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Supporting Students' Social Emotional Well-Being Using Clay: An Action Research Study

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING USING CLAY: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this action research study is to examine scholarly recommendations on how to use clay to promote the social and emotional well-being of students in the high school ceramics classroom. This study enacts recommendations and strategies to enhance an existing curriculum to align with my school district's educational goals of promoting social emotional learning (SEL). This study took place at a high school in Westchester County, New York in the fall of 2021. Data for this study is informed by my interviews with two specialists regarding putting SEL strategies into action, my modification of an existing curriculum as a teaching artifact to meet district goals, and my observations of how my first formal attempt to put theory into practice did or did not inform the teaching and learning process with high school students.

INTRODUCTION

I have been working with clay for the last 15 years, from the age of 14 to when I became an art teacher myself. I know firsthand how satisfying it can be to work with clay, especially in times of uncertainty and stress. Fortunately, the school district in New York where I work has put a strong emphasis on all educators working to promote the social and emotional well-being of our entire student population. In fact, the guidance and counseling section of the Somers Central School District website lists under "Values" that educators will "provide each child with a safe and caring environment that enables him or her to develop appropriate educational and career goals, *collaboratively monitor the social and emotional wellness of each child* [emphasis added] and deliver personalized services" (SCSD Counseling Department, 2021, para. 2).

As an art teacher, I have challenged myself to take our shared goal and see how I can modify an existing curriculum to be more inclusive of SEL goals. In this action research study, I use insights gathered from interviews with experts in counseling and art therapy to modify part of my existing lessons for use with my students when using clay. In this way, I intentionally use the strategies of an action research study to critically reflect on *if* and *how* these modifications made a difference during the teaching and learning interactions. The purpose for this action research study is to find out how to best support students' social and emotional well-being using ceramic art, while also acknowledging that my expected outcomes may be different from what I hope to achieve.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Origins of Art Therapy

According to Leah Guzman (2020), the goal of *art therapy* is "to use a creative process to gain self-awareness and self-reflection in order to gain personal insight and develop self-control over emotions" (p. 3). Art therapy was developed by psychologists and art educators in equal measure. This demonstrates that the beginning of art therapy shared a central core, despite the differences between art therapy and art education today. Margaret Naumberg, a psychologist from the early 20th century, "began using art in psychotherapy" (Stoll, 2005, para. 6), and is considered the mother of art therapy. Florence Cane, her sister, was also a prominent art teacher and writer of art therapy, famous for her scribble technique. Edith Kramer, an Austrian painter and art therapist, wrote *Art as Therapy with Children* (1971) where she discusses the value of art education and the arts in general when working with students who have psychological problems. Kramer (1971) notes, "While art therapy is not identical with art teaching, progressive art-teaching methods are indispensable tools in therapeutic art programs" (p. 8). Edith Kramer also describes Florence Cane's *blind scribble project* with large paper involving the whole body, many sensations, and imagination.

> The "scribble" was then examined from all sides, until the student "saw" forms that suggested a picture to him. He then completed his picture, using those lines that fitted his ideas and obliterating others at will, so that the finished picture usually bore little resemblance to the initial scribble. (Kramer, 1971, p. 10)

The unconscious being tapped for creative inspiration shows how the Jungian psychological theories of the day were influencing progressive art education.

Viktor Lowenfeld was another art educator who viewed his work as a balance between therapy and education, eventually calling it "art education therapy" (Andrus, 2006, p. 181). Lowenfeld, like Cane, saw the value of limited senses. He had been a student of professors of sculpture who wouldn't allow their students to see their projects, but only work with blindfolds so as to focus on texture more than how their sculptures looked (Michael, 1981). In 1922 at only 19 years old, Lowenfeld began working with blind students and other students with disabilities while in Austria. Lowenfeld theorized the sensory experience in clay was heightened when limiting other senses and, therefore, believed that art could be a pathway for emotional healing for children who were otherwise barred from making art. Lowenfeld, as a college student, began sneaking into the Hohe Warte Institution for the Blind in Vienna against the director's orders to bring students clay to sculpt. Lowenfeld (1958) notes:

> I believe today I can really say it was history because they were the first creative sculptures made by blind individuals. Believe it or not, blind people never before did creative works. They only imitated, according to adult concepts which people had already produced, just to show their skills and had never been motivated or allowed to do their own work. (Lowenfeld, 1958, as cited in Michael, 1981, p. 8)

Eventually Lowenfeld fled Austria as World War II approached and began a career as both a lecturer and professor of art education at Harvard and Pennsylvania State University as well as art therapist for students with severe disabilities in New York, Massachusetts, and Virginia over the rest of his career (Michael, 1981).

Therapeutic Use of Clay

The therapeutic nature of sensory experiences for the first art therapists in the United States, with or without sight, also shows up in research into the therapeutic use of clay. Cornelia Elbrecht

(2013) created a therapeutic tool called the *clay field*: a wooden box full of soft clay with a separate bowl of warm water for manipulation and sensory exploration. Elbrecht (2013) describes that the end-result isn't a project or finished work to show to anyone else, but an experience. "[T]he kinesthetic motor action combined with sensory perception will have lasting therapeutic benefits, especially in cases of developmental delays and trauma healing" (Elbrecht, 2013, p. 15). Elbrecht, like Cane and Lowenfeld, describes that some patients close their eyes while exploring in the clay field to allow increased perception. The senses alone and the exploration of one's surroundings while working in water and clay is a part of her therapeutic practice. Leah Guzman (2020) also writes about a clay exercise like the clay field, called a *feeling sculpture*. It is about using clay as an extension of one's interior feelings and using one's senses to externalize them. Guzman (2020) notes, "The feeling you have when you squeeze and pinch the clay is an extension of your current emotional state. Working with clay allows you to objectify what you're feeling" (p. 76). David Henley (2002) also notes that 99% of art therapists when polled believed that clay was an inherently therapeutic material. Henley also writes in a poetic way about the process of creating a work of ceramic art showing how the process can be valuable in each stage:

> From ideas and feelings to workable design; to exploration and fabrication while in the clay's wet plastic state; to the process of "letting go" as the finished piece air dries on its way to the first bisque fire; to the process of reconsidering the surface by glazing or decorating; and then on to the culminating fire where we sacrifice our work to the blind forces of intense heat and flame in the hope of its final transformation. (Henley, 2002, p. 56)

This journey through a project, Henley (2002) notes, is the intersection of technique and personal expression. The material is so reactive and responsive that it invites "regression . . . playful manipulation with the frequent effect of diminishing inhibitions" (Henley, 2002, p. 55), where students may slash, destroy, or manipulate gently.

In considering how much of an effect artmaking alone can have on students' emotional well-being, research by Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz (2016) investigated artmaking with many media, including clay, and stress. Adults had their cortisol levels, the hormone associated with stress, tested through a saliva swab before and after a 45-minute art-making session. "Although results overall were statistically significant, reductions in cortisol levels were not consistent for all participants. Levels were lowered for about 75% of the sample" (Kaimal et al., 2016, p. 79). Three-quarters of the participants were less stressed after making art, while other research participants had no change and others increased in cortisol. The researchers informally wonder in their conclusion whether making art may also excite and stimulate, which could explain the rise in cortisol, however their findings were not conclusive.

Many researchers investigate the reasons behind how making art can benefit emotional well-being and Paolo Knill (2005), Leah Guzman (2020), and Constant Albertson (2001) all have different aspects that they discuss. Paolo Knill (2005) explains how the act of making art informs our emotions, stating that "trance-like presence during the disciplined play in the arts is focused on the surface: manifest in the material, the structure and the form involved in the act of shaping" (p. 91). The important element for the disciplined play is "the accomplishment in art-making is a literal enabling which has the merit of a beauty which can evoke responses that 'move' or 'touch' us" (Knill, 2005, p. 92). The act of making is not only a benefit as a form of productive play, but also gives patients or students a feeling of accomplishment and the chance to inspire others and create beautiful work for themselves and others.

Similar to Knill, Guzman (2020) speaks on the experience of completion of artworks as well as the overarching idea of art *as* therapy, it is "product-oriented because it's satisfying to create a piece of art that is aesthetically pleasing. The act of producing the artwork is an end to itself. The creative process can foster self-awareness, boost self-esteem, and increase personal growth" (p. 6). Constant Albertson (2001) writes about a ceramic arts education program in Quebec, where students responded about the benefits of the course: an increased respect for the arts, a greater respect for classmates, and synthesized knowledge from other courses and their own lives into their projects. Albertson (2001) also observed that "students believed that their self-esteem improved because they successfully worked through problems from beginning to end, learning important lessons about themselves and their ability to be creative" (p. 7). This thread of personal growth and the therapeutic benefits of creating art can also be seen in how art education intersects with SEL.

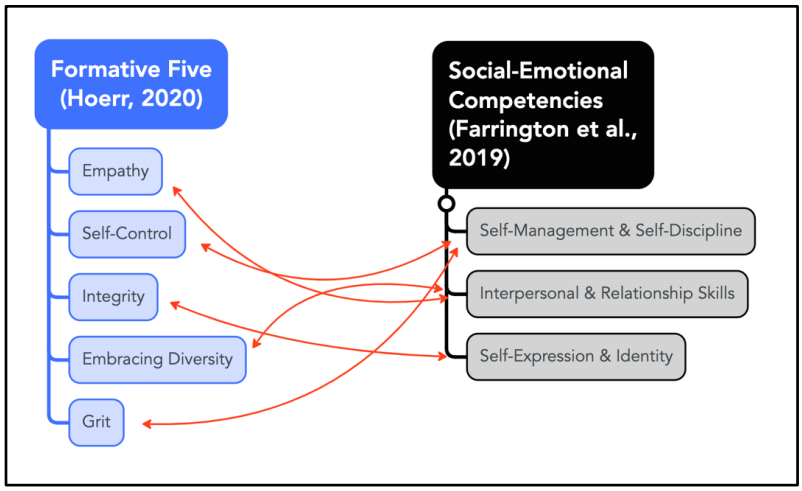
Art Education and Social Emotional Learning

The cross-section of art education with social and emotional well-being seems to be best realized under the umbrella of SEL. Justina Schlund (2021) is the Senior Director of Content and Field Learning at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Schlund (2021) describes SEL as the:

> Process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (para. 2)

This is a recognition of the soft skills that help student achievement, including academic, social, and personal goals. To group some of the many SEL skills, I referred to Thomas Hoerr's (2020) *formative five success skills* and Farrington et al.'s (2019) three social-emotional competencies. Hoerr (2020) focused on "skills of empathy, self-control, integrity, embracing diversity, and grit" (p. 20), and Farrington et al. (2019) had three SEL competencies: "self-management and self-discipline, interpersonal and relationship skills, and self-expression and identity" (p. 15). Hoerr (2020) discovered his formative five success skills while traveling to and visiting many schools in several roles. Hoerr (2020) noticed "the people who advanced toward a goal were able to do so primarily because of their interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities" (pp. 19-20). Farrington et al. (2019) has condensed some of the prior skill sets seen in other SEL literature into three groups of social-emotional competencies. Between these sets of skills are many interactions that stand out for study, especially as it pertains to art education (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mind-Map of the Formative Five (Hoerr, 2020) and Social-Emotional Competencies (Farrington et al., 2019) with Connections between Skills



Two groups of authors wrote about the connections of SEL and art education: Eddy et al. (2021) and Farrington et al. (2019). Eddy, Blatt-Gross, Edgar, Gohr, Halverson, Humphreys, and Smolin (2021) wrote in *Arts Education Policy Review* about local implementations of SEL across the country and across the disciplines of dance, art, art history, music, and theatre departments. Eddy et al. (2021) discuss that the arts "can provide integrative learning across cognitive, emotional, esthetic, and physical domains and do so in embodied and embedded ways. It is precisely this interactive, creative, and experiential learning that is suited for Social Emotional Learning (SEL)" (p. 193). The arts are a way to engage deeply in personal and interpersonal skills, especially since these areas are central to the arts curriculum. Eddy et al. (2021) continue, "Engaging the body (kinesthetic intelligence) is a unique feature of arts education that further supports self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making through group interaction, whether in person or online, because they all require reading non-verbal movement cues" (p. 193). Art classes require physicality and social interactions that are embodied both through the students' own locations, interactions, and through the media as well.

Farrington, Maurer, Aska McBride, Nagaoka, Puller, Shewfelt, and Wright (2019) wrote a *theory of action* discussing how SEL is present in several areas of the arts in school, including visual arts, music, dance, theatre, and media arts. Farrington et al. (2019) also state that the risks that students are willing to take are proportional to how safe they feel in arts classrooms. "Many arts educators operate on the belief that arts participation requires an environment in which students feel comfortable taking productive risks, being challenged, feeling discomfort, and growing emotionally" (Farrington et al., 2019, p. 19). When arts educators focus on creating spaces where students can take risks and fail, then they have created spaces that are safe to make those mistakes and grow from them. The ability to engage in SEL as art teachers come down to some key elements that Farrington et al. (2019) describe:

1. Creating safe, developmental spaces may also involve educators finding opportunities to facilitate student agency and to be responsive to student desire.
2. Many teaching artists identified a strong connection between art and the idea of exploring the culture and beliefs of oneself and of others.
3. meeting students where they are, holding this kind of flexibility as a core value of quality arts teaching and learning.
4. students . . . feel comfortable in their arts classes disclosing and working through challenging situations they may be facing. (Farrington et.al, 2019, pp. 19-20)

These four recommendations are ways that teachers of the arts may be able to help bridge their content area and students' social and emotional wellness. When students are given the power to interact with the arts in a personal and meaningful way, it unlocks the possibilities for the social skills to be utilized.

Amanda Allison (2013) wrote of her experiences as an educator in higher education, where she had her class of art education students in a pre-service undergraduate course team up with a local art therapy studio for collaborative projects. The students met in the studio several times for therapeutic exercises and as a result, they:

> [U]nderstood their responsibility to develop a safe and creative space for their students. They also understood how to create a curriculum that had therapeutic ends. Moreover, they viewed art therapists as resources who could be consulted when a student needed support beyond the classroom. (Allison, 2013, p. 88)

The goal of creating a more therapeutic version of art education isn't to stop teaching the content of visual arts or to replace art therapists, but to find creative ways to engage with students that can both be therapeutic while also engaging in the curricula to create products, which can boost students' sense of accomplishment (Albertson, 2001; Farrington et al., 2019; Guzman, 2020).

Interpretation of Common Threads and Unique Distinctions Between Readings

What follows are the author's interpretations of the common threads and unique distinctions found between the readings:

1. The goal of creating a more therapeutic version of art education isn't to stop teaching the content of visual arts or to replace art therapists, but to find creative ways to engage with students that can both be therapeutic while also engaging in the curricula to create products, which can boost students' sense of accomplishment (Albertson, 2001; Farrington et al., 2019; Guzman, 2020).
2. The goal is to "see children as individuals, to take their concerns seriously and respond in ways that are sensitive and productive" (Henley, 1992, as cited in Andrus, 2006, p. 183). While this is the goal of any empathic educator, one can see the possibilities for growth and health in our students when we make social and emotional wellness a priority by integrating SEL into the art curriculum.
3. The most striking commonalities between using clay as a therapeutic tool and SEL skills are how a tactile and sensory-heavy medium can channel emotions.

Opportunities for SEL within ceramics abound because of the inherent ability for the medium to calm and relax, as well as the benefits to students of artmaking in general (Elbrecht, 2013; Kaimal et al., 2016), as well as the possibilities when including SEL strategies into projects already tailored to benefit students' social and emotional wellbeing. Farrington et al. (2019) had one example about how an art class can develop a student's motivation:

> *Feeling motivated is key to self-management.* Sam, the student who compared the rigors of his painting class to that of his math class, confirms the importance of this ownership, noting, "I like painting, I like bringing the artwork to my house, like showing it off...you can show your emotions through it. So you go there, you paint what you want to paint." Perhaps this sense of ownership fueled Sam's improved self-management and discipline in doing his work without seeking shortcuts. (Farrington et al., 2019, p. 26)

When the arts can inspire, and students can practice self-discipline and self-expression through the sense of accomplishment, an intersection of interests unfolds. To tailor projects to focus on deeper meanings allow the arts to be a place of discovery as well as a way to alleviate stress.

METHODS

As a high school art educator and researcher, I used a pragmatic research methodology that assists in critically reflecting on how best to enact theories into practice. Since the high school where I work prioritizes supporting students' social and emotional well-being, this was a natural area to begin inquiry. My qualitative inquiry explores how educators can contribute to this effort in an art classroom.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this action research study is to find out how to best support students' social and emotional well-being using ceramics in the art classroom. The research questions are:

1. What recommendations do specialists in counseling and art therapy have for promoting well-being in the classroom?
2. How can an existing curriculum be modified to be more inclusive of these recommendations?
3. What impact, if any, does enacting these changes in the art classroom have on the teaching and learning experience when working with clay?

Study Overview

I am not an art therapist, so to work to incorporate goals to promote SEL in all classrooms, I consulted two professionals who have experience putting theory into practice. Their insights helped me to better understand the complexities of art as a therapeutic tool and navigate how to modify an existing curriculum to be more inclusive of SEL goals. These professionals include Phil Kavanagh, the head of counseling for Somers Central School District and Robin Sheldon, a fellow art teacher who is also a Clinical Licensed Art Therapist (CLAT) (Figure 1). Both individuals consented to having their identities revealed in this study.

Figure 1: Times, Dates, and Communication Format Used with Interview Participants

PARTCIPANTS	DATE OF INTERVIEW	COMMUNICATION FORMAT
Phil Kavanagh, Director of School Counseling & Student Services	Feb. 9, 2022	Interview conducted via E-mail.
Robin Sheldon, CLAT, Art Teacher & Art Therapist	Feb. 22, 2022	Interview conducted via E-mail.

How This Action Research Study Was Enacted

According to Thomas (2017) *action research* involves the following steps: define the problem, examine the idea or problem and gather information about it, plan your action, take

action, and critically reflect on the outcomes. Below, I use Thomas' suggestions to articulate the steps followed in this study:

- *Defining the Problem.* Our district has put an emphasis on promoting SEL, so how can I as an art teacher put theory into practice? How can art teachers assist students who need social or emotional assistance in the classroom? Can art teachers can use methods or strategies to assist students' social and emotional well-being? By consulting with specialists who understand why it is important and how to go about enacting positive change, I hope to find out.
- *Examine the Idea or Problem and Gather Information about It.* My background and specialty in the art classroom is ceramics, so I searched for existing educational resources that promote how to use clay to promote SEL goals. I adapted the curriculum and corresponding lessons that I have created to use some teaching and learning strategies that are tied to this area. I modified two projects' processes and outcomes to be more inclusive of recommendations, based on my interviews and review of literature.
- *Plan Action.* I modified two out of six existing projects from my ceramics curriculum and incorporated eight of the key recommendations that I gathered, based on my research. These key SEL skills promote the following: embracing diversity, empathy, integrity, grit, self-control, self-management/self-discipline, interpersonal/relationship skills, and self-expression/mastery. I considered how the materials, the structure of the lesson or project, and other factors set the stage for promoting positive SEL engagements using clay.
- *Take Action.* I then worked with two high school Ceramics I classes during the fall semester of the 2021-2022 school year to see how my attempts to enact connections between theory and practice did or did not support students' social and emotional well-being.
- *Reflect on the Consequences.* I made observations during this process to see how students seemed to respond to these recommended approaches. I also include photographs of the art generated by students, and capture some of their informal thoughts as I reflect on our teaching and learning experience. I acknowledge that my findings are based on my first attempt to put theory into practice within my ceramic classes and will not necessarily be true for other art educators who try a similar strategy in their own ceramics classrooms.

Data Collection Tools

My data collection tools used for this study were:

1. *Interviews.* I conducted interviews with two professionals, one in SEL and one in art therapy / art education.
2. *Student-Generated Artifacts.* I analyzed student-generated artifacts to consider if theory had informed the teaching and learning process.
3. *Observations and Reflections.* At the conclusion of this action research study, I share my findings regarding the effectiveness of the recommended strategies I encountered and consider if and how I might further improve my attempts to support students' social and emotional well-being using clay.

Using these three data collection tools, I am enacting the process of *triangulation*. Thomas (2017) recommends triangulation as a process of using three data collection tools to understand one topic of study more thoroughly. Triangulation is not meant to verify through multiple test points but is more akin to building an argument with three pieces of data.

Protection of Participants

This action research study features two interviews: one with a licensed art therapist / art teacher named Robin Sheldon, and the other with the Director of Counseling and Student Services, named Phil Kavanagh. Both participants were asked if they wished to reveal their names or remain anonymous for this study. They both consented to revealing their identities. Students' artwork is shown, but never students themselves. All observations shared with me by students are based on informal interactions we had during our ceramics class in the high school setting. The identity of students is protected.

Limitations of the Study

While I would have liked to have seen how implementing these eight key recommendations may have impacted all six lessons for this ceramics course, time was a constraint. Another constraint is the difficulties in measuring inexact experiences, such as how enacting select key recommendations does or does not impact learning and well-being. The goal is a subtle one; a process of engaging with students and setting the conditions for the desired results to unfold. As such, it is not an exact science. In fact, even as a qualitative inquiry, my findings can be contested, as interpreting how actions are impacting mental well-being is a subjective process.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion section, I follow the recommended steps for an action research study, as outlined by Thomas (2017). What follows are my findings, based on my interpretations of interactions with my interview participants and high school ceramics students. I consider the work created by two groups of ceramic students after I modified my lesson to incorporate more SEL goals and share my observations and reflections regarding this process.

Step One: Define the Problem

In the three years of teaching in my current school, I have seen an increase in students with anxiety and emotional disabilities. To informally understand this change, I examined data from *Infinite Campus*, our district's student information system (SIS) listing students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans for accommodations and modifications. This platform shows that the case load of students with anxiety and emotional disabilities has more than tripled in all my classes. Yet applying this data to students within my classroom remains unclear due to the following:

- *Could the same population of students have these needs, but they're only now in my classes?*
- *How and when are students being classified with these disorders (i.e., could it be after I've had them in 9th or 10th grade)?*
- *Have the same number of students always had these needs and are only now being classified for them?*

I am not a counselor or art therapist; however, I have conducted my study as both a teacher and researcher, trying to implement methods or strategies to assist students' social and emotional well-being. Our district has promoted SEL as a part of the Whole Child Success Team, stating that, "A focus on the whole child promotes the development of students who are socially, emotionally, and physically healthy" (*Whole Child Success Team*, n.d., para. 1). Teachers are tasked to be a part of the team to help students develop socially and emotionally, and I fully support this endeavor.

Step Two: Examine the Idea or Problem and Gather Data about It

Insights Collected from Interview Participants Phil Kavanagh and Robin Sheldon

I interviewed Phil Kavanagh and Robin Sheldon via e-mail for the purposes of this action research study. To see the full interviews, please see Appendices A and B. Both e-mail interviews began with my three research questions:

1. What recommendations do specialists in counseling and art therapy have for promoting well-being in the classroom?
2. How can an existing curriculum / lessons be modified to be more inclusive of these recommendations?
3. What impact, if any, does enacting these changes in the art classroom have on the teaching and learning experience when working with clay?

Phil Kavanagh is the Director of School Counseling & Student Support for our school and the interview closely followed the three questions above. It turns out that the majority of explicit teacher led SEL activities happen at the elementary and intermediary school level in our district with a variety of lessons / activities designed to explicitly work within the social and emotional realm, including mood meters and dedicated time set aside to regulate emotions and check on ability to learn. At the secondary level, there is no explicit SEL curriculum in place, although Kavanagh believes this will inevitably change over time.

One part of the first two questions answered connected to what I have seen in the SEL literature, "sharing good and bad experiences in a safe environment create[s] opportunities within a classroom for learning that may be difficult to measure, but are impossible to miss" (P. Kavanagh, personal communication, Feb. 9, 2022). Kavanagh goes on to reiterate that while some teachers balk at the time missed with these kinds of SEL skills in the classroom, "much more is lost by kids being preoccupied with other thoughts and feelings, and in not feeling safe" (personal communication, Feb. 9, 2022). The third question regarding how these SEL skills may or may not interact with a ceramics course elicited a new intersection between clay and SEL skills in the form of counseling and sensory experiences:

> I know in many counseling situations, if you can direct attention elsewhere, it's much easier for someone to lower their guard. Working with clay would be both a physical and mental release, allowing the student to be absorbed in the material and what it is becoming. The goal would be to relieve the student of the typical self-talk and preoccupations that prevent authentic conversation and self-understanding . . . I would argue that people who are engaged in a creative endeavor like working with clay are engaging parts of their brain that create physical and emotional changes, even if temporary, that are numbed from the more typical, passive watching routines we all fall into. As a sidebar, this is one of my challenges with some of the direction of art courses, where traditional academic stressors become part of the experience. We can end up unintentionally negating the therapeutic environment that artwork has the significant potential of creating. (P. Kavanagh, personal communication, Feb. 9, 2022)

Based on my interview with Kavanagh, I was able to appreciate many benefits to using lessons with clay as a tool to encourage SEL outcomes:

- Engagement with clay offers a chance for disrupting negative self-talk.

- Engagement with clay can allow room for students to become absorbed in the tactile qualities of the activity.
- Creating a relaxing and hands-on activity with clay can give students freedom to lower their guard.

I also agree with Kavanagh's sidenote about how teachers are constantly tasked to legitimize the study of the arts. This limits the time and energy that teachers of the arts may have that could otherwise be used boosting students' social and emotional health. Yet, I am also reminded that Kavanagh suggested that any attempts to measure social and emotional learning will be challenging.

In my interview with Robin Sheldon, we discussed how art teachers are continually charged with keeping the arts seen as relevant or important. Sheldon is currently working as an art teacher but is also a clinical licensed art therapist, or CLAT. The interview began with the three questions, but quickly derailed into a conversation about the heart of teaching, making art, and how art therapy and art education are distinct while also sharing that healthy and vital core of the human experience. I found the following ideas relevant to my classroom practices:

> [I]t is somewhat unethical to try to introduce actual therapeutic techniques in a classroom environment unless there are real support structures in place and the classmates are respectful of boundaries (R. Sheldon, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022).

Sheldon notes that when in a protected environment with either one or a small number of *patients,* not students, there are supports in place if something dangerous or sensitive is brought up. However, teachers do not have recourse or protections for students in this regard, should a dangerous or sensitive issue arise. Rather, a classroom teacher would follow school protocol and contact the appropriate mental health professionals in the school and reach out to parents to further help the student with the problem or issue.

While art teachers cannot enact therapy in the classroom, as the research and interview have both shown, art teachers can still create meaningful experiences, establish positive relationships, and create opportunities for students to learn and grow. Sheldon notes what art teachers can provide the following:

1. Create opportunities for self-expression.
2. Encourage students to experience mastery.
3. Provide some calming and relaxing moments when fully engrossed in a process.

The fear is that with role misunderstandings, teachers should be protected from the weight of attempting to create an environment that isn't ethically sound to sustain. Art classes can be enriching without being therapeutic, and there are art therapists for students who need them should they need that support.

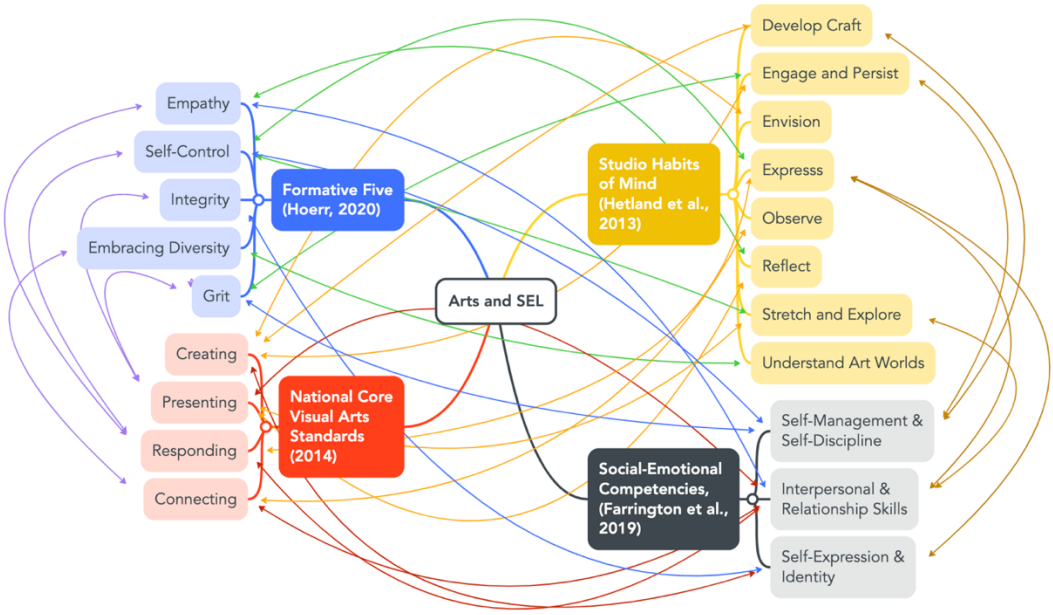
As far as legitimizing the discipline of art, Sheldon proposes that the arts are more akin to foreign language and how art education is about learning a visual language as well as learning about the art world as a separate culture and worldview. Instead of adding academic rigor in the way of math or reading to legitimize the subject, we should think about art experiences and language experiences on the same level. From my past experiences in foreign language acquisition, I remember an emphasis on small exercises, collaborative projects, practicing in the language, and

doing personally guided research in the language of study, all of which is similar in art classes as well.

Step Three: Plan of Action

In consideration of both my research and interviews, I modified my ceramics curriculum and corresponding lessons to incorporate recommendations for how to support students' social and emotional well-being. My course curriculum is shaped both by the National Core Visual Arts Standards (Shepherd, 2014) which focus on the four artistic processes of *creating, presenting, responding,* and *connecting.* Additionally, I referred to the *Studio Habits of Mind* (Hetland et al., 2013) to develop craft, engage and persist, envision, express, observe, reflect, stretch and explore, and understand art worlds. I started my plan by attempting to connect the SEL skills along with the art practices necessary for a successful art course (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Mind-Map Connecting the Formative Five (Hoerr, 2020), Social-Emotional Competencies (Farrington et al, 2019), National Core Visual Arts Standards (Shepherd, 2014), and Studio Habits of Mind (Hetland et al., 2013).



The curriculum and corresponding lessons I inherited when I joined the high school were solely focused on process, such as: six pinch pots with differing qualities shown in each, a coil pot, a slab wall pocket, mask-making, a slab-constructed box, and a piggy bank. I have been slowly *adapting* the curriculum to be more personally meaningful for students, more inclusive of multicultural and contemporary artists, and now to include SEL skills into the curriculum. My new six units for *Introduction to Ceramics* include the following six projects:

1. Creating a set of three pinch pots with a connecting theme.
2. Creating a coil pot with Grecian form but incorporating a modern narrative.
3. Creating a slump-mold vessel with student-made stamps.
4. Constructing a mask based around investigating a culture of interest.
5. Constructing a slab-constructed vessel.
6. Developing a final project of interest based on research into a ceramic artist of choice.

My action plan incorporated eight of the key recommended SEL skills from the research into my curriculum (Figure 4). These key SEL skills promote the following: embracing diversity, empathy, integrity, grit, self-control, self-management/self-discipline, interpersonal/relationship skills, and self-expression/mastery.

Figure 4: Table Showing Eight SEL Skills Within Each Project.

	SEL SKILLS	Embracing Diversity	Empathy	Integrity	Grit	Self-Control	Self-Management / Self-Discipline	Interpersonal / Relationship Skills	Self-Expression / Identity
PROJECTS									
Pinch Pots				X		X	X		
Coil Pot		X	X		X				X
Slump Mold / Stamp						X		X	
Mask Research Unit		X		X					X
Slab Vessel					X			X	
Individual Inquiry			X			X	X		X

While I am continually working to adapt and integrate SEL skills into all six projects for ceramics, for the sake of depth, the focus of my curricular changes for this action research study are in the first two projects: the three pinch pots and the coil pot. These are not only the first two projects that students encounter, but also ones that deal with two different focuses, *pinch pots* focusing on a small series of interrelated works and the *coil pot* focusing on making a larger vessel with illustrative and storytelling elements.

For the pinch pot project, I adapted the lesson Florence Cane discussed in Edith Kramer's (1971) book, *Art as Therapy for Children* for high school students and for a three-dimensional medium. I wanted to integrate the whole body via blind "scribbling" or manipulating wet clay, free sculpting without sight, as recommended by Cane. This sculpture was then studied and whatever can be seen will be the basis for the students' pinch pot series. Motifs or symbols were then to be further developed, but they must have had some basis in the initial 3D scribble-sculpt. Students then investigated pinching and building methods. The final three began with some aspects of the six criteria from the curriculum that I inherited: twin vessels, a textured vessel, a lidded vessel, a vessel with negative space, or a vessel with a foot, feet, or a base. Students then choose three elements from the six provided and plan ways to develop their initial blind sculpture into a set. The series emphasis is grounded in some elements being repeated or reinterpreted in three different ways. This could be achieved through a repeated motif in form, surface decoration through underglazes, stains, or glazes, or sculptural additions to the exterior of the vessel. The pinch pot project begins with sensory exploration and then allows students to explore abstract thinking and furthering their potential for abstract thinking and individually developing designs unique to them, touching on key recommendations to encourage social and emotional well-being: *integrity, self-control*, and *self-management*.

The coil pot project used to be solely about creating a large coil pot: the process of rolling and attaching coils together successfully. While this skill is important, it's shortsighted when considering the use of coiling as a method not to accentuate the coils, but to create symmetrical works without the use of a wheel. We started by looking at coiling methods by contemporary ceramicists, like Korean potter, Lee Kang-hyo (Goldmark Gallery, 2014), and then look into the

narrative aspects that were typical of ancient Grecian pottery, especially discussing Greek storage jars and how their narrative element could connect to their form, like the women waiting in line for water (Priam Painter, 510-500BC), and Herakles fighting the Hydra (Eagle Painter, 520-510BC) both depicting scenes related to water on vessels used to hold water. We then explore contemporary artists who use vessels to tell stories or celebrate heroes, like Daphne Christoforou, Grayson Perry, and Roberto Lugo. Students were encouraged to consider how their coil vessel can also be an expression of either a personal challenge or used to celebrate someone they look up to. In this way of exploring the *emotional connections* inherent to storytelling from a personal place, this modified curriculum requires *empathy*, because these suggestions have been understood in research to promote student well-being. The project explores cultural differences both in historical works of Grecian potters demonstrating daily life and heroes as well as contemporary potters of various nationalities and races touching upon these ancient forms themselves to discuss contemporary issues. The coil pot encourages growth through grit by a very process-heavy project and opens the possibilities for students to tap into self-expression and identity in their choice for what story to tell or who to celebrate on the vessel.

Recommendations from Eddy et al. (2021) for SEL inclusion in the arts focused on the kinesthetic benefits that the arts provide and how sensory work allows students to work on *interpersonal skills*. When students interact and exchange ideas with each other informally during this creative process, they reinforce the interpersonal skills recommended by research scholars. The other dynamic present is how focused sensory work can be used to distract focus and allow students to open up since pressure of eye contact isn't present and students are physically manipulating clay (P. Kavanagh, personal communication, Feb. 9, 2022). This is best seen in the blind sculpting activity, but also through discussions throughout both projects when given opportunities for formal, subject-specific discussions and informal, social conversations that arise naturally in class.

Farrington et al. (2019) recommended four ways to encourage SEL skills in the arts: facilitate student choice and agency, explore cultures and beliefs, differentiation and flexibility in curriculum, and allowing students to use art as a channel for their personal lives. Each of these skills draw on students to engage in *self-expression*, and *embrace a diversity of ideas*, as recommended in art therapy literature. The coil pot is a perfect opportunity for all four suggestions to be actualized: student choice and flexibility through the content illustrated on the vessel itself, exploring cultures and beliefs through finding artists to use for inspiration in their style of decorating the vessel, and using art as a channel through what story they want to be told or who they want to celebrate. Students can explore any artists they choose for how to exemplify emotions in the narrative, even two-dimensional artists for inspiration on the three-dimensional form since the illustrative quality is necessary for storytelling.

Step Four: How Action was Taken

I had two sections of *Introduction to Ceramics* for the fall semester of 2021, 18 students in Section A and 17 students in Section B. I followed the first two projects in the course to evaluate students' reactions and any noticeable shifts in quality between previous years and this semester. I divided this section into two subsections to discuss each project specifically and how therapeutic practices and SEL strategies came together in each project, as well as informal observations of students in the course.

Pinch Pot Series

Students began this project with a sensory experience that I led. I asked students to close their eyes after being given a lump of clay the size of a golf ball. Students were told they could manipulate the clay in any way they saw fit, inspired by the *blind scribble* recommendation by Cane. After two minutes of *blind sculpting*, I asked students, still without sight, what they felt as they explored the material. Students said that some haven't played with material like this since they were in elementary school using Play-Doh. Some said that they felt more relaxed. Some said they were frustrated that they couldn't see what they were working with. Other students used pencils and objects nearby to cut, tear, or puncture the clay without prompting. Once other students in the class heard this, a few copied the actions. Some students asked if they could try to sculpt something while their eyes were closed, I said yes. After four or five minutes, students were instructed to open their eyes and inspect their sculpture. I asked them to view it from all angles and to try and stand it up in a few directions: is there anything that students could recognize in the clay? I asked students to try to accentuate those qualities to help the sculpture become more objective based on what was seen as they were inspected. Students could then sketch some of those shapes and objects seen in their sketchbooks.

These sculptures are the formative step for the pinch pot series. Some elements from the initial sculpture will be developed for the pinch pot series of three. Students may continue to develop the initial sculpture into a variety of related symbols or decorative elements. The following are examples of student work from both sections A and B (Figures 5, 6, 7).

Figure 5: Pinch Pot Examples Created After Blind Sculpting

Note: Student noted that the texture of their initial sculpture reminded them of bark, which they developed into these linear carvings on their series.

Figure 6: Pinch Pot Examples Created After Blind Sculpting

Note: Student saw waves in their initial sculpture. This was then abstracted into red, orange, and yellow colors for the decoration.

Figure 7: Pinch Pot Examples Created After Blind Sculpting

Note: Student saw a mushroom in the initial sculpture.

Coil Pot

I start the coil pot project looking at some ceramicists who use them around the world to reinforce the idea of promoting well-being by promoting a *diversity of ideas*. First, we looked at Lee Kang-hyo, a Korean potter who uses coil methods to make giant *Onggi jars* used for fermenting various foods, such as kimchi (Goldmark Gallery, 2014), and another looking at the art of Freya Bramble-Carter as she demonstrates the process for making a coil pot like Grayson Perry (Bramble-Carter, 2020). I then led students through an introductory PowerPoint lesson surrounding how ceramic vessels were used in the Greek and Etruscan cultures 2,500 years ago. Students were shown how the stories on the vessels connected to the use of the forms. Students were then shown a variety of contemporary ceramicists who are also using ancient forms but with modern narratives: Daphne Christophorou, Grayson Perry, and Roberto Lugo. Students were encouraged to consider any stories or problems they want to tap into or if there was anyone they wanted to celebrate, in the same way that ancient vessels showed the gods and heroes on the exterior of utilitarian ceramic pots.

I included *grit* as a SEL skill for this project because it is very process heavy. It's time-consuming to score and slip between each coil, then pinch and blend the clay to the right consistency and shape before moving to the next coil in the series. It's ample opportunity for discussion and students opened up about how calm they felt, even with the challenging learning curve necessary for forming the pots. Many students talked about how short the classes felt and often would complain when the period was over, touching upon the focus and sensory combination that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2004) explores in his TED talk about *flow,* the state of immersion in activities requiring high levels of focus and internal motivation. Many students wrote at the end of the course that the class was a way to make friends and deepen relationships because of the flexibility inherent to projects and that they were able to share about themselves through their projects, which shows elements of *self-control* and *self-management*. Their responses show that they felt the benefits of *interpersonal and relational skills,* as the research suggested. The following images are of students' personal stories or people they look up to (Figures 8, 9, 10).

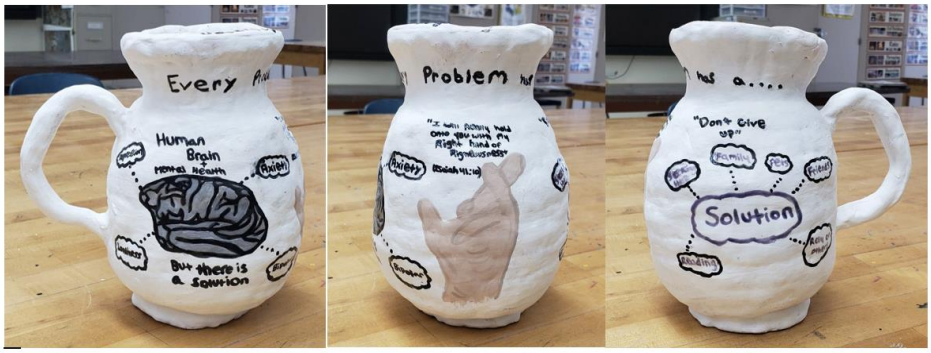
Figure 8: Coil Pot Example

Note: This student created a piece that focused on personal issues surrounding gender expectations.

Figure 9: Coil Pot Example (Two Sides)

Note: This student wanted to make a coil pot showing her celebration of protestors and people engaged in social justice.

Figure 10: Coil Pot Example (Three Angles)



Note: This student wanted to create a coil pot about her struggles with anxiety.

Step Five: Reflect on the Consequences

I am proud of the vulnerability of my students and the hard work they put into the courses that I teach. I wanted to modify the curriculum and lessons so that students could find more purpose

in the course while also learning about the ceramics process and developing integral social and emotional skills. The goals for the curriculum modification were to strengthen students' SEL skills to promote their social and emotional well-being, while also encouraging their artistic progress and interest in the arts. The informal observations of students give me hope that these goals were met. In fact, even now after finishing the focused observations, students still tell me that my ceramics class is the calmest part of their day where they get to just focus on making art.

Leading students in a sensory activity as an introduction to the medium was successful in that it gave students pause and allowed them time to interact with their senses in a way that many courses have abandoned since most classes have transitioned to solely digital work, post-COVID.

What follows are my findings from engaging in this action research study:

1. One change that I may make in the future is to not require students to close their eyes in the sensory activity to start the pinch pot project, since that was a point of discomfort for some students. I believe this was because trust had not been built up to a point where they felt comfortable with that much risk yet. However, I think that more students felt free to attempt an abstracted design resulting from the blind sculpture since they had a visual cue to move forward from instead of trying to think up a design for a series from the very beginning of the class. Consequently, I will provide my future classes a choice.
2. I have further altered my curriculum to start with a collage assignment from old *Ceramics Monthly* and *Pottery Making Illustrated* magazines that serve as finding diverse works that can inspire their projects better than social media sites like Pinterest could provide.
3. I will continue to open up the coil project to include room for students' personal stories or to celebrate a personal hero was also successful. In previous years the assignment was just another fast project meant to demonstrate ability for a specific skill, but now students find ways to share a personal part of themselves or to honor people of interest to them.
4. Making the project more meaningful gave students more purpose and focus, which also deepened relationships in the class as students informally shared about the meanings behind symbols on the pots that they had chosen with their neighbors and with me. Since some of the subject matter was very personal, I never asked students to elaborate or explain the imagery in case it deals with topics deeper than they feel comfortable divulging in a classroom setting.
5. In the future, I want to open up the exploration for ceramic artists to students to explore a wider variety of artists from around the world, instead of gatekeeping by only showing a small group of contemporary potters that I am fond of.

I acknowledge that I focused on implementing eight key SEL skills in these two lessons, but also realize that using them only once is only the first step. With continual trial and error, I plan to continue to foster a classroom environment where the following steps are promoted: embracing diversity, empathy, integrity, grit, self-control, self-management/ self-discipline, interpersonal/ relationship skills, and self-expression/ mastery.

CONCLUSION

Teachers are already tasked with playing many roles, which seem to be expanding each year. In no way do I believe art teachers now need to also be trained in SEL to be successful or

relevant in the classroom. However, I believe art is already a subject which embodies so much of what is healthy for students socially and emotionally. Through the arts, students are already given chances to hone their artistic skills as well as learn about grit, self-discipline, empathy, and interpersonal communication, including the spatial, visual, and verbal forms. Teachers themselves being empathetic to student concerns and being flexible and accommodating to the individual student in one's classroom already gives space for students to continue to hone their SEL skills.

It has been reiterated a few times in this action research study, but art teachers cannot be expected to give therapeutic care or therapeutic levels of individualized attention to students. However, I believe that teachers can slightly adapt any of their projects to include room for students to strengthen their SEL skills through making work that can be personally meaningful while also encouraging technical proficiency in the artistic medium in question. My findings suggest that interactions in the classroom have proven to make students more willing to trust in their peers as well as motivate them to finish projects in question because it means more than simply a graded assignment for a course. While clay is inherently tied to this action research study both for its sensory benefits and its way of hearkening to students' younger selves, I believe the same levels of material exploration and time for free play can be achieved with many artistic media. Yet, finding more ways to promote social and emotional well-being using clay is something that I will continue to pursue, to support the student population that I work with.

Overall, my goal is to continually adapt curriculum to meet the needs of students. I believe that these tools can help strengthen students' soft skills and improve the effectiveness of instruction as well as improve intrinsic motivation in the ceramics classroom. Any ways that we can show students that their ideas and interests merit academic investigation will help them engage in the curriculum and allow them space to process in the classroom, making the classroom a space to develop their own voice more effectively.

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