual and language-rich environments that stimulate and support early learning. The richness, however, varies from family to family and is complicated by many factors, such as demographics, socioeconomic status, and the language spoken by parents and caregivers. The differences are significant. Children who are deprived of resources and conversation enter school at a disadvantage.<sup>1</sup> Children are quite literally, products of their upbringing. Over the years the emphasis has shifted from this experimental and creative phase of development to a test based society for all. Here, 'We forget to capitalize on the natural ability of children to look, listen, and talk about their environment. Children need to keep looking - and looking and talking - all through the middle years, a time of great cognitive creativity and drive. This developmental period signifies an emergence from dependency, with children becoming more independent while continuing to broaden their knowledge and skills.'<sup>1</sup> These practices are known as Visual Thinking Strategies. Without the implementation of such practices certain functions can be detrimental to the development in children. 'Many teachers have known for years that trauma interferes with a kid's ability to learn. The game- changing current research explains why childhood trauma has such tragic long-term consequences: Toxic stress physically damages a child's developing brain.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Literature Review**

1. Visual Arts - The visual representation of everyday life including action experiences (encountering, tinkering, choosing, practicing, and contributing) and reflection experiences (describing, evaluating, connecting, envisioning and integrating).<sup>5</sup>
2. Social Emotional Learning - The process in which children understand and manage emotions.
3. Adolescence - What are the special developmental needs of early adolescence?

Teachers have begun to notice an influx of behaviors that are violent and aggressive inside their classrooms. These behaviors are not only towards other students but towards school staff as well. According to recent data, more than half of all U.S. children have experienced some kind of trauma in the form of abuse, neglect, violence, or challenging household circumstances-and 35 percent of children have experienced more than one type of traumatic event. <sup>2</sup> Current trends in art education are starting to shed some light on the complexities of trauma induced students and how SEL within the art classroom may be helping. When it comes to developing curriculum for such programs there are five competencies of SEL to be aware of; 1. Self-Awareness, 2. Social

Awareness, 3. Responsible Decision Making, 4. Self-Management and 5. Relationship Skills.<sup>3</sup> One could argue that these five competencies are important life skills that are useful to maintain a job, create and maintain meaningful relationships and to be able to learn and practice empathy. In other words, to live a happy and successful life. In order to help develop these competencies in students, art educators spend time working with students to analyze work samples and help guide students in visual representation practices. One example of SEL would be the discovery of an unfamiliar topic. This could look like a question posed to students such as, “What do you see?” Students will point out observations that will serve as clues to help better understand the work of art. Instilling the idea of wonder in the minds of children is beneficial in nurturing their ability to understand, relate and explain a certain image to their classmates. This will in turn better help them understand themselves and other people in the context of their own lives and communities. Yenawine found that, ‘Students steadily develop confidence in their own voices and in the validity of their opinions. The importance of such social and emotional growth has increased in recent years as schools have assumed more responsibility for developing all aspects of student potential, not just academic achievement.’<sup>1</sup>

The adolescent age group, between the ages of 11-15 years of age, is arguably the most developmentally complex. ‘Middle school educators understood that the biological event of puberty fundamentally disrupts the relatively smooth development of the elementary school years and has a profound impact upon the cognitive, social, and emotional lives of young teens.’<sup>2</sup> The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act certainly did not help in the development of these students. In fact, some people consider NCLB to have had no regard to the developmental changes in adolescence at all. ‘NCLB is essentially nondevelopmental for all levels of education. It requires uniformly high test scores throughout the K-12 curriculum without regard to developmental changes at different stages of childhood and adolescence. Instead educators insist that puberty can have a profound impact on students. Practices at the best schools honor the developmental uniqueness of young adolescents, including the provision for a safe school environment, student-initiated learning, student roles in decision making, and strong adult role models.’<sup>4</sup> Understanding the complexities of both puberty and adolescence can help us determine what the best action is in regards to ‘how best to create an education environment that will optimally help young teens generate not children, aggression, or pathos but creative ideas, positive projects, and proactive contributions to the society of which they are becoming an increasingly integral part.’<sup>4</sup>

What are examples of developmentally appropriate educational practices for this specific age group? Art education can play a role in the development of social-emotional competencies that enable young people to interact productively with others, build and express a healthy sense of self and community, and work effectively toward their goals.<sup>5</sup> Incorporating art into the everyday lives of these young bodies can provide countless benefits to the well being of their brains, bodies and outcomes for the rest of their lives. Art provides a space to problem solve, to think critically and creatively. Art classrooms promote a place for free thinking and an open mind to different ideas, people and cultures. Working in groups and at tables with other peer groups allows for acceptance and appreciation for all students. Reflecting on work and asking and answering questions in peer groups as well as engaging in open and honest discussions and conversations are also ways that students can start to learn how to appropriately interact with

those around them. For example, the art practice of peer critique of students' self-portraits in a visual arts class might have complementary social-emotional components such as opportunities to develop listening skills, practice at communicating clearly with peers, and manage emotions. The art practice of learning a new brushstroke technique might have complementary components that build social-emotional competencies such as building self-control, focusing one's attention, and building self-confidence and positive identity.<sup>5</sup>

### **Study Design**

I surveyed 34 K-12 visual arts teachers in the Albuquerque Public School district. 21 are familiar with SEL while 11 are not while 2 answered, "sort of" and "a little." I identified in which Learning Zone these teachers are working, how long they have been teaching and what grade level they teach. Almost exactly  $\frac{1}{3}$  responded from elementary school,  $\frac{1}{3}$  from middle school and  $\frac{1}{3}$  from high school.

### **Data Analysis & Findings**

The overwhelming response was that students are showing a general level of apathy and many teachers responded to questions with personal stories from their classrooms about their students' social emotional development. "Kindergartners are coming in with grossly underdeveloped social skills, i.e. no eye contact; lack of spatial awareness; underdeveloped fine motor skills; lack of vocabulary; lack of gross motor skills; lack of age appropriate knowledge for understanding of social cues, societal norms, verbal instructions; overall lack of awareness of their surroundings. The list goes on and on." A question I asked was, "Do you feel supported as a staff member at your school when you have a student you feel needs extra social support?" A surprising 41.2% responded "sometimes" but feel like there are too many social conflicts happening in their student's lives to appropriately address the issues. The findings are also overwhelmingly clear that teacher's want and need more SEL professional development. Not one participant answered no to the question about SEL PD being needed.

### **Recommendations & Next Steps**

If standardized testing were structured differently in this country, we could make room for SEL in classrooms. We could make room for students to learn how to interact with their classmates and create relationships with each other and their teachers. We could help create an entire group of people who were contributing members of society. When I think about this kind of learning and teaching it reminds me of what my classrooms felt like as a kid. I have very fond memories of K-12 that involved making friends and learning how to navigate kinships with classmates all while learning and having fun at the same time. Learning and having fun seems so natural and symbiotic that it is sometimes hard for me to see my students in lives that do not resemble my own.

My recommendation would be to continue, if not start, focusing on meaningful SEL PD for educators of all grade levels across all contents. We need to learn real world applications and how we can integrate this way of thinking into what we are already teaching students. My mom told me once she read something that said, "You have to have a happy enough childhood to last the rest of your life." Think about that. What happens if you don't?

## **Bibliography**

<sup>1</sup> “Lascaux Cave Paintings (C.17,000 BCE).” *Lascaux Cave Paintings: Layout, Meaning, Photographs*, [www.visual-arts-cork.com/prehistoric/lascaux-cave-paintings.htm](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/prehistoric/lascaux-cave-paintings.htm).

<sup>2</sup> “Teachers Voice.” *Crisis In The Classroom*, vol. 21, no. 2, Nov. 2018, pp. 0–8.

<sup>3</sup> “Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies.” *Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning*, Jan. 2017, [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org).

<sup>4</sup> Ascd. “Chapter 5. Middle Schools: Social, Emotional, and Metacognitive Growth.” *Middle Schools: Social, Emotional, and Metacognitive Growth*, [www.ascd.org/publications/books/106044/chapters/Middle-Schools@-Social,-Emotional,-and-Metacognitive-Growth.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/106044/chapters/Middle-Schools@-Social,-Emotional,-and-Metacognitive-Growth.aspx).

<sup>5</sup> “Arts Education and Social-Emotional Learning Outcomes Among K-12 Students.” *UChicago Consortium on School Research*, [consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/arts-education-and-social-emotional-learning-outcomes](http://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/arts-education-and-social-emotional-learning-outcomes).

## **Research Questions**

1. In what APS Learning Zone do you work?
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. What grade level do you teach?
4. What subjects are you certified to teach?
5. What subjects do you currently teach?
6. Are you familiar with Social Emotional Learning?
  - a. If you are familiar with SEL, have you been able to implement parts in your teaching? If so, how?
7. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. With that being said, do you think the students you teach show any of these skill sets?
8. Do you think the students you teach could benefit from any SEL?
9. During your career have you noticed a "shift" in the social emotional development of your students?
  - a. If you answered Yes please elaborate.
10. Do you feel confident and comfortable that you would know how to handle a situation in which a student shared with you something traumatic they experienced?
11. Do you feel supported as a staff member at your school when you have a student you feel needs extra social support?
12. Would you like to see SEL as an option for professional development?
  - a. If there was an opportunity for a SEL PD would you prefer the delivery mechanism be by your school or through the district?
13. Do you have a personal connection with visual arts, either as a student or teacher, and SEL? If so, how?