Visual Art as Pedagogy for Autism: Exploring Educators use of Art Therapy Intervention in the Classroom for Students with Autism

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Abstract

For the purpose of this Master of Teaching Research Project, a qualitative study was conducted that explored how educators utilized daily visual art-based learning experiences into the classroom as a form of therapy, and to learn what outcomes they observe for students with autism spectrum disorder. This qualitative study was conducted through three semi-structured interviews with participants who held experience enacting visual art-based interventions in their learning environments and who held experience working with students with autism. This study’s findings suggest that art therapy serves in supporting exceptional students’ ability to communicate and willingness to engage in self-expression. Furthermore, findings also suggested a number of challenges that teachers are likely to face while implementing visual art-based initiatives in the educational setting. Implications of these findings suggest that art therapy should be valued and recognized in the educational and parental community, not only for its versatility, but for the promising outcomes it provides for children diagnosed with autism. Recommendations are then made for the school community, teacher community, and parental community in that all would value in networking with professionals working within the discipline of art therapy to provide effective training, school support, and home initiatives that can be enacted to ultimately improve the lives of all students. Incidentally, further research has yet to be explored to solidify and further support the movement of art therapy into educational settings.

Key words: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Art Therapy, Visual Arts, Pedagogy, Visual Art-Based Intervention
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1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

In today’s society, children spend the majority of their day in educational settings. It is within these settings that knowledge acquisition and social development take place through interactions, learning experiences, and cognitive functioning. The creative nature of art therapy however, has been found to benefit such cognitive functioning, as well as social development, and emotional development through its creative art process (Flaherty, 2011). A wide range of factors contribute to the variety of definitions used to identify the creative process of art therapy such as personality, theoretical orientation, and context (Case & Dalley, 2014; Malchiodi, 2003). Art therapy's primary goal however, is to encourage self-expression, and provide opportunities for patients to understand and express their emotions while enhancing brain plasticity and development (Flaherty, 2011; Mirabella, 2015).

Final products of the visual art intervention disclose important underlying messages of a prominent or current issues in the child’s life that therapists, or teachers, can utilise to take further action in supporting a child when necessary (Flaherty, 2011). Inevitably amongst the population of elementary students however, exists students who require specialised attention due to a variety of complexities like autism for example. Defined as a neurological disability in which significantly affects verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, and academic performance; autism is a complexity in particular that requires the undivided attention of educators in the school system, especially as its prevalence increases (Donald, Wolery, & McLean, 2004).

Recent studies estimated that the average annual percentage of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in schools has risen from 9.7% to 14.6% (Fombonne, Zakarian,
Bennett, Meng, & McLean-Heywood, 2006; Franc, Bernier, & Chung, 2014). Unfortunately, no specific evidence has been found for the increasing prevalence of autism. This information becomes especially useful for educators as art based initiatives can be beneficial for those students who fall within the low functioning levels of autism and who struggle to verbally communicate. The difficulties children with autism experience due to their disorder are extremely complex, hence the large spectrum that exists today (Evans, 1998).

Communication skills, among other skills, are one of many impairments that children with autism are often faced with. In light of the aforementioned, art therapy’s nature and ability to use little to no communication – yet still able to gather valuable and relevant information from engaged individuals – is a piece that can become extremely useful for educators to consider (Pacheco, 2014; Ju, 2014). Essentially, educators can utilize art therapy to facilitate and aid communication between the student and teacher. Additionally, cross curricular connections have been found between the arts and academic achievement as one study concluded that “the verbal and math SAT scores of students who engaged in art were significantly higher than for students who failed to engage in art experiences” (Jordan & Dicicco, 2012, p. 27). This research in particular offers teachers a rationale for implementing art based learning experiences in the classroom as evidence clearly indicates its benefits in various subjects. Art based learning experiences can therefore be used as a valuable tool to support the academic achievement of all students in the classroom environment.

Not only are there suggested mathematical benefits that may well develop from exposure to the arts, but in current school environments, student health is becoming an important element of consideration for all areas of curriculum as prefaces to curriculum documents now include a synopsis and strategies for supporting student health needs. For example, both revised editions of
Social Studies and Health and Physical Education curriculum contain a three page segment titled “Supporting Students’ Well-Being and Ability to Learn” where general information and strategies are further evaluated. Although this section of the document speaks more towards supporting mental health, this information can also be implied towards students of neurological complexities and developing children in the classroom as cognitive, emotional, social, and physical factors of lesson design have inevitable factors that will positively affect all children.

The document states that “an educator’s awareness of and responsiveness to students’ cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development is critical to their success in school” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 4). In light of the aforementioned, it is undeniable that teachers are the individuals most likely to impact the behaviour and complex needs of children, however, research has reported a high demand for professional training and pedagogical support (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011). A surprising 36% of teachers reported on this subject indicating that they did not acquire the level of knowledge necessary to meet the mental health needs of the children nor did they feel adequately prepared to identify or implement practices to do so (Reinke et al., 2011; Coholic, 2011; Campbell & Townshend, n.d.).

This collected information indicates that teachers are likely to approach challenges when implementing art based practices for supporting students with complexities as there already exists a lack of knowledge and experience for standardised differentiated practice. It is clear that more resources and training are required for teachers in order to meet the needs of the growing population of complex learners. Teachers have also reported, alongside the lack of training and knowledge, busy schedules, financial impediments and public pressure from family members and school boards that ultimately contributed to the challenge of implementing art as a form of therapy into the classroom environment (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.; Lasry, 2010, Jordan &
Dicicco, 2012). Although schools are aware of the fact that art is one of the four core components of Ontario’s mandatory curriculum for grades 1 through 9, many schools devote less than 25% of their time and resources to the arts” (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). Not only has programming been reported as a time constraint, but limited work and planning hours also posed as barriers for educators attempting to incorporate additional visual art opportunities for their students.

Financial impediments were yet additional barriers to visual arts integration as budgeting decisions were often made to reserve funds for other means within the school. What was sacrificed however were usually creative materials, and external art programs meaning that students were not provided with adequate materials or experiences to fully engage in genuine and effective visual art learning experiences (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). Finally, external pressures from school boards, organization philosophies, and caregivers posed as challenges for the implementation of visual art-based initiatives as school boards and organizations demanded specific expectations and criteria, while the parental community voiced their opinions regarding the value of visual arts.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

In view of this problem, the goal of my research is to learn how a sample of elementary teachers are incorporating daily visual art-based learning experiences into the classroom as a form of therapy, and to learn what outcomes they observe for students with autism spectrum disorder. I aim to share these findings with both the teacher community and educational research community in order to encourage the implementation of visual art-based interventions within the educational environment.
1.2 Research Questions

The primary question guiding this study is: How is a small sample of elementary school teachers designing lessons that use art as a form of therapy and what significant outcomes do they observe from students generally, and students who are diagnosed with autism more specifically? Sub-questions to further guide this inquiry include:

- How did these teachers develop their confidence and competence in using arts-based learning as a form of therapy?
- What challenges do these teachers face when creating arts-based activities and how do they respond to these challenges?
- What resources are available to support these teachers in this work?

1.3 Reflexive Positioning Statement

As a person who enjoys the tranquil and therapeutic feelings of creative activities such as colouring, painting, scrapbooking, sketching, etc., I have developed a strong interest in learning more about the therapeutic benefits of art, and am motivated to learn how I can incorporate creative activity in educational environments so that I can encourage self-expression, brain development, and social-emotional development of all children in the elementary grades. I can recall specific experiences as a primary student in the kindergarten classroom. My favourite activities included painting, colouring, and drawing. These activities were only available to me during centre rotations and during free periods however, but I ensured that I engaged in at least one of these activities during the school day as it instilled calm onto, what I felt was, an overwhelming and stimulating environment.
As I have come to realise and learn about the calming effects of visual art activities through research and through personal experiences, I ponder how these activities would affect the population of individuals acquiring a neurological disorder who would perhaps experience beneficial outcomes from the tranquil experiences of visual arts. Although these educational environments within Canada acquire individual characteristics and miscellaneous populations, it is inevitable that amongst all students, there are those who require specialised attention. Throughout numerous practicum experiences, I have been observant to the fact that amongst the larger school population there exists a fair portion of children with autism diagnosis.

I have learned that even within the population of these specialised students exists diverse behaviour that must be supported in a variety of ways. It is here where I question how students with autism would benefit from visual art based interventions in the classroom. I am cognisant to the fact that art based learning experiences are implemented in most educational instructions, however, to what degree are these experiences being implemented with the intention of being therapeutic? And how can I support these students through this type of practice in the classroom as a teacher? My passion for supporting and teaching students has brought me here into this teacher education program, where I have nurtured my inquiries regarding the benefits of visual art interventions, and where I can uncover potential outcomes for students with exceptionalities.

1.4 Preview of the Whole

To respond to the research questions I will be conducting a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview 3 teachers about their experiences implementing arts-based learning for therapeutic purposes in their teaching, and the outcomes they observe from their students with ASD. In Chapter 2, I review the literature in the areas of art therapy and
autism. Next, in Chapter 3 I elaborate on the research design. In Chapter 4 I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature, and in Chapter 5 I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas of Art therapy intervention, autism spectrum disorder, and student experiences with art therapy. Additionally, I review literature that explores current challenges relating to implementing visual art programming, and teacher preparedness and training for supporting students with exceptionalities through art. More specifically I review themes related to the beneficial outcomes art therapy suggests for children with autism. I start by reviewing the literature in the area of art therapy and autism to explore various definitions of each term and consider art therapy’s hypothesised benefits for children with autism spectrum disorder. Next, I review research on students’ experiences with art therapy. From there, I investigate the current challenges related to implementing art programming within the school schedule in order to discover explanations for the lack of therapeutic art initiatives in the classroom. Finally, I explore teacher preparedness and training concerning children with exceptionalities and how they are being supported through visual art experiences.

2.1 Defining Art Therapy and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Art therapy is a treatment and intervention used in the classroom that has been examined by several researchers, however, it is imperative that this treatment, and the neurological complexities of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are specifically defined before connections are made between art therapy and ASD.
2.1.1 Art therapy

Art therapy is an innovative and fascinating form of treatment that exists amongst individuals today which has evolved over generations into a psychodynamic process generated from the complimentary features of art and psychoanalysis (Evans, 1998; Pacheco, 2013; Case & Dalley, 2014). Due to its divergent nature, a wide spectrum exists in which therapists use to define art therapy and is dependent on the initiators personality, theoretical orientation, and context (Case & Dalley, 2014; Malchiodi, 2003). For the context and purpose of this literature review, art therapy will be defined as a nonverbal creative and healing process of art making that reflects the individuals thoughts and feelings (Malchiodi, 2003). The common rationale standing behind art therapy however, is that both the therapist and client engage in a meaningful relationship in which both parties participate in visual art processes while analysing the client’s products as representations of past or present underlying issues (Evans, 1998; Case & Dalley, 2014). Although literature has indicated the benefits of art therapy, further research indicates the limitations that currently exist within the process of art therapy. For example, limited research exists to provide a convincing amount of evidence to support the effectiveness of art therapy while also failing to assess its risks and benefits (Mirabella, 2015).

Although conducted studies have found positive outcomes with the use of art therapy, most sample sizes consist of only 6 to 8 participants which is too small of a value to be creating largescale generalizations (Mirabella, 2015; Ju, 2014). As previously mentioned, the nature of art therapy is quite diverse in that its process depends on the initiators personality, however; participants’ personality traits also present themselves as variables, as individuals may experience the process in a variety of ways creating inconsistency with results (Mirabella, 2015; Ju, 2014). This inconsistence only presents itself as a problem when this form of intervention is
used on a larger scale to make generalisations as the process of art therapy can be very personalised, hence the strong relationship between client and therapist or educator (Case & Dalley, 2014; Malchiodi, 2003; Evans, 1998).

Attributable to short-term interventions, some findings have produced temporary results and similar to diverse personalities, the efficacy of art therapy cannot effectively be addressed with studies of multiple neurological complexities (Mirabella, 2015; Malchiodi, 2003; Ju, 2014; Evans, 1998; Pacheco, 2013). Although limitations to art therapy exist, it is clear that research, although containing small sample sizes, presents promising outcomes for developing children and those of complexities, which will be explored further, and should not hinder the implementation of such initiative in classroom environments.

### 2.1.2 Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder poses varying complexities amongst diagnosed individuals. Autism is thought to be a pattern of underconnectivity among various regions of the cerebral cortex effecting thinking processes, emotion, and comprehension while also producing repetitive and rigid behaviour (Pacheco, 2014). Although they may appear unsympathetic, engaging in a social interaction generates frustration due to the underconnectivity that takes place in the brain of individuals with ASD (Pacheco, 2014).

As these individuals “experience difficulties with representational thought and sharing experiences with others” it is likely that egocentrism is also at the forefront of their behavioru as the child’s ability to recognise differential perspectives is affected by autism (Evans, 1998, p. 18). Considering the thinking process and representational challenges children with autism face, what appears interesting is that this thinking process inevitably takes place, but occurs primarily
visual in nature (Lasry, 2010). Teachers can ultimately support the learning of children with autism through visual representations in which they can visually display their learning oppose to providing written feedback. Considering this, it is undeniable that art therapy in the classroom is likely to offer beneficial outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder.

It is important to note however, that based on finding from recent studies, it has been estimated that the average annual percentage of students diagnosed with autism in schools have risen 9.7% to 14.6% (Fombonne, Zakarian, Bennett, Meng, & McLean-Heywood, 2006; Franc, Bernier, & Chung, 2014). No specific evidence has been found which suggests contributing factors to the increasing prevalence of autism however, but teachers should be adequately quipped with resources, mentors, and strategies or interventions, such as art therapy, that can be used to support the learning of this rising population of complex needs.

2.2 Challenges Related to Implementing Visual Art Programming within the School

Schedule and Environment

The majority of children in today’s society spend more than half of their day in the school environment (Lasry, 2010). Based on this statistic, the school environment seems ideal for implementing therapeutic interventions for children. As the simplistic painting and colouring materials required for art therapy are easily accessible, it can easily be assumed that integrating such a program into the school schedule entails little restructuring and planning. However, a large number of educators included in the reviewed literature experience a variety of challenges including financial impediments, busy schedules and public pressure from family members and school boards (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.; Lasry, 2010, Jordan & Dicicco, 2012).
Within the Ontario curriculum, art appears alongside three other mandatory components of programming for students in grades 1 through 9, indicating its importance within educational environment (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). Unfortunately, although art programs exist within the large majority of schools; reports of the program’s duration is found to be inconsistent as some schools engage in strong creative art programs, while other institutions devote approximately less than 25% of their time and resources to creative arts (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). School boards have reported experiencing struggle due to challenging programming and budgeting decisions such as eliminating arts programs and cutting budgets for creative materials, which have ultimately derived from financial impediments (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.).

While institutions experience financial crises, educators are faced with demanding school schedules in which they are expected to arrange and customise to fit the needs of their students and occupational expectations like meetings. Although visual art interventions are found to be effective for all students in the classroom environment, art programming is only required to be conducted on a weekly basis; therefore, it comes as no surprise that educational institutions have reported to lack art programming within the curriculum due to busy agendas (Lasry, 2010).

Although research supports the integration of art therapy within the school system, it also suggests that consistency is necessary and requires ongoing assessment and monitoring when implementing art therapy as it eventually becomes a routine process creating seamless transitions between subjects (Lasry, Stanovich & Perpt). However, based on alternative research that supports teacher’s demanding schedules, educators who strive to integrate art therapy within the classroom environment may feel pressured to create this consistency from time constraints and expectations from curriculum standpoints (2010).
“Children’s eagerness to produce marks seems to be innate” Evans (2016) claims however, as children are often observed running their fingers over a steamed pane of glass, using branches to form lines in sand, and will most likely produce drawings if paper and crayons are made available (2016, p. 19). Evans (2016) clearly indicates that although instructors may face demanding agendas, alternative approaches exist to implement the creative and therapeutic techniques of visual art especially if children innately hold such creative expressions. While pressures from daily agendas exist, as do pressures from external forces like family members, principals, and school boards as important decisions surrounding the arts curriculum are made “locally, board by board, and often school by school” (Campbell & Townshend, n.d., p. 4).

Family members hold a large percentage of external stress as approximately 72% of Canadians feel as though exposing children to the arts is important and necessary (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). However, current and ongoing changes within the school curriculum, from principals and board members, create senses of urgency and confusion for both teachers and family members as art currently stands as a mandatory component in the school curriculum, while families obtain varying opinions and values regarding visual art that range from those who strongly support the visual arts to those who consider it to be frivolous in nature (Campbell, Townshend, n.d.; Ju, 2014).

Buttignol (1998) rises similar opinions within her research but found instead that teacher’s viewed art as frivolous as they explained that the nature of the classroom becomes disruptive and embodies opposing ideals or schemas in regards to the classroom environment. Although one may imagine a simplistic integration of art curriculum and art therapy in school systems; it is clear that educators would face a number of pressures deriving from possible financial issues, demanding schedules, and expectations held by principals, and family members.
2.3 Effects of Art Therapy on Autism

As both terms have already been appropriately identified, it is here where connections can be made between the convenient nonverbal processes of art therapy and how research has described its effects on children who fall within the spectrum of autism. The visual processing that takes place in the minds of children with autism spectrum disorder ultimately aids the processes of art therapy, as it is similarly visual and imaginative in nature (Evans, 1998, Pacheco, 2013). Art therapy allows children with ASD to utilise social, communication, and language skills, through the oral dialogue that occasionally takes place, preparing them to communicate effectively with their external environment (Evans, 1998). This bidirectional interaction only takes place when a level of comfort with all elements of the therapeutic process has been established as these elements become factors in the success of the treatment due to sensitivities, therefore; the environment, materials, and instructors are involved in fostering cognitive and meaningful communication amongst children with ASD (Evans, 1998).

Due to its versatility, art therapy can be recreated within settings external to a therapists office, such as classrooms for example, where art therapy can intentionally take place, through children’s art work, ultimately allowing teachers to further engage students requiring therapeutic interventions, or taking advanced actions in critical scenarios (Lasry, 2010). Being reported as one of the best methods for children with autism, these visual art processes have the ability to develop patience aside from improving communication skills as the focus relies on manipulating artistic elements instead of engaging in constant interpersonal interactions (Lasry, 2010 & Evans, 1998). This alternative approach, although sometimes lacking verbal communication, still creates dynamic interaction through a less intimidating approach for children with autism. Furthermore, this interaction, ultimately allow these individuals to appropriately discharge emotions or
aggression enabling self-regulation (Pacheco, 2013 & Lasry, 2010). Visual arts also allow these exceptional students to produce work that contains deep meaning and reflecting, being elements in which may not be represented through written work or oral discussion (Lasry, 2010).

Discovering these connections through the visual, concrete, and playful nature of art, all children obtain the ability to develop a sense of self and resilience to effectively work through present difficulties (Ju, 2014, Pacheco, 1998 & Lasry, 2010; Case & Dalley, 2014). These connections however, are not formed solely from the manipulation of creative materials, but are formed through the oral conversation that can occurs during the creative experience as well. Individuals have the opportunity to process rationales behind their creative piece and simultaneously express their emotions verbally (Evans, 1998). If a child has not yet acquired this ability to make sense of exterior anxiety through dialogue, the visual art process of art therapy can act as a substitute as it has been found to calm the inner chaos that exists in children with anxiety and ASD (Curry & Kasser, 2005).

Over 9 in 10 individuals shared such observation of children who had engaged in the visual arts within their school system indicating that creativity and imagination improve, self-efficacy increases, and that writing and speaking skills enhance as well (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). These findings are especially useful for educators and parents of children with ASD as these children who fall within the spectrum of autism often experience a wide range of social complexities (Evans, 1998). Depending on the severity and of the neurological complexity of the child however, art therapy may not be as effective as it has been claimed (Mirabella, 2015). Outcomes are only experienced when the function of the brain is in a healthy state, indicating that because art therapy acquires the ability to access information and requires some
form of communication, if cognitive operations of the brain have been severely compromised, reaping any form of benefit from art therapy will be nearly impossible (Mirabella, 2015).

In other settings, children with autism were observed engaging in visual art and among those who displayed little to no interest in the art work had later failed to recognise their own pieces of work, nor did they obtain the intention to see it again when asked (Evans, 1998). These observations raised several questions between researchers regarding whether or not children with autism are producing and or engaging in beneficial ‘artwork’ if the intention to communicate experiences cannot be fully managed (Mirabella, 2015). Unfortunately researchers concluded that additional testing is required for art therapy as its benefits have not been fully assessed (Mirabella, 2015). Regarding the purpose of this research, it is important that these findings are taken into account as there is a potential that, through further conduction of art therapy for children with autism, products may not be acceptable evidence to indicate underlying issues or emotional connections.

In this case, implementing art therapy into the classroom would serve educators, and children with autism, little to no purpose as true connections between self and world and emotional development would fail to take place ultimately challenging the purpose of this method. More research regarding the outcomes of art therapy may need to be evaluated, however, intentionally implementing art as a form of therapy in the classroom has evidently been proven to be effective for all children of developmental and neurological abilities.

2.4 Student Experiences with Art Therapy

While research has been conducted regarding art therapy’s benefits for children falling within the autism spectrum, and typically developing children; documentation has been noted
regarding overall experience and improvements with art therapy. In an intimate study of 3 children, social adaptation, self-acceptance, social skills, and emotional stability were tested through an adjustment scale where the overall emotional adjustment of these children were documented (Ju, 2014). After engaging in art therapy activities, the overall adaptability of these students were tested and had increased from 42% to an overwhelming 81% (Ju, 2014).

As the nature of art therapy appears fun and engaging, children naturally magnetize to its activities and it is ultimately through this pleasurable nature that children’s development of self-awareness, confidence, and emotional regulation are fostered (Coholic, Eys, & Lougheed, 2012). A report from one student indicated that the artistic intervention was “fun” and that he enjoyed the activities that encouraged self-reflection, self-discovery, and appreciated the opportunity to meet other children of whom he was able to find similarities with regarding life experiences (Coholic et al., 2012).

As some forms of art therapy incorporate opportunities to share and present artistic creations with the larger group, stories in which expressed the overall experience while engaging in the art therapy revealed feelings of relaxation, empowerment, value clarification, and increased self-awareness (Hensel, Bradbrun, Kelly, Manahan, Metzinger & Moore, 2012). These reports clearly indicate the positive experiences and benefits found from both typical and atypical developing students in the school system, indicating the value that art therapy may hold if implemented into the school environment. This information is valuable particularly to teachers as this intervention can be used to foster the development of the “whole” child through cognitive, emotional, and social development alongside curriculum learning experiences (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).
2.5 Teacher Preparedness and Training in Supporting Children with Exceptionalities

As children with special needs are beginning to be included into today’s conventional school programming, this trend raises awareness for teachers as many must undergo specialised training in order to acquire the necessary skills to adequately support these unique students (Lasry, 2010). Current research states that a gap exists between research and practice, laying particularly within the area of mental health practices and school interventions, indicating the reported lack of informed and valuable knowledge that exists amongst mental health pedagogy in school systems (Reinke et al., 2011).

These findings become extremely important due to the fact that although educators have the innate ability to foster differentiated instruction to students of varying degrees of development, a lack of experience, training, knowledge, and resources continue to be documented amongst current educators (Reinke et al., 2011). While educators report attaining inadequate knowledge and experiences to support these differentiated students, the physicality of the school environment presents additional challenges in some institutions as they inevitably lack spacing, materials, and organization to support beneficial treatments and programs such as art therapy (Reinke et al., 2011).

It has been reported that of all teacher research participants, 75% have either referred or were currently working with students of whom acquired exceptional needs over the past year, indicating the prevalence of special needs within the school system and the level of consideration needed to be placed towards attaining these needs (Campbell & Townshend, n.d., Rinke et al., 2011). A slight correlation exists within the reviewed research however that reveals a dependent nature, from educators, on school psychologists as they appear at the top of a socially
constructed hierarchy as having a primary role in delivering differentiated service for exceptional students in the school environment (Reinke et al., 2011, Campbell, & Townshend, n.d.).

The lack of experience, knowledge, and skills necessary to meet the needs of children with special needs are justifications for the dependency that exists on school psychologists; however, additional research emphasises that “if interventions are to be successful in the classroom, educators must accept this role and feel they are adequately trained to be successful” (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011, p. 3). Contrary to this statement however, research case study findings reveal tangible evidence that indicates the lack of training that exists amongst teachers.

For instance, of two hundred and ninety two early childhood educators and elementary school teachers, 24% agreed to feeling adequately informed to meet the mental health needs of their students (Reinke et al., 2011, p. 7). Additionally, an alarming 51% of teachers “felt that schools should be involved in addressing the mental health issues of their students” signifying the need for collegial and administrative support (Reinke et al., 2011, p. 7).

Although these findings suggest that educators lack confidence in supporting students with exceptionalities, researchers have found that educators often confuse or overlap their own professional duties with psychologist’s professional duties, leading teachers to deny their abilities in supporting students with exceptional needs (Reinke et al., 2011). Similar to the gap existing in research and practice, a divide exists between educators and psychologists where both professionals are competitive in nature rather than working as a bidirectional system of operators (Stanovich, Perot, & Jordan, 1998).

This scenario is unfortunate as collaboration amongst colleagues is not only most effective for the educational development of the child, but especially for educators who feel
uninformed about effective teaching strategies for their students with exceptionalities as teachers are often asked to initiate the interventions (Lasry, 2010 & Stanovich et al., 1998). These varying perspectives and scenarios brings light to the importance of gaining insight into teacher needs and will allow program developers and researchers to construct evidence-based interventions that will aid teachers in their preparation and training, by exposing them to a variety of specific strategies and techniques (Reinke et al., 2011, Stanovich et al., 1998).

In light of the research purpose, it is possible that if teachers are feeling unprepared and unqualified to teach students with exceptionalities, they may be unaware of the art therapy initiative. Cognizance must be brought to the notion of art as a form of therapy in the classroom as its materials are readily available for teachers and is not required to take place in an institution-like setting with chairs, and isolated environments (Lasry, 2010). Teachers are not always required to obtain formal experience or recognised degrees in order to teach the arts, but are rather required to create safe and supportive environments for children engaging in art activities. As the educator acquires slight control over the process, designing the art therapy intervention activities can surround desired topics that can accommodate well into inquiry based learning as well as curriculum based learning, depending on the teachers preference.

2.6 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examined research that explored art therapy’s effects for children with autism, student experiences with art therapy, challenges that prevent creative activities from being implemented into the school environment, and teacher preparedness and training for students of complex needs. This review elucidates the extent that attention has been paid to defining art therapy and highlighting its potential benefits for children with autism. It also
raises questions about the legitimacy of case study findings due to small sample sizes and points to the need for further research in the areas of assessing the process of art therapy due to factors such as initiator and participant personality traits. In light of this, the purpose of my research is to learn how a sample of teachers are implementing art as a form of therapy in the classroom and to learn about the outcomes they observe for students with autism so that I may inform current and future teaching practices with the knowledge surrounding the benefits of art therapy.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the various components of the research methodology. I begin by reviewing the research approach, procedures, and data collection instruments. I then identify the methodological decision process of participant selection through sampling criteria, sampling procedures, and participant bios. Data analysis procedures will follow, along with ethical review procedures, and limitations and strengths of the research study. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of key methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This research study will be accomplished using a qualitative research approach through a semi-structured interview of three teachers, and a review of relevant literature and existing research pertaining to the research question and purpose. Qualitative research delves into phenomenon that relates to or involves speaking to quality (Kothari, 2004; Rajasekar, Philominathan, Chinuathambi, 2013). Similarly to the investigative nature of qualitative research approaches for finding the effectiveness of mental health strategies or examining human behaviour, for example; my research aims to uncover the benefits of art therapy and its potential benefits for children with autism diagnoses (Kothari, 2004). The existing literature surrounding qualitative research methods often compares its nature to that of quantitative research methods. A reoccurring difference is that qualitative research lacks the analysis of numerical data, and instead, investigates meaning in literature or collected data (Rajasekar, Philominathan, Chinuathambi, 2013; Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012).
It is important to recognize that both qualitative and quantitative data are designed for particular research purposes, but hold no superiority over one another (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012). Qualitative research adds a particular value to research data as it allows readers, and researchers, to become somewhat immersed in the social setting of the population under observation while monitoring and documenting progressive change (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012). Essentially, individuals being investigated in qualitative research, structure the research process and hold significant importance to research findings (Bryman, Bell & Teevan, 2012). Given my research purpose and questions, the qualitative research approach would best suit my intent to discover the benefits that art therapy offers children with autism diagnoses. My hope is to expose these findings to the larger educational community, especially for teachers working with children with autism diagnoses and since these findings pertain to such a specific audience, it inevitably embodies the qualities of qualitative research (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012).

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Given the parameters and nature of this research project, the primary instrument used for data collection in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structure interviews are designed to allow the interviewer to prepare and improvise questions, strategically, to gather further information pertaining to the purpose of the interview (Wengraf, 2013; Galletta & Cross, 2001). This interview process also allows participants to contribute “new meanings to the study focus” through unrestricted elaboration (Galletta & Cross, 2001, p. 24). Semi-structured interview protocols become extremely useful for interviewers as they have the ability to stray away from their structured list of inquiries, and further explore an unexpected area of interest that may arise though conversation (Wengraf, 2013; Gelletta & Cross, 2001).
It is especially useful if this area of interest brings new meaning to the research question and purpose. Given the research purpose and questions, semi-structured interviewing suits the flexible nature of the research purpose which is to investigate the practices and interests of a sample of teachers. This flexibility accesses information that may lie outside the list of predetermined questions. As these questions will not be given to participants in advance, it is important that during the interview process, I will be able to develop questions that will suit unpredictable responses that I feel are necessary to explore. Generating a predetermined list of questions however, reassures that necessary topics are spoken to so that, unlike unstructured interviews, analysis can be completed much easier and is less time-consuming (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012; Kothari, 2004).

3.3 Participants

In this section, I review the sampling criteria I established to select participants for this research study. I then describe the sampling procedure by providing a definition of both convenient and purposeful sampling to yield further context into the methodology of this research study. Finally, through brief biographies, I describe the participants selected for this research study.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria was utilized during the participant selection process:

1. The teacher will have to be or have previously worked in a recognized elementary school.
2. The teacher will have to be or have previously worked with a child with an autism diagnoses.

3. The teacher will have to be or have been involved in art based initiatives within the school system.

4. The teacher must have at least 1 additional qualification course pertaining to visual arts and 1 in special education.

It is often that researchers struggle with determining appropriate research sampling sizes as too small of a sample size may not offer adequate information to support the research question and purpose, while too large of a sample size may be costly and wasteful (Kothari, 2004; Wengraf, 2013). Typically, however, qualitative researchers often select small sample sizes that can include one or even two participants in an effort to highlight the participants unique life experience (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Due to the parameters of this research study, a small sample size of three elementary school teachers was used to investigate the use of art as a therapeutic tool in the classroom, and what benefits it offered for students with autism diagnoses.

Stringent criteria was a contributing factor in determining the participants surveyed for this study. Firstly, due to the fact that I wish to share my findings with the larger educational community, it was imperative that participants were to have been working or have previously worked within a recognised elementary school.

Because my findings also pertain to students in elementary schools, participant exposure within elementary school settings was a necessary element of criteria for my research and targeted audience. In light of my research purpose and questions, teacher participants were required to have been or have previously been affiliated with students of autism diagnoses so that I may learn about the outcomes or observable changes in their behaviour, socialization, self-
esteem, and so on, after having been engaged with visual art activities. Engagement in visual art initiatives was an additional aspect of criteria I utilized to select my participants as my overall intention was to learn about diverse visual art ingenuities that may exist for students in elementary school settings.

While implementing diverse art based activities for students, it was also important that teacher participants held a passion for visual arts and were appropriately qualified through the completion of at least 1 additional qualification course related to visual arts. Unfortunately, participants did not meet this criteria, however, I strongly considered the educational backgrounds of the participants as satisfying elements to meet this outlined criteria. For example, all participants obtained recognised degrees within the general discipline of the Arts, which I felt acted as an appropriate substitute for a visual arts qualification. Lastly, reflexive of my research purpose, ideally, participants were expected to obtain knowledge and appropriate evidence to speak to growing changes in behaviour, socialization, and self-esteem of children with autism diagnoses so that I could draw inspiring conclusions for art therapy and autism spectrum disorder.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Researchers rely on a wide range of sampling procedures, however, the selection of a strategy relies heavily on the particular style of research being conducted, as well as the various qualities and parameters that exist amongst the methodology of the study (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010). In qualitative research, convenience and purposeful sampling procedures are often favoured as particular participants can be chosen to highlight research purposes and questions and are conveniently available to researchers (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010;
Bryman, Bell & Teevan, 2012). Convenience sampling is often used due to the fact that it’s “elements are readily available to the researcher” (Bryman, Bell & Teevan, 2012, p.219).

Purposeful sampling rather, selects particular persons, places, or things that informs the researcher on the specificities of their research, research purpose, and questions (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010). Due to the parameters of my research study, I have used a combination of both convenient and purposeful research strategies to inform my research purpose and questions. Through pre-existing connections from practicum experiences and relatives, I have utilized the strategy of convenient sampling. Searching for and contacting educators within the Greater Toronto Area, inevitably, I also utilized strategies in which derive from purposeful sampling. By selecting individuals who obtain specific criteria, I have selected favourable people who embodied the qualities I was searching for in order to highlight my research purpose and questions.

I began by contacting previous colleagues, teachers, and professors via email where I provided them with a brief description of my research, research question, sampling criteria, and interview duration. Furthermore, I highlight the parameters of confidentiality that took place throughout the period of research development. In addition to contacting previous colleagues, I contacted various Art and Art Therapy organisations and spoke to family members who were able to provide a referral to fitting participants. Through conversation, I emphasised that participants must obtain teaching experience and experience working with students with autism spectrum disorder.
3.3.3 Participant bios

In light of confidentiality parameters, all participants have been assigned a pseudonym to adhere to the ethical considerations of this research study.

Mike

Mike was an Arts Animator who worked with an organisation that fostered a variety of visual and expressive art programming for children with complexities and children in general. Previously, Mike worked at a community theatre company and completed formal studies at an arts college where he acquired a plethora of knowledge surrounding the discipline of visual arts and arts more generally. Within the past 10 years, Mike has acquired a great deal of experience working with students of a variety of complexities, and more specifically, students with autism diagnosis. His role as an Arts Animator has worked in developing his ability to accommodate and modify programming to serve his students with autism. Mike’s experience and knowledge bring insight to the practical strategies used to enact visual art-based intervention into educational settings.

Rexha

Having taught visual arts for over 10 years, Rexha’s experience included working in community centres, art galleries, art organizations, and within local schoolboards. From these various positions, she was able to develop experience working with children from 4 to 18 years of age. Furthermore, Rexha held an undergraduate degree in Studio of Fine Arts which contributed to her expertise knowledge and understanding of visual arts. From these experiences, Rexha has had the opportunity to work with developing students, and students diagnosed with
autism spectrum disorder. Rexha’s unique understanding of visual arts allowed her to create therapeutic experiences for all students so that they may work in developing a variety of aspects like communication and self-expression. By sharing her experiences, Rexha shed informative insight onto how to create practical and effective visual art interventions and spoke to how she overcame a variety of challenges from implementing such activities.

Mariah

Mariah’s experience developed through a variety of work initiatives including teaching digital art literacy programs, leading summer camps and special workshops, and working as a visual arts instructor for the local city’s Cultural Division. Within these positions, both Mariah and the community share similar intentions in that providing equitable and inclusive programming for the community are at the forefront of their initiatives. In addition to her work experiences, Mariah has completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design, and has completed additional courses and certification in visual arts during her college career. Her growing experience working with children diagnosed with autism has brought further inquiry to developing effective teaching tools for exceptional students, while her experience working within developed programs has informed research regarding the common challenges educators face when implementing visual art interventions.

3.4 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis occurs alongside several other “closely related operations” such as transcribing, coding, and data organization, such as, identifying reoccurring themes within collected data and reviewed literature (Kothari, 2004, p. 18). I utilized these methods to
analyse my collected data. These steps in the methodological process were essential for ensuring that my findings were relevant, and that themes could been established so that I may make connections to existing literature (Kothari, 2004). I began the data analysis process by transcribing my audio recorded interviews. I utilised a recording device to audiotape the interviews, and then uploaded these files onto my personal laptop. The transcriptions were completed by attentively listening to the audiotapes and converting all dialog into a typed Word document script (Olson, 2016; Bailey, 2008).

This process, although timely and rigorous, allowed me to analyse and review my collected data in an easier fashion inevitably assisting the coding process. The process of coding entails interacting, grouping, and “memo writing during the qualitative data collection and analytic process” (Arthur, Waring, Coe, & Hedges, 2012; Saldaña, 2009). The overarching purpose of coding is to reduce the collected data to surface relevant correlations between findings and literature (Attride-Stirling, 2001). I often utilized short phrases such as “confidence development,” “benefits: differentiation,” and “outcome: behaviour” to capture the essence of my data for useful reference at a later time (Saldaña, 2009). To further assist the organization of my findings, I used an assortment of coloured highlighters to provide a visual differentiation of each found category within the text of data.

Through a deep analysis of these highlighted themes, similarities among participant reports became evident, which evidently allowed me to organize my collected data into more specific themes. Galletta and Cross (2001) state that grouping data “allows for considerable play among ideas and strengths emerge conceptual frameworks that ultimately inform the study” (p. 128). I utilised this strategy throughout the analytical process. For example, I recognized that participants spoke frequently about their students outcomes following their engagement with
visual art interventions. Therefore, I constructed a category titled “Outcomes” and grouped all codes pertaining to observed outcomes there (Olson, 2016). I then analysed this category and created smaller subthemes related to the types of outcomes participants recorded. Examples include “increased communication,” “relationship building,” “improved behaviour,” and “increased self-expression.”

These organised themes were then grouped together to form the basis of my findings chapter. Once the coding process and had been completed, and categorical themes were developed, I related the themes to what existing research had already identified as most important. The categorized themes that emerged from data analysis ultimately allowed me to identify distinct gaps within existing research. Furthermore, my collected findings presented new ideas and practical examples while also pointing towards areas which required further investigation.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Several policies are put in place to ensure that any form of research conducted in Canada is conducted in an ethical manner (Bryman, Bell & Teevan, 2012). Inevitably, “every research situation has an ethical dimension to it” therefore it is important to recognise and highlight these issues related to confidentiality, consent, right to withdraw, and so on (Bryman, Bell & Teevan, 2012, p. 192). It is important to notify participants that they will not be harmed during their participation in this study as concern for safety should override all other objectives (Bryman, Bell & Teevan, 2012). Given that the research topic, survey questions were not likely to trigger any emotional response, there are therefore no known risks associated with participation in this study. To further ensure the safety of all participants, all participants were assigned a pseudonym.
for the purpose of reference within my written report. Participants’ identities remained confidential and any identifying markers related to their workplace or students were excluded as well.

All participants were notified of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research study. It was mandatory that each participant was aware of their rights as a participant and understood that they were able to “freely withdraw their consent and discontinue their participation in the project” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001, p. 78). Participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts and clarify or retract any statements before I conduct data analysis. All data, including audio recording, was stored on my password protected laptop and will be destroyed after 5 years. Finally, participants were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A) giving their consent to be interviewed as well as audio-recorded. This consent letter provided an overview of the study, addresses ethical implications, and specified expectations of participation (one 45-60 minute semi-structured interview).

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Unfortunately, due to the fact that this qualitative research study highlighted strategies developed only for elementary school students, and more particularly students with autism diagnoses, findings produced by this research study will not be valuable to all populations, but rather a small number of communities. Given the ethical parameters that we had received approval for, the MTRP could only involve interviews with teachers, and consequently it was not possible to interview students or parents, or to conduct surveys or classroom observations. Narrow or specific topics sometimes fail to develop adequate analytical data due to the fact that a small sample of participants are involved (Rajasekar, Philominathan & Chinnathambi, 2013).
Due to the small number of elementary school teachers involved in this study, while the findings can inform the topic at hand, they cannot generalize the experience of teachers more broadly speaking.

In terms of methodological strengths, as previously mentioned, purposeful sampling selects very specific and favourable participants to enhance research findings (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010). Interviewing teachers ultimately allowed me to hear from them in more depth than a survey could allow for, and it also created space for teachers to speak to what mattered most to them when it came to the topic at hand. In this way, the interviews validated participant voice and experience, and was an opportunity for them to make meaning from their lived experiences which inevitably enhanced the research study in relation to its purpose and questions. Interviews also acted as an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practices and to articulate how they conceptualized particular topics, such as visual arts and autism spectrum disorder, in theory and in practice.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the various components of the research methodology which included transcription of data, coding, and data organization. I began with a review of the research approach, procedures, and data collection instruments. I then identified some of the methodological decision processes of participant selection through specific sampling criteria, sampling procedures through convenient sampling, and presented participants’ biographies and data analysis procedures. I then reviewed and outlined ethical review procedures, and highlighted how the small sample size of educators participating in this study acts as a limitation due to the fact that generalizations are impossible to be made amongst the larger educational community.
However, purposeful sampling served as a strength for this research study as I was able to select participants who acquired expertise and unique knowledge that would inform my research study. In the following chapter, I report the research findings.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss my research findings which derive from three semi-structured interviews. Two interviews were conducted through a 45-60-minute face-to-face consultation, while the third was conducted via teleconference. Participants had acquired experience in enacting visual art interventions, and could speak to student outcomes, particularly associated with students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The purpose of the interviews was to learn how teachers implemented art as a therapeutic tool in their educational settings, and what significant outcomes they observed from students with autism. Understanding that communication presents itself as a difficult task for children with autism, I hoped to learn how to foster effective visual art interventions to support, encourage, and enhance the dialogue for these individuals in the classroom environment. I will disseminate by identifying three organized themes in which have derived from my collected findings. The organized themes will appear as follows:

- Participants Relied on Professional Experience, and Acquired Knowledge, as Motives for Developing Confidence and Competence in Using Visual Art-based Learning Experiences as a form of Therapy.
  
  o Participants relied on past and present work experiences to develop confidence and competence in using visual art-based learning experiences as a form of therapy.
  
  o Participants relied on their educational backgrounds, personal interests, and additional qualifications to support their instruction and organization of visual art-based learning experiences.
Participants Overcame the Challenges of Staff and Student Communication, Limited Professional Support, and Dissimilar Perspectives and Philosophies by Maintaining a Flexible and Student-centred Teaching Environment.

- Communication issues between staff and students presented challenges to initiating and constructing therapeutic visual art-based learning experiences.
- Limited training and time constraints posed as challenges to analyzing and implementing the therapeutic visual art-based learning experiences.
- Participants recognized Ontario curriculum standards, family values, and program philosophies as challenging factors to initiating and constructing therapeutic visual art-based learning experiences.
- Participants responded to these obstacles by challenging organization expectations, restructuring the learning environment, and considering students’ interests.

Participants Observed Improved Reciprocation and Self-conduct from Students who are Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Student Generally, Prior to and During Engagement in the Visual Art-based Learning Experiences.

- Participants observed an increase in reciprocation through student-teacher dialogue and peer relationship building among students generally and those diagnosed with autism.
- Participants observed an increase in self-conduct through increased classroom participation, improved behaviour, and increased self-expression among students generally and those diagnosed with autism.
Within the themes, I will discuss related findings, reference participants’ instructional strategies, and deliberate its significance and relation to existing literature.

4.1 Participants Relied on Professional Experience and Acquired Knowledge as Motives for Developing Confidence and Competence in Using Visual Art-based Learning Experiences as a form of Therapy.

Each participant acknowledged a variety of methods utilized to support their development of confidence and competence in using visual art-based learning experiences as a form of therapy. While speaking of their confidence and competence in designing and teaching therapeutic art-based learning experience, it appeared that all three participants made use of professional experience, acquired knowledge, and stakeholder dialogue as supporting motives. They truly valued their expertise and experience within the discipline of art education as it served in enhancing their use and instruction of visual art-based learning experiences as a form of therapy. Interestingly, participants often referred to their personal interest in the arts as a major asset in confidence and competence development.

4.1.1 Participants relied on past and present work experiences to develop confidence and competence in using visual art-based learning experiences as a form of therapy.

Rexha, who has worked as an Arts teacher for most of her life, expressed that she often “[brings] the art into [places] where previous people [had not].” She explained, “I have been teaching visual arts for over 10 years and have worked with many different organizations and so I’ve started slowly and built my confidence and experience that way.” Similarly, Mike and Mariah had accumulated extensive experience. Mike proved his experience when he spoke to his
unique work in community theatres while Mariah expressed her skill development within her employment opportunities. Mike reported, “I come with quite a bit of experience with visual arts. I have always been involved in arts especially in community theatres. So [my experience] probably started there 10 years ago, and continued with some gaps in between.” In light of the research focus, Mariah highlighted how her experiences with students, particularly students with special needs, supported her competency in using visual art-based learning experiences. She highlighted,

After working with children and youth with special needs I feel that I have become more flexible with my program planning. I am able to work with the participant by using basic techniques that suit any situation and severity of special needs. I have become more patient while working with children and youth.

The confidence and competence development among the participants is evident due to the unique work involvements. Given that existing research reports a large percentage of educators who feel as though they lack confidence in supporting developing students, and students with specialized needs, researchers highlight that educators tend to overlap their duties as teachers with the duties of psychologists (Reinke et al, 2011; Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). This overlap contributes to educators’ self-perception that they obtain limited knowledge and experience to support students generally, and through visual art-based practices. Additionally, research suggests that reflecting on one’s own practices was found to serve effectively in teacher competence and confidence development (Bowell, 2010). In light of what research suggests, these teachers were evidently effective in valuing their past experiences as supporting competence motives which has ultimately contributed to their teaching confidence and competence. Additionally, although research reported that teachers were likely to overlap their
duties with the work of psychologists; participants rather considered their colleagues as valuable supportive resources and worked collaboratively with them to produce effective visual art based experiences. While past and present work experiences were found to contribute towards teacher competence, additional purposes such as personal interests, educational backgrounds, and additional qualifications were also found to support teacher competence in using visual art based learning experiences as a form of therapy.

4.1.2 Participants relied on their educational backgrounds, personal interests, and additional qualifications to support their instruction and organization of visual art-based learning experiences.

In addition to participants’ formal certification, findings uncovered that their individual interests and additional qualifications were initiatives in which further supported their competence development. As Rexha spoke about her work experiences, she also described her educational background in visual arts and undergraduate education in Studio of Fine Arts. She explained, “as an artist and art student, throughout my life…that was my passion and that’s all I ever wanted to do. I wanted to be a positive role model for students and young people who might not look into the arts.”

Also, inspired by personal interests, Mike explained his educational background when he shared “I did not go to arts school…although I did go to Arts College. I did not study a lot of arts there but I have always been involved in arts.” While both the research and interviewed participants highlight that formal training is not necessarily required to implement therapeutic art-based learning activities, Mariah, who also held an appreciation for visual art, rather specified that her acquired training improved her planning abilities (Case & Dalley, 2014). She shared,
I always had a strong interest in arts specifically visual arts. I completed my B.F.A in Graphic Design, and completed additional courses and certifications in visual arts while I was in college. I would say having formal training definitely helped me structure and plan better programs for my participants.

Unfortunately, the literature reviewed offers little indication as to whether an Arts educational background, personal interests, and additional qualifications associated with visual arts are adequate qualifications to foster effective therapeutic visual art interventions for students. Literature has learned that a movement of art therapy into various school systems exists, and therapists are supporting teachers with a diverse range of strategies that can be used among students in the classroom (Case & Dalley, 2014). Although participants clearly hold strong interest for their work and have undergone extensive training, research cannot support whether or not these qualifications are sufficient in providing long lasting benefits. Due to the rise in student diagnosis, more research is required to support whether or not formal education and training is required to perform effective treatment within the school environment. (Fombonne et al., 2006; Franc, Bernier, & Chung, 2014).

4.2 Participants Overcame the Challenges of Staff and Student Communication, Limited Professional Support, and Divergent Perspectives and Philosophies by Maintaining a Flexible and Student-centred Teaching Environment.

Throughout their years of experience, participants identified a number of challenges which affected the ways in which they chose to direct and plan therapeutic visual art activities. Among these challenges arose communication barriers between staff and students, varying perspectives and philosophies enforced by curriculum, parents, and organizations, and finally,
limited professional support available to enhance their unique pedagogy. Each participant enacted solutions differently, such as through advocacy, lesson reconsiderations, and maintaining student-centered mindset in classroom planning.

4.2.1 Communication issues between staff and students presented challenges to initiating and constructing therapeutic visual art-based learning experiences.

Working within educational settings requires teachers to communicate effectively with involved stakeholders. Holding various titles and responsibilities, colleagues often collaborate to form safe and supportive learning environments. However, participants reported colleagues as sometimes imposing barriers to their efforts in creating therapeutic visual art activities. In relation to this matter, Rexha addressed her challenge with a colleague who seemed to have created additional challenges for her in the working environment rather than acting as a collaborative team member. She shared,

My assumption was that because [the student] had a caregiver, I would be okay. The frustrating part about the caregiver was that I tried to explain to her that [she needed] to tell me how I [could] adapt the lesson for him but she explained that the student was okay reading a book instead. But he [was there] to learn about art. I noticed that she was actually drawing the work for him [but] I want him to try you know, why would he ultimately be [there]?

Rexha’s experience delivered surprising findings as literature fails to emphasize staff as hindrances to structuring learning experiences. Instead, the literature emphasizes that communication from students diagnosed with autism can pose challenges for teachers who are unfamiliar with these students’ various communicative complexities (Evans, 1998). Similar to
literature’s reports, Mike experienced positive and supportive collegial relationships, and found student-teacher communication to be at the forefront of his challenges. He reported, “the communication barrier where we are speaking the same language but are communicating in different patters is always a challenge. Trying to find a way to having them [involved] in the art is challenging.”

Similarly, Rexha extended this matter when she explained her experience working with students with autism. In her experience, communication and emotional expression were at the forefront of her challenges. She explained:

The biggest barrier I have seen is communication. Sometimes students aren’t able to vocally express themselves. I have witnessed when I’m asking students “How does this make you feel?” I can see on their paper by the way their drawing. When I ask them how they’re doing, they won’t always answer me, they’ll just look at me. So, by asking them to draw a picture for me, it’s neat because I can move from there as a teacher.

The aforementioned challenges regarding communication present insight into the potential supports required for minimizing communication challenges and barriers. Although literature holds limited connection to teacher-staff challenges, it does align with Rexha and Mike’s experiences in that students diagnosed with autism do experience verbal communication challenges (Lasry, 2010). Due to these challenges, these children rely on alternative forms of communication such as technology and visuals (Lasry, 2010). Recognizing this helps educators understand the effectiveness of art based interventions in that they can be used to aid communication with students and reflect student’s thoughts and feelings as both Rexha’s experience and literature have reinforced (Malchiodi, 2003). In agreement, Mariah believed that “the goal of art therapy is not to create a masterpiece but to use it as an effective tool for the
wellbeing of the participant.” While Mariah may have valued this method as a useful tool, some educators may surpass the simplicity of the method as further or exterior challenges such as limited training, and time constraints seem to be prevalent, as will be discussed next.

4.2.2 Limited training, and time constraints posed as challenges to analyzing and implementing the therapeutic visual art-based learning experiences.

Among collegial and student-teacher communication challenges, participants reported that limited training opportunities and time constraints existed as additional challenges in regards to implementing and enacting therapeutic visual art lessons. While participants, and research, point towards the idea that formal training is not mandatory in order to enact visual art as a form of therapy in the classroom, this limited training did affect the ways in which participants analyzed their participants’ experiences and outcomes (Lasry, 2010). For example, Rexha claimed, “I think it is beneficial, but I don’t think it is necessary. I have tried to use art therapy in my classroom, but if I was formally trained, I think I will be able to do better.” In addition to this, she stated, “to be honest, because I’m not formally trained, I don’t know if [the observed outcomes] are because [the students] are becoming more familiar and comfortable or if it is actually my teachings.”

Mike shared a similar experience with a student’s reaction to an art activity. Mike explained, “I wonder if [his efforts] are choices or just his reaction and response. With him it’s an interesting question like whether he even realizes that he’s doing an art project.” Speaking about an additional experience, Mike described his challenge in determining what may have produced the student’s improved outcomes. He shared
I am not sure if [his outcomes] are specific to the art process of him playing with clay. I can’t say that anything has changed in him behaviorally or psychologically except we can say now with more certainty this year that he is completely different.

Teachers’ reports of limited training also appeared within the literature. Reinke et al. (2011) share alarming percentages of teachers advocating for training, and Bowell (2014) reported about “5,400 teachers request support to teach visual art” (p. 11). Considering these aspects, it is evident that training opportunities need to be more accessible for teachers while supporting organizations should accommodate and make themselves available for educators.

Not only has training proved to pose challenges for educators, but time constraints have also imposed challenges onto their planning and instruction time. As Rexha shared,

There are only ‘x’ amount of hours during the day to complete all tasks and subjects. When it comes down to it, then [teachers] only have time to do either sports or art, and most of the time they’ll pick sports.

Evans (2016) argues that alternative methods exist to support teachers’ art initiatives, and that children generally hold an innate willingness to express themselves through visual art when materials are present. Yet, considering Evans (2016) claim, educators still struggle to create consistent visual art interventions due to time constraints. Further, time plays an effect on the consistent delivery of visual art interventions which research has claimed to be an important factor in delivering effective therapy (Mirabella, 2015; Ju, 2014).

Mike spoke to one of his experienced challenges of limited planning time. Luckily, his open ended instruction accounted for his limited planning time in that he found himself to be more creative in his thinking as there was so limited time for planning. Furthermore, he shared
We are practicing what we are calling improvisational art where we are always open to whatever possibilities the kids throw at us and turn that into an art process. It actually takes pressure off making a perfect curriculum type of program versus a more open one. Evidently, Mike ultimately finds this limited time as a benefit to creating open-ended visual art experiences. Mike’s positive experience with minimal planning time brings light to the potential that perhaps other educators may benefit in developing their creative thinking from minimal planning. Mike was challenged to think quickly and creatively on a daily basis which are ideal characteristics that educators are likely to embody over time. In light of this inquiry, participants expressed additional pressures, deriving from external resources that will be explored further in the next segment.

4.2.3 Participants recognized Ontario curriculum standards, family values, and program philosophies as challenging factors to initiating and constructing therapeutic visual art-based learning experiences.

Educational institutions hold a number of involved and imposing stakeholders. These stakeholders, being school boards, students, parents, etc. all hold divergent ideals and expectations of how and what they believe should be imposed into the school system. These beliefs are derivatives from a variety of factors including cultural beliefs, and personal experiences (Campbell & Townshend, n.d).

Participants identified the Ontario curriculum as an element in which present challenges when implementing visual art-based initiatives. While participants planned visual art-based initiatives to implement into the classroom, mandatory curriculum expectations sometimes overrode the initiation of their planned activates. More specifically, Rexha described her
dichotomy. She shared that “one of the problems in the curriculum education system is that they focus too much on technique and it becomes boring for students so I try to do the opposite.” Similarly, Mike shared his perspective of the curriculum and how it limits students’ abilities to use art as a form of expression. He believed that “the curriculum is more product focused.” This subtheme related to curriculum priorities also appeared within the reviewed literature. The literature reported the diversity that existed among educators’ philosophies and curriculum perspectives related to visual art caused teachers to feel pressured in creating appropriate and standardized visual art activities, while upholding therapeutic intentions (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.; Ju, 2014).

Program philosophies were yet another posing challenge to the implementation of art-based interventions as participants felt that they could not work against organizational philosophies but instead had to restructure their visual art programming to fit within their organization’s expectations. The aforementioned were found to be the most influential stakeholders that inevitably, and unintentionally, present challenges for educators. Generally, Rexha advocated that “it takes a village to teach a child. It’s the family, the school, it’s the teachers, it’s everything that comes into play when you’re teaching a child.” Rexha’s experience brings light to that fact that stakeholders have profound effects on programming, end eventually, in class instruction. Clearly, stakeholders need to be more engaged within the education system to produce equitable instruction. In light of this challenge, Rexha explained:

If I was teaching my students the way my school had expected me to teach them, which was you draw realistically and that was your only goal, then the art was not therapeutic at all, it just became another task. And I didn’t like that because it didn’t match my philosophy so I couldn’t stay there.
Mariah shared that “a lot depends on the priorities and standards the school has set for itself. I think you need a lot of support from everyone.” Overall, it is undeniable that each stakeholder is likely to hold varying perspectives, however, these challenges become important aspects to consider as educators should feel supported within their working environments. Research supports the overall goals of each participant in that the curriculum, families, and organizations should come to “realize the value of a strong arts program” (Campbell & Townshend, n.d, p. 28). Acknowledging that participants experienced a variety of obstacles while planning and implementing visual art interventions, it is important to also acknowledge how these educators responded to these obstacles. Recognizing these strategies is particularly important and will hopefully be useful for the population of teachers who wish to implement visual art interventions within their educational environments, as research does not highlight how their participants responded to their challenges.

While participants struggled with curriculum expectations and program philosophies, familial values posed as additional challenges as their perspectives and values of art programming were strongly addressed. Rexha shared that “even though [society] is better than it was 30 years ago, it is not always encouraged in families for people to pursue art.” She continued by explaining,

I love sharing with parents that art will actually help your academics. I’m not a scientist but I know a little bit enough to know that it helps grow the brain differently. Parents might have different expectations, so I have run into some problems that way because they want to see results.

Mariah shared similar experiences. She described that “in some instances, parents have not been supporting where they try to force certain ideas on the participant.” The varying
perspectives that exists between teachers and parents is important to recognise as educators, inevitably, structure their teaching to benefit all students, however; this becomes problematic if their teaching styles and philosophies are working against parental values. In this scenario, it is imperative that teachers learn how to work effectively with parents to find reasonable grounds to educate effectively. Existing literature supports Rexha’s experience as reports of confusion and urgency were derivatives of enforced familial values (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.; Ju, 2014; Lasry, 2010, Jordan & Dicicco, 2012). However, contrary to participants’ reports, the literature reported that 72% of families advocate for arts programming in schools (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.; Ju, 2014).

4.2.4 Participants responded to these obstacles by challenging organization expectations, restructuring the learning environment, and considering students’ interests.

In active attempts to respond to the various aforementioned challenges, participants reported to challenge organization expectations, restructure learning environments, and consider student interests. While discussing her philosophy, Rexha shared further action she enacted to advocate for her teaching style within her working environment. Her decision to challenge administration in hopes they would embrace her delivery of visual art lessons generated unfortunate results. She explained: “I got a lot of uproar from the parents because I understood that the goal was to make this representational thing, but I wanted to work up to that, so I wanted to start with abstract and [people] were not happy.” While Rexha choose to challenge organization priorities, Mike, who felt supported in his work environment, restructured lesson plans to accommodate for the diverse challenges he experienced. He explained a scenario in which he restructured a student’s learning environment, demonstrating his response to a
challenge he was faced with. Mike described a student who struggled to follow circle expectations as he would often remove himself from the circle. Mike felt that the environment of the circle was providing extensive stimulation for the student and was therefore causing his misbehaviour. In support of the student’s needs, Mike and his colleagues adjusted this activity, after which Mike was able to recognise a large shift in the child’s behaviour:

There was one participant who could not sit in the circle, and had to stay outside of the circle. It was either too much for him and his focus was shifting constantly on everything. So, we created a bit of a focus circle with him where he could be near the circle but still separate. He would visit us sometimes, make suggestions, and make requests.

Furthermore, Mike highlighted focusing on students’ interests as effective methods in responding to communication challenges between students. In particular, Mike found that high functioning students diagnosed with autism tend to express their interests more easily than low functioning students. He found that it was much easier to plan next steps for his students based on these observations. Mariah also expressed that keeping the students’ interests and cognitive levels in mind maximizes participation and works in tackling behavioural problems. Although the literature clearly highlights the many similar challenges such as communication, divergent philosophies, and limited professional support or training, the research fails to identify what initiatives were taken to overcome these challenges.

Research identifies that educators tend to overlap their duties with those of a psychologist’s as supporting reasoning for the challenges faced by teachers; however, this is insufficient to support how teachers can build operative communication between staff, encourage dialogue from students, manage diverse perspectives, and feel professionally supported (Reinke
et al., 2011). In light of this matter, the research suggests that further evidence-based research can offer educators a variety of useful strategies to overcome their challenges (Reinke et al., 2011; Stanovich et al., 1998). Once participants have developed effective strategies and have effectively implemented their interventions, outcomes such as increased dialogue and improved self-conduct were observed. These observations will be discussed next.

4.3 Participants Observed Improved Reciprocation, and Self-conduct from Students who are Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Students Generally, Prior to and During Engagement in the Visual Art-based Learning Experiences.

Implementing a number of therapeutic visual art activities, participants, over their extensive years of experience, recall observations from students who engaged in their designed activities. Significant themes arouse among the reported outcomes of their work such as increased dialogue from student, and improved self-conduct or behaviour. While beneficial outcomes were produced from typical developing students, these results were also produced from students diagnosed with autism. Research presents related findings to students’ use of art therapy highlighting important considerations for educators in fostering these types of initiatives into their own educational environments.

4.3.1 Participants observed an increase in reciprocation through student-teacher dialogue, and peer relationship building among students diagnosed with autism.

Understanding that communication skills are one of the major areas of concern for educators caring for children with autism, art therapy, being a healing tool used to reflect the participant’s thoughts and feelings, offers promising solutions for educators to enhance or
increase the dialogue from children experiencing these complexities (Malchiodi, 2003; Pacheco, 2003). With that in mind, participants interviewed for this research used visual art initiatives with similar intentions. For example, Rexha emphasized:

I feel like art is one of the best ways to [make sense of things]. I think students know they’re going through a lot of really tough things growing up and art is one of the best ways to get those feelings out and to be able to share it with the world if they choose to.

She continued to explain that these benefits are “multiplied of what [she] shared” for students with autism spectrum disorder. In her experiences, these particular students experience “even more trouble communicating themselves, and art is a way they can communicate easier.” Recognizing that full and complete verbal communication is not guaranteed to be produced with the use of art therapy, Mike indicated, “you can see their physical responses to things,” which he takes as a form of communication. This method ultimately “helps [him] determine how to [identify] what is beneficial for them [so that he can] continue moving forward [with effective support].” In conjunction with increased reciprocation from students with autism peer relationships resulted from the medium of therapeutic visual art initiatives.

Regarding the classroom environment, Mariah believed that although the benefits of art therapy can be quite broad: “it can prove to be helpful in creating an inclusive environment, [ultimately] making the child feel welcomed and part of the school or classroom environment.” She explains that her traditional forms of art “such as painting, drawing, photography, and sculpture” have led to her observations of her students feeling welcomed as she also ensures to appreciate and affirm all students’ participation in the activity. Rexha also shared an experience where socialization was increased among students in the classroom engaging in visual art interventions. She described,
[When the students] are working on their artwork, they share their ideas with each other and I love that. [This, in itself] is therapy because they’re interacting with people. So, in this kind of situation, it’s like they are all friends, it’s so great.

The literature reminds us that these visual art methods have not only been reported as one of the best methods for children with autism, but are recognized to improve exactly what each participant has had opportunities to observe (Lasry, 2010 & Evans, 1998).

Acknowledging that students are unique and are divergent in development, and in personality, the literature also reminds us that art therapy is likely to produce varying outcomes (Mirabella, 2015). These outcomes are undeniably important for the population of educators. There is no doubt that incorporating visual art experiences with such intended purposes will act as a meaningful and productive tool to support the dialogue and socialization of students with or without diagnosis. Realizing that communication and socialization lie within a larger perspective of outcomes, the next segment will speak to the benefits visual art interventions have produced for the fundamentals of socialization such as classroom participation, behaviour, and self-expression.

4.3.2 Participants observed an increase in self-conduct through increased classroom participation, improved behaviour, and increased self-expression among students generally and those diagnosed with autism.

Classroom participation, improved behaviour, and increased self-expression among students generally, and those diagnosed with autism have been reported as outcomes of therapeutic visual art experiences. While Rexha had expressed various challenges of student
participation and communication, she had observed that her visual art initiatives served in supporting and improving the participation of students with autism. She shared:

Sometimes people with autism can seem like there in their own world, so I can notice that there at least listening to what I am saying, where before, to an observer, it seemed like they weren’t even listening…like they were just doing their own thing, but I can see that they might turn their head and look while they are [working]. They are a little more interested and generally, a little bit more willing to sit and do the exercises.

Evidently, Rexha’s implemented art intervention seemed to work as an effective tool for her student. This finding points towards the potential benefits that art therapy holds within the educational environment to support students diagnosed with autism. While students with autism often experience communication challenges, these students also attain a limited ability to self-express (Lasry, 2010). Mariah had witnessed such an instance with her exceptional students. She shared “I have observed when the participants with autism engage in art activities it helps increase self-expression through art.” These emotions may have been represented through the students’ artwork depending on the craft’s structure, colour, and imagery. Incidentally, self-expression among students diagnosed with autism was naturally enhanced through the use of art-based interventions. Although these examples pertain to students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, their findings still provide insight for students in general who may also benefit from alternative motives to encourage participation. In light of this, Rexha identifies a scenario where, generally, students’ behaviour was improved through the use of visual art initiatives. This outcome was observed within the duration of the school day. She shared:

I have watched the way that students walk into the classroom where they’re all over the place, like their bouncing off the walls pretty much or their having a bad day, and at the
end of the day [they are] like a completely different student walking into my classroom and it’s amazing.

It is important to recognize that outcomes may differ depending on the attitude of the individual, therefore, outcomes may not be produced as quickly as Rexha had experienced. Interestingly, research has indicated that “the current education system is not placing enough value on children’s emotions and appropriate self-expression” (Lasry, 2010, p. 1). Rexha recognized that her visual art initiatives have allowed students generally to practice self-expression. During a volunteer experience, Rexha incorporated visual art initiatives into her sessions with disadvantage youth. She reported that art served to be an effective tool in guiding and encouraging these youths to express themselves appropriately.

Mike had also witnessed his non-identified students express themselves visually. He expressed “I think art in general is a way to help people express themselves. So, we definitely see kids expressing themselves visually.” In light of these experiences, it becomes easier to assume that these visual art initiatives will aid students’ ability and provide opportunities for both students with autism and students generally to self-express. Combining these findings with literature’s claims regarding self-expression and communication in general, educators should bear in mind that art therapy will offer all students effective opportunities to self-express, a skill that is necessary to improve one’s quality of life (Lasry, 2010; Case & Dalley, 2014).

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed my research findings in which I have categorised into three large themes. I then discussed these larger themes in further detail through developed sub-themes. In essence, these findings discovered that participants relied heavily on their educational background and acquired knowledge, through personal interests and additional qualifications, to
foster visual art interventions with confidence and competence. Secondly, while participants faced several obstacles, they were able to overcome them by challenging organization philosophies, reshaping lesson delivery, and maintaining student interests at the forefront of all planning. More importantly, several effective outcomes were observed from students who engaged in the visual art interventions including more frequent communication, improved behaviour, and self-expression.

The significance of these findings sheds light on existing literature by identifying how teachers ultimately overcame their challenges with implementing their therapeutic initiatives within the classroom environment. The existing literature identifies similar challenges, however, fails to identify how, or if, the sample of educators overcame their experienced challenges. These findings will hopefully work in preparing and providing strategies for teachers who plan on implementing art therapy within their educational settings. In Chapter 5, I discuss various implications for the educational community, parental community, and for myself as a developing teacher and emerging teacher-researcher. Furthermore I share recommendations for the school community, teacher community, and parental community.
Chapter Five: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the implications and recommendations of this research study. I disseminate by providing an overview of my key findings of how educators are using visual art as a form of therapy in the classroom and discovering what outcomes were offered for students with autism diagnoses. Next, I will identify the implications of my research study for the educational community, parental community, and for myself as a developing teacher and emerging teacher-researcher. In light of these implications, I identify recommendations for the school community, teacher community, and parental community. Finally, I highlight areas in which I believe require further research to enhance the research surrounding art therapy and autism spectrum disorder.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

The previous chapter of this study outlined a diverse set of findings regarding teacher competence, challenges, and outcomes of using visual art-based interventions in educational settings. Teachers felt that their professional experience, knowledge and collegial relationships supported their competency in using visual art-based learning experiences. Additionally, participants held a strong appreciation for their educational backgrounds, personal interests, and additional qualifications as they collectively assisted their ability to foster developmentally appropriate visual art-based learning experiences for their students. While these educators reported formal training in art therapy was not a necessary element to fostering these types of interventions, they felt that formal training would enhance their implementation and ability to analyze the outcomes of these interventions.
While implementing the art-based interventions, staff and student communication, limited professional support, and divergent perspectives posed as challenges in which were overcome by a unique set of strategies. Participants felt that respecting and upholding their personal philosophies helped them to overcome the overbearing expectations of curriculum and organizations, and helped to build healthy working environments to foster art-based initiatives. Additionally, accommodating and modifying learning environments, and bringing students’ interests to the forefront of art-based design, contributed in overcoming the student communication and participation challenges. In doing so, participants found that identifying next learning-steps for students, and students with autism, became recognizable.

Considering these identified instructional strategies for the visual art-based learning experiences, participants were able to recognize positive outcomes from developing students, and students with autism, who have engaged in the designed art intervention. Participants were able to observe an increase in reciprocation, improved behavior, and increased self-expression from all students in the learning environment. In support of the reported challenge of student-teacher communication, the implemented art interventions created a gateway for students, those with autism in particular, to use as a means to communicate pieces of information. Participants held strong beliefs that the art-based learning experiences were utilized as helpful opportunities to uncover beneficial pathways for students with autism to socialize and manage behaviour. With these outcomes in mind, the study evidently provides findings in which will serve as a benefit for the educational community – including school boards, schools, and teacher – and parental community to consider when fostering visual art-based learning experiences.
5.2 Implications

Within this segment, I identify the implications my findings from the previous chapter presents for the educational community – including educators, schools, and school boards – the parental community, and for my own pedagogical practice.

5.2.1 Educational community

Amongst the large population of educators, a plethora of teaching strategies are enacted daily to support the wide range of diverse learners in their learning environments. While these strategies may also be beneficial, some require specialized material and technology to provide appropriate outcomes. In light of participant experiences, the simplicity of visual art-based learning experiences should be recognized as it can be easily implemented in a variety of educational settings and utilizes basic materials – like paper, pencils, paint, etc. – that are readily available within educational settings (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.).

Its functionality can be supported in a variety of settings as its materials can be adapted to support diverse environments and the divergent learning styles of students (Campbell & Townshend, n.d.). While speaking of their experiences, participants shared using therapeutic visual art-based experiences within traditional educational settings, community groups, and in outdoor settings, highlighting its diversity. Additionally, therapeutic art-based experiences were reported to have been used in settings where visual art had not existed; therefore, if this is a possibility for some, these research findings shed light onto art therapy for the larger educational community to consider given that educational settings and materials support the functionality of therapeutic visual art initiatives. With this in mind, these findings are evidently important and useful for the educational community.
While art therapy’s basic instruction and implementation are aspects that should be considered by the educational community, subsequent teacher knowledge and training in art therapy, although limited, should be recognized as a valuable component of teacher competence in and for fostering effective therapeutic interventions. All participants claimed to have no formal training in art therapy, however, expressed that training would aid their ability to foster more effective therapeutic interventions and would further aid their ability in making more informed conclusions about their students’ outcomes. This finding brings awareness to the fact that training opportunities might need to be explored in supporting teachers who wish to foster effective visual art-based interventions in their classrooms.

5.2.2 Parental community

While therapeutic visual art-based learning experiences offer insight to the educational community, it also offers promising findings for the parental community of developing students, and parents of children with autism. Although a variety assistive technologies have been designed for children with autism, visual arts is one that also provides beneficial opportunities for students with communication challenges. All participants spoke to the impressive outcomes they were able to witness among their students after engaging with multiple visual art interventions. Educators witnessed a growth in students – including those with autism – including improved willingness to participate in large group activities, classroom behaviour, and ability to self-express with the use of visual arts. Through the tactile engagement and free representation, educators believed and witnessed how visual arts inevitably invited self-expression among students as it became evident in their behaviour and appropriate disclosure of information.
In addition to this, an immense amount of communication was also produced using the visual art interventions. One participant used visual art interventions during the initial periods of the day to structure her teaching and classroom environment to support the attitudes and needs of her students for that day. This information otherwise would not have been freely disclosed to her, but she could identify her students’ challenges through their drawings. With these participant experiences in mind, it is evident that these art-based initiatives provide support and offer benefits for students in their school environment. However, these findings clearly bring light to the parental community as these initiatives can be extended into the home environment to provide extended support and assist the role of the caregiver. Parents and caregivers should recognize the practicality of therapeutic visual art initiatives that can be uniquely used in the home environment. Its simplistic nature can be easily fostered and used to support challenges that parents may be experiencing.

5.2.3 Personal teacher-researcher development

Developing through teacher practice, I have come to value the unique ways educators support students of complex needs, particularly autism spectrum disorder. Within recent practicums, I have come to recognize that classrooms house at least one student diagnosed with a degree of autism diagnoses. Holding a strong appreciation for visual arts – the main component of art therapy – I developed an inquiry regarding art’s therapeutic possibilities in the classroom to support students diagnosed with autism. While exploring a plethora of research, I have come to learn that while it is a fun and engaging exercise, visual arts holds the ability to enhance the attention, behaviour, self-expression, and communication, through simple activities such as drawing pictures, painting, and colouring, for all students in the classroom environment. My
findings will ultimately enlighten my own practice as I plan on infusing my learnings from this study into my own practical initiatives. While I have always intended on infusing visual arts cross-curriculally into the school regime, I am now inspired to foster visual art-based learning experiences in a unique way to promote communication, self-expression and aid behaviour for all students in the classroom.

Not only will my practice as an educator be enhanced from my learnings, but I have come to recognize the value of being appropriately informed about autism and art therapy. Like the reviewed literature, participants reported feeling unacquainted with the knowledge of art therapy and how ‘direct’ outcomes should appear. Although observable benefits were reported and recognized, participants – and literature – felt that added training would assist them in differentiating outcomes from simply enjoyment or stimulus to the art-based intervention. In reference to this learning, I plan to become adequately trained so that I may confidently differentiate between actual outcomes and reactions, and so that I may enhance my ability to plan effective therapeutic art-based interventions.

5.3 Recommendations

Educators hold an important role in the lives of students. Their ability to structure learning experiences that support the development and knowledge acquisition of students with complex needs can sometimes pose as a challenging task. However, when these accommodations and modifications are designed and implemented effectively, the feeling of reward is hard to ignore while students are flourishing. An effective method that teachers often rely on to enhance their practice is to seek additional training through a selected set of additional qualifications, and workshops. In light of this, research findings developed from this study point towards a need for
additional training for educators in the area of art therapy or preservice educational courses structured around the use of visual arts and its ability to support complex needs such as autism.

While educators – both novice or experienced – enhance their understanding within the area of art therapy, the notion of using visual art to support developing and complex students will rather be thought of as an additional and effective method of supporting students in the classroom, as current perspectives hold art therapy to be unrelated to the classroom setting. Becoming informed about this unique method will generate well-rounded teachers who can support a diverse range of learners in a plethora of effective manners. While educators can seek services and training to inform their knowledge, building collegial relationships – as research has pointed towards – offers similar assets to a teacher’s professional development. I feel that while teachers are maintaining a supportive networking system, they will be provided with opportunities to discover unique strategies – like art therapy – that can be used to support the learning diversity that exists within most classrooms.

Furthermore, I believe that strong professional networks also function in supporting collegial work efforts, and create safe and supportive working environment, which in turn, will contribute to teachers’ competence and confidence development within their discipline of employment. Recognizing the aforementioned recommendations, I believe that school boards will benefit in valuing the use of art therapy within the school systems. Thus, the larger ecosystem of the educational environment should seek professionals who are willing to offer their therapeutic instruction within the educational environment, and or seek training opportunities to provide their educator's opportunities to develop professionally within the discipline of art therapy. Offering these additional opportunities, I am confident that school boards will create more well-versed and supportive school environment.
Research often highlights that, although art therapy has proved to deliver a variety of beneficial outcomes for students, its results may vary (Mirabella, 2015; Ju, 2014). However, this notion shares similarities with the idea that not all forms of differentiated instruction work for all students. This points to a question: if art therapy has the potential to offer benefits to a sample of students, why should it be ignored? Offering various methods to support children’s development, ultimately provides opportunities for all students to become successful and influential beings in their future endeavors. While educational boards can consider infusing art therapy into school regimes, these recommendations extend to parents and caregivers supporting students in their home environments.

When educators suspect a student is experiencing challenges within a particular subject area, supportive exercises are often sent home or recommended to be practiced within extracurricular environments to enhance skill development and learning. While this method is perceived as effective, I believe that extending the therapeutic and assistive methods of art therapy into the home environment will present increasing benefits for students, and students with autism. Just as math extension activities, for example, serve to enhance the development of math skills to improve school performance, incorporating art therapy within the home environment will extend its benefits found within the educational environment to the home environment, ultimately creating a well-rounded lifestyle and support system for the child to develop and thrive. Additionally, I believe that further exposure to the intervention will create for seamless transitions between the home and school environments. Based on my findings and what my research has learned, it is evident that the teacher communities, school boards, and parental communities can become more informed about the offered benefits of art therapy.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

Limited research exists within the realm of art therapy, particularly around the notion of art therapy and its benefits for children with autism spectrum disorder. Additionally, limited research exists to provide further suggestions for how educators are implementing such methods into the school regime and environment. With this in mind, further research would benefit in providing additional evidence to support communication strategies for students with autism. Once this information has been adequately researched, more institutions will likely grow an appreciation for and recognize art therapy to be an effective means to support developing students, and students with autism in the classroom. Due to the fact that this research only speaks to a small sample of teachers who enact visual art initiatives in their educational environments, more extensive samples of educators will work to generate accurate results that can be used to support the movement of art therapy into educational settings.

Although the reviewed literature and findings reported equivalencies among the reported challenges teachers faced when implementing visual art learning experiences in their classrooms, the literature failed to explain how or if these educators were able to overcome these challenges. Participants expressed their reliance on restructuring their instruction and planning of visual art initiatives to support experienced challenges. However, I am curious to know if these methods provided long lasting solutions and whether or not there are other methods or resources available for educators to refer to when experiencing challenges. Evidently, further research is required in order to support the use of art therapy in the classroom setting, however, all participants supported the idea of integrating such intervention in the classroom, and were able to speak to documented outcomes for developing students, and students with autism. With this in mind, it
would be interesting to gather tangible and direct evidence of the lasting benefits of classroom-based art therapy interventions for students with autism.

5.5 Conclusion

My dissemination of this chapter began with a summary of my key findings in which were deeply explored in Chapter 4. I then outlined the implications of my work for the broader educational community where I stressed that art therapy should be valued and recognized in the educational community, not only for its versatility, but for the promising outcomes it provides for students, and students diagnosed with autism. I then outlined implications for the parental community in that these art-based initiatives – if have been shown to prove beneficial in the school environment – should be practiced within the home environment to extend the benefits it serves. Later, I identified specific actions or recommendations for the school community, teacher community, and parental community.

In essence, these communities would value in networking with professionals working within the discipline of art therapy to provide effective training, school support, and home initiatives that can be enacted to ultimately improve the lives of all students. Finally, I highlighted areas for further research as certain gaps and additional inquiries were developed through the completion of this study. Overall, I am confident that this study has created a movement within the educational community toward integrating visual art-based learning experiences to support students, especially those diagnosed with autism.
References


Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. NYU Press.


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Date:

Dear ______________________________,

My Name is Daniela DiNardo and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how elementary teachers are using art as a form of therapy in the classroom and to learn what outcomes they observe for students with Autism. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have additional qualifications in special education and the Arts, and who enact art therapy in their teaching practice. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela Macdonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Daniela DiNardo
daniela.dinardo@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela Macdonald
Contact Info: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Daniela DiNardo and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introductory Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how teachers use visual arts as a form of therapy in the classroom and what outcomes they observe from students with autism. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your background and practice. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audiorecorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information:

1. Can you describe your current position?
   a. What grade do you currently teach?
   b. Do you fulfill any other roles or responsibilities in the school in addition to being a teacher?
      ❏ Can you describe your school for me? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)
2. How you always taught grade _______?
3. How many years have you been in the teaching profession?
4. Can you tell me about your background experiences with the visual arts?
   a. What personal, professional, and educational experiences have informed your commitment to the arts and helped prepare you for this work? *listen and probe re: undergraduate studies, personal arts practice, teachers college, graduate studies, professional development, AQs etc.
   b. Do you have any formal training in the area of art therapy? If yes, what is it?
   c. Do you have any training in counseling psychology? If yes, what is it?
5. Can you tell me about your background experiences working with students with exceptionalities, broadly speaking, and students with autism, in particular? *listen and probe re: personal connections, formal studies, teachers college, Spec ed AQ, professional jobs related to this work, professional development etc.

Teacher Perspectives:

1. When we spoke about your participation in this research, you indicated that you use the visual arts as a form of therapy in your teaching practice. How do you understand the meaning of art therapy? If you were going to describe it to someone, what would you say? [What does the term art therapy mean to you and how would you define it?]
2. In your view, what are the goals and benefits of art therapy (for people generally speaking)?
3. What do you believe are the benefits of art therapy within school and classroom environments?
4. What do you believe are the benefits of art therapy for students with exceptionalities, generally speaking, and students with autism more specifically?
   a. What are some of the key barriers that you have seen faced by students with exceptionalities in schools? In your view, how, if at all, can art therapy offer a response to these barriers?
   b. What are some of the key barriers that you have seen faced by students with autism? In your view, how, if at all, can art therapy offer a response to these barriers?
5. In your view, is it important that teachers be formally trained in art therapy to enact it in the classroom? Why / why not?
6. How, if at all, do you see art therapy being aligned with the curriculum?

Teacher Practices:

1. To start, can you tell me more about how you teach the visual arts, generally, in your teaching?
   a. Do you teach visual arts as a specific subject area, or do you integrate it across the curriculum? Why?
2. What are some of the advantages of implementing visual arts into the classroom setting?
3. How do you structure visual art experiences for students in ways that draw out their therapeutic benefits?
4. Can you provide me with some examples of how you teach visual arts and what therapeutic outcomes you have observed from students?
5. Can you provide me with some examples of how you have created opportunities for engagement with visual arts for students with autism, and what outcomes you observed from them?
6. What do you think some of the advantages that children with autism gain from engaging in visual art activities? How do you know?
7. How, if at all, has your experience integrating visual arts for therapeutic purposes changed your teaching practice and/or experience of teaching?
8. What resources support you in your capacity to teach visual arts for therapeutic purposes? *listen and probe re: materials, space, websites, books, guest speakers

Supports and Challenges:

1. What factors, if any, make it possible for you to teach visual arts for therapeutic purposes? (e.g. supportive admin or parents, mental health priority of school board).
2. What challenges do you face when teaching visual arts for therapeutic purposes?
3. What concerns, if any, do you have?
Next Steps:

1. What do your future goals entail regarding promoting visual arts as a therapeutic tool in the classroom?
2. What advice can you offer educators who wish to implement art based activities as a therapeutic tool in their classroom setting?

Thank you for your time and participation.