Validating Boyness: How Art Education Allows Male Adolescent Students a Space for Authenticity, Vulnerability, Empathy, and Connection

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Validating Boyness: How Art Education Allows Male Adolescent Students a Space for Authenticity, Vulnerability, Empathy, and Connection

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Validating Boyness: How Art Education Allows Male Adolescent Students a Space for Authenticity, Vulnerability, Empathy, and Connection

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Master of Art

This thesis examines societal norms and unwritten rules for boys as they mature. It is hypothesized that most boys deal with emotional suppression or dissociation in varying degrees of severity due to traumas during their developmental years. This dissociation creates an inability to express their own emotions adequately and therefore affects their ability to empathize with others. A lack of vulnerability may also be a common challenge among boys society still considers vulnerability weakness. This pattern continues into adulthood and is then perpetuated through posterity and future generations. This thesis explores through a qualitative case study how using art integration in an English classroom, in tandem with teaching a novel written by Patrick Ness and illustrated by Jim Kay, and an emotional education curriculum produced by Yale’s Center for Emotions, can give male adolescent students safe opportunities to reassociate with their emotional selves and emotional expressions. Methodologies I used in addition to qualitative case study are interviews of adult men, lyrical sociology in the form of vignettes, and inspiration from an Indigenous methodology of bringing the relationship between researcher and research to the forefront.

Keywords: emotional health, adolescent male, emotional expression, boys, education, art
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Preamble

As I sat at my desk with my jaw sullenly resting on my palm, I stared at the computer screen. It was one day of many that I seriously considered walking out of the school and never returning. I had one class period with 35 boys and five girls who hated school and me, their English teacher. I had district leaders observe my class, the department chair gave advice, and I counseled with the other teacher on my grade-level team. The opinion was that it was just one of those classes that give you teacher PTSD, and that I should fight through the rest of the year and give them worksheets for self-preservation. The naïve, bright-eyed enthusiasm I brought in August had been squeezed out of me like apples in a cider press. I could no longer take it. My fingers typed into the search engine “How do I educate a boy?” and I laughed as the wait icon swirled—it’s not like Google would give me anything of merit.

Three links down, an article in The Atlantic caught my eye: “The Miseducation of the American Boy: Why boys crack up at rape jokes, think having a girlfriend is ‘gay,’ and still can’t cry—and why we need to give them new and better models of masculinity.” My students snickered at horrid jokes, and I caught more than one looking at pornography at the back of my classroom. I realigned my spine in my rolling chair with its broken headrest. Was this my answer? Were the boys in my class not the only ones? I leaned forward to devour the 21-page article.

One consensus was that society allows boys to feel two feelings: anger and anger. There is little space for vulnerability in American boy culture. They want to cry, be heard, and have relationships. But they can’t. The biggest source of shame is weakness (Brown, 2013; Orenstein, 2020). When I asked one of my current classes what vulnerability was, a boy in the back immediately piped up and said, “Weakness.”
I started paying attention. I started being intentional with my boys. I started asking my students to write about their feelings with the promise that they wouldn’t have to share with anyone, not even me. I said, “I have a problem. I’ve noticed that society doesn’t let you feel. People assume you don’t have feelings. Now, I’m not saying you have to cry all the time and wallow in the depths of your emotions, but most of you feel more than you’re showing, and there’s no one to tell that to.” Without fail, there was usually at least one brave boy in the back of nearly every single one of my classes who pumped his fist and responded with one of the following:

*Preach!*

*Finally, someone gets it!*

*Can you tell this to my dad?*

*How do you know all of this?*

*It’s never going to change.*

*Well, it’s not like I can just cry.*

Depending on the class, a good chunk of the boys had a responded similarly and the more introverted ones would at least nod their heads, communicating silent agreement.

After this discussion I started to see that some of my teenage male students needed a space for emotional expression, and writing became the medium. Even though I said they didn’t have to share, the braver boys started to open up. They talked of hopes, dreams, fears, and pain. They started showing up as their “authentic selves” in my classroom (Brown, 2013). I used an existing curriculum and intertwined it with my own to teach about emotional intelligence, empathy, vulnerability, and validation. I gave them emotional vocabulary and communication lessons. I used cross-curricular art projects for emotional expression. We read a text called *A
Monster Calls in which the main character is entrenched in grief and can’t get out. His sources of coping are isolation and a monster alter ego. Everyone was hooked, which is uncharacteristic of students in a ninth-grade English class. The boys reacted differently than before. I knew I was on to something.

But then, I needed to examine my personal life. You see, I’m super good at marriage. I’m so good at it, in fact, that I’ve been married twice. Both men left me. I realized that lack of space for emotion was not just a boy issue. It was also a man issue—it was my men’s issue. I had to do something. Where are the spaces for men’s feelings? How do we as a society give men that space? How do I give men, and boys within my influence, a way to show their greatest strength which is vulnerability?

And my son. He’s tall for his age and his heart big like his body. A big heart is usually synonymous with the trait of having easily stirred emotions, yet a large body size is often associated with physical and emotional toughness. My son is quicker to cry than my daughter; he is angrier faster, laughs harder, and can’t stand when his peers don’t validate him. In essence his feelings stretch taller than his already large stature. I gave him the children’s book The Boy With Big Big Feelings by Brittany Winn Lee for Christmas, and he read it every night for 3 months. For him, the book gives him representation because he identifies with the main character who copes with and manages feelings that he assumes no one else has. The boy, with intense sensitivity, eventually finds a sense of belonging with children who accept him for who he is. My son does not have a societal model that behaves like him. He knows he cannot be his authentic self in a world that crushes the true strength of vulnerability. He has already learned that his young male peers will not hold space for him. He’s tried. And he is often shamed.
Culturally, we need change. Our boys are aching for it. Our men are aching for it too. To give them a space of safety it will take an entire societal paradigm shift to recognize that vulnerability is a strength. That change will not happen overnight, but it will potentially reduce violence, abuse, hatred and whole slew of challenges.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Boys are over diagnosed for ADHD, underdiagnosed for depression, and are less likely to report sexual abuse (Orenstein, 2020; Romero et al., 2018). As a society, we encourage boys to be prematurely tough, which causes them to disconnect from their emotional selves. Boys master how to mask feeling pain, sadness, loneliness, a desire for attachment, and any feelings associated with vulnerability. We need to be paying attention to what is hidden.

There is a time and place for vulnerability not to be shown in certain circumstances, however, consistently stifling feelings associated with vulnerability causes problems. Men are more likely to be the aggressors in domestic violence acts, have higher rates of dying by suicide, and are stoically suffering (Real, 1997). Power, money, fame, and oppressing others will never fill the void that vulnerability, empathy, validation, and authenticity will. If men cannot or will not cultivate these emotional feelings and skills, they may lose the opportunity for deep connection and closeness in their interpersonal relationships. They may experience sadness and loneliness. Humans need connection to thrive, and that requires emotional intelligence and availability to communicate and vulnerability to connect.

Culturally, we have feminized many types of feelings such as sadness, loneliness, and vulnerability. Men and boys are taught to hide or ignore these feelings. Feelings reserved for males are strength, stoicism, and even anger (Brown, 2013, 2020). However, this does a disservice to males because few, if any, fit these rigid gender stereotypes. Some of us know this intellectually, but behaviorally we don’t always abide by what we know. Our beliefs about gender roles may even subconsciously affect how we interact with others. For example, a chilling study found that boys are more expressive as babies, but their mothers are less responsive to them than their female counterparts. We teach boys to ignore their feelings. We
stop hugging our boys affectionately around the age of 7 (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Our young boys start to pull away emotionally—or are they being pushed away?

Socially and culturally, we view vulnerability as weakness and being weak is usually felt as shame. The most significant source of shame for males is to be perceived as weak (Brown, 2013). Weakness and its connection to shame present a slew of implications, applications, and considerations for the education of boys. Our males need healing. They have numbed themselves simply because they are typically not taught any other coping skills (Brown, 2013).

In my junior high school English classroom, I have noticed that boys are not well connected to their emotions. As a researcher, my response is to explicitly teach SEL (Social Emotional Learning) to allow boys to permit themselves to experience the spectrum of emotions. My curriculum, which integrates art with literature, and a district endorsed SEL program, is designed to help create a space where boys can cultivate skills of empathy, vulnerability, and a healthy expression of a full range of emotions. They have power to choose to step into their authenticity by using the tools the curriculum provides.

Because vulnerability can be a scary place even for the bravest of boys, art can be a less threatening medium of expression. As a research instrument, my curriculum explores the following questions.

1. How does an art integrated English curriculum focused on social and emotional learning influence my male students' expression of empathy, vulnerability, and emotion?
2. How does deliberately teaching social and emotional skills using art influence my teaching experience?
3. The following sub questions are also indirectly explored:
a. What has been, what is and what will be masculinity?
b. How do we teach our boys emotional intelligence?
c. How do we as a society be a safe place for boys’ and men’s vulnerabilities?
d. How do I cultivate safety and teach these skills within my scope of influence as a teacher and parent?
e. What does art have to do with these ideas and processes?
f. What will my findings have to do with my experiences with boys and men?
g. How does one step back into feeling after dissociating?
h. What feelings are bottled and why?
i. What is the difference between controlling feelings and managing feelings?

My thesis includes three main components: First I will present a case study of my experiences teaching a ninth-grade-art-integrated English curriculum focused on social and emotional learning. My curriculum experiment explored my experiences as a teacher and what happens to my male students’ expressions of empathy, vulnerability, and emotions when emotional skills are paired with art and literature.

Second, I will discuss my analysis of a series of interviews with adult men regarding issues of gender, vulnerability, and social and emotional learning. To complement my classroom research, I interviewed these men about their concepts of masculinity and vulnerability and collected their stories. As an outsider, I cannot pretend to understand the innerworkings of manhood thoroughly, but I have had many experiences with men and boys. I wanted to bring my own biases and experiences with questions of masculinity and vulnerability to the forefront.

Third, I will include autobiographical narratives in the form of lyrical sociological vignettes to explore my emotional journey related to personal concepts of masculinity and
vulnerability. Both the interviews and personal narrative complement my study of an integrated art and English curriculum designed to explore social and emotional learning. The insights I gained from the interviews and my own reflections of vulnerability provided additional insights about the challenges facing boys in our culture and schools. I did not interview my boy students, therefore the topics and issues brought up by the interviewed allowed me to see potential problems my students face without directly asking them. This awareness increased my ability for sensitivity as a teacher of possible issues my students silently battled. The vignettes allowed me to also be more aware of my ever-changing bias about my topic and my students. Self-awareness in a teacher student relationship is vital for authentic connection. I could not expect my students to be the only ones reconnecting with parts of themselves from which they suppressed or dissociated with, and the vignettes were a part of my process.

In Chapter 2, I examine existing research about the social and educational climate for boy culture in the United States. I studied family and societal culture and how males’ experiences with social systems and expectations affect their construction of an emotional framework. I also describe a Social and Emotional (SEL) curriculum and the benefits of explicitly teaching social and emotional skills. This thesis includes a curriculum combining art and English to explore social and emotional learning. My field notes and personal reflections about teaching this course are included as an analysis of the curriculum experiment.

Chapter 3 describes my methodologies, which include indigenous inspired considerations of relational connectivity awareness, autoethnographic study, qualitative case study research, lyrical sociology, and interview methods. Findings and reflections are summarized in the concluding chapter, and directions for future research are outlined.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

From baby to boy, to teen, to man the males of our world deal with emotional complexity and trauma that goes unrecognized. In the past 50 years, they have been demonized because of the misuse of power, strength, money, and leadership. These societal issues needed to be addressed, and these behaviors (many of which have become better) needed to stop. However, are some of these behaviors due to a deeper social issue?

Feminism gave women the option of being whoever they wanted to be. It permitted them to have a voice. That is the challenge of women in our culture, the process of finding their voice. The challenge of men is finding safety to open their hearts and share their vulnerabilities. There are currently men at the proverbial front lines of this movement. Just as women permitted themselves to be “Rosy Riveters,” powerful professionals, and athletes, men need permission to be emotionally intelligent, vulnerable, and relational. Power, money, and fame will never fill the void that interpersonal closeness and connection will. I maintain that examining why toxic male behavior patterns happen in the first place could be helpful in allowing men to be whole and become what society needs—even those who are not explicitly toxic need healing. It starts by considering how we educate our boys socially and emotionally at home and school. We can do a better job.

There are societal norms and unwritten rules for boys and I even observed within the context of my ninth grade classroom. It is hypothesized that many boys experience varying degrees of dissociation in their emotional development due to traumas, which may result in difficulties empathizing with others, particularly in severe cases (Real, 1998). A lack of vulnerability may also be a common challenge among boys because they are taught from a young age that vulnerability is a weakness. The pattern carries on into young adulthood and
adulthood and then is perpetuated through posterity and future generations. Current research on education and boys and how we educate our boys socially and emotionally at home and school is relevant to this investigation.

**Young Males and Parents**

Education of our boys begins before they ever put massive backpacks on their tiny bodies and take their first steps toward independence in the preschool classroom. Education happens in the home where learning is informal. In that space of osmosis unwritten social rules are learned from parental behavior. However, the parenting choices of both mother and father are potentially influenced by society’s ideals of what boys should be. Often, socially accepted norms of gender are perpetuated (whether intentionally or unintentionally) in the treatment of boys. Even in the care of infants, there is a disparity between boy babies and girl babies. This can affect how very young children learn about emotions.

Research on interactions between mothers and their babies illustrates how the process begins revealing that, totally unaware of their actions’ consequences, genuinely living caretakers prematurely dampen their sons’ sensitive emotive sides. Boy infants, at birth and for months afterward, are much more expressive emotionally than girls—they startle, excited, cry, and fuss more than girls—though caretakers sometimes believe this infant emotionality is a sign of “fragility” or lack of self-control, rather than an enhanced communication of feelings. Haviland and Malatesta, in studies conducive at Rutgers University, found that in order to keep their more volatile emotions in check mothers tend unwittingly to mimic and overly reinforce smiling in boys while ignoring more unhappy emotions. Hence without realizing it, in their attempt to be “soothing,” mothers are participating in the earliest phases of emotional straight jacketing in boys—they are
teaching them to smile when they may not feel like it. Even infant boys are subject to the Boy Code. (Pollak, 1989, p. 40)

Pollak explains how boys’ emotions as baby boys are not responded to as often or as gently even though they have more emotive expressions than girls. If this pattern of invalidation of emotional response is quite literally given to boys out right of the womb, they will pick up this pattern for their own emotions and how they interact with the emotions of others. These habits and patterns can be difficult to change in adulthood after years of ignoring natural responses.

Societal expectations of what a boy should be, when he should become a man, and how to do so can be molded by parents, even unwittingly. Education happens every day through life experiences, and in the younger years, boys learn from what adults say and do. Parent behaviors are so influenced by societal expectations of what is normal that most parents are ignorant of their actions. Parents who may be more aware and trying to break this pattern can still make mistakes that invalidate boys’ pain or other expressions of emotion.

Terrance Real is a well-known licensed clinical therapist, speaker and author offered a story of parenting his son. When his son was younger, Terrance took him ice skating. His son complained about the pain he felt skating, but Terrance dismissed him and said he was fine. The boy continued to skate and continued to complain of pain, but Terrance again told him to just skate anyway. Once the son persisted after some time, Terrance took off his son’s skates and realized the skates were on the wrong feet and had created two massive blisters on the back of his son’s heels. Terrance was horrified at himself and this action of dismissing the pain of his son. He said that if it been a daughter, he didn’t think he would have dismissed her pain (Real, 1997). Actions like this teach boys to dissociate with their pain. In other words, they
disconnect completely from feeling. They do this instead of moving through the feeling which can cause emotions to be expressed in potentially damaging ways.

Moreover, because they often do not receive empathy for their pain, boys are not taught to have empathy for the pain of others. Terrance has made it his professional passion to help men heal from moments like these (and often even more extreme) and yet he still fell victim to the idea of boys being tough (Real, 1997). These instances illustrate an informal learning experience that may happen in or out of school. There is a societal commonality that boys, in general, may not be receiving empathy and responsiveness for their emotions. Boys may not be taught to talk through their emotions to learn healthy ways to deal with their feelings. By the time boys reach formal education, they are already stifled.

A licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT) in Utah told a story about a similar circumstance. He had been playing basketball with his son and another boy at a neighbor’s house. The ball hit the neighbor boy squarely in the nose. He covered his nose with his hands, and the boy’s mother shouted from the porch, “You’re fine son. Shake it off!” She was no doubt a very loving mother, but this is a typical response from even loving parents. The therapist didn’t want to override what the mother had said, but he bent down and looked the boy in the eyes and said, “That hurt. Didn’t it?” The boy quietly nodded his head, let two tears slip down his face, and proceeded to play.

There is definitely a space and place for toughness. However, in this instance, the young boy’s mother’s response illustrates a more commonplace action that happens regularly to our boys. Validating a pain or hurt, as the therapist did, whether it’s physical or emotional, will give boys skills to associate with their pain, and deal with it healthily. This is important because if a boy disassociates from his pain it can lead to more significant problems for him during his
teenage years. Parents want to raise resilient and tough kids, but resilient, tough kids are produced by empathy, vulnerability, validation, emotional intelligence, and emotional education.

A boy who has a close relationship with his mother can be seen as emasculated. Any association with characteristics, habits or preferences that are societally perceived as feminine may also be viewed as emasculating. Yet, when emotion is seen as primarily feminine, that becomes unfair for both genders. Emotion is human.

Most of our boys desperately need their parents, the family, and the extended family—coaches, teachers, ministers, rabbis—to be there for them, stand firm yet show flexibility, and form a living wall of love that they can lean on and bounce off. It’s not separation but rather individuation they want. It’s becoming a more mature self in the context of loving relationships—stretching the psychological umbilical cord rather than serving it—that is what healthy male adolescence is all about. (Pollack, 1998, pg. 173)

That challenges the common Western cultural tradition of harmful levels of individualism and hyper-independence. Some families may believe it is important to toughen up their sons in order to prepare them for the world. However, this approach can lead to problems of insecurity later on, such as an inability to regulate emotions with healthy coping strategies.

Boys in School

In a formal education setting, a systemic classroom often demands a certain amount of compliance, silence, and stillness even with many teachers and districts trying to update education for a modern world and the active learner. From the earliest moments of education there is a sort of separation that can be problematic for some boys. William Pollack observed an early elementary class where children were separated from their mothers for the first time. Two
boys seemed very concerned about their mother leaving. One woman stayed, even though the education experts advised her not to, and allowed her son to feel comfortable before she left. The other mother did as she was advised and left. That boy had an awful time adjusting to the point of vomiting. Because it was more abrupt than he could handle, he was unable to cope with the separation like he needed to (Pollak, 1988). The youngest boys will deal with separation in varying degrees of severity, discomfort, and difficulty. Because of this, it is advantageous for all adults involved to allow the boys to lead out emotionally instead of forcing the disconnect.

Another systemic education issue is that education does not always cater to active students, who are often male. Society is still in an age where the formal education of sitting quietly at desks is normal and expected, and we have not deviated much from that format. While teachers of younger boys are likely more tolerant of the need for movement, it is important to use movement as a learning tool for all ages. Older boys have usually overcome the premature separation from early school days, but the need for movement still exists for many male students. Mobility and physicality have the potential to maximize learning.

A classroom, even at the secondary level, needs to be set up in a way that is conducive to movement during acceptable times (Cleveland, 2011). For post-secondary school, Bell Hooks suggested a classroom setup where the teacher’s desk is at the same level as the students and the students’ desks form a circle allowing for an exchange of ideas through discussion and relationship (Hooks, 1994). This particular setup also allows a large middle space for students to move around in when the teacher designates appropriate times to do so. An ominous teacher presence may allow a teacher to have more “classroom control” but it creates distance between the student and teacher. Both Levant and Pollack mentioned how males preferred display of emotions and connection through doing, or what they call “action empathy” (Levant qt.in.
Pollack, 1998). Boys need space to do, learn and feel. Experiential learning is valuable for these active learners.

Relationships also matter in an academic setting when interacting with adolescent boys. One significant way a quality relationship is achieved is by a teacher’s self-disclosure. When a person is in a position of power, their own self-disclosure fosters a sense of safety for those in their stewardship to feel comfortable doing the same. In a classroom setting the teacher must validate students instead of using shame to discipline. Connection to teachers is more easily accessible through teacher disclosure and the equalizing positioning of the teacher’s desk in Hooks’ classroom setup.

When teachers shared about their lives outside of school, the male students felt more connected to the class and had better learning outcomes (Reichert & Hawley, 2010). In other words, when teachers are appropriately vulnerable with students, that forms the basis of connection in the student-teacher relationship. Relationships matter in an academic setting, especially when interacting with adolescent boys. This isn’t easy to do, but as one art teacher related, “I decided that it would be unfair for me to not share my insecurities with them” (Francis et al. 2018, p.81). These are the building blocks of any connective relationship. When a person is in a position of power, their own self-disclosure fosters a sense of safety for those in their stewardship to feel comfortable doing the same. In a classroom setting it is the teacher’s responsibility to validate students. Because boys connect through doing and moving, as was mentioned before, an ideal classroom might look like one intentionally set up for active, experiential, lessons and a teacher who is open.
Adolescent Boys’ Emotional Journey

Societal expectations create an informal education that teaches boys about who they are. This comes from parents, teachers, media and peers. How teachers treat boys is important, but the treatment from their parents is clearly more key in this experience. There is a type of repression and rejection that boys deal with, and to cope with these scenarios, boys turn to dissociation. Dissociation is when one disconnects with feelings for the purpose of emotional management and safety (Real, 1997). This societal and familial education of dissociation trickles into school performance.

Once boys are in school, they receive formal learning from teachers. However, they also still deal with the nuanced gender stereotypes within their relationships and even their own internal grappling with the meaning of maleness. These male normalities of stifling and dissociation contribute to perpetuating an emotional narrative that shapes who we think boys are. It is valuable instead to allow young boys to be given spaces where they are allowed to feel the full spectrum of human emotion. Then they choose how they present themselves, instead of conforming to rigid expectations. It is common for teenagers of all genders to go through a self-stifling of emotions as they come of age. Even though girls often receive more emotional education and validation from home about dealing with their feelings, big emotions are a challenge for all genders. Brené Brown has studied human emotion within the psychological and educational contexts and she explores the topics of courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. Her work is particularly pertinent to my own investigation. She relates the following in regard to the emotional transition made by teens:

We see kids start shutting parts of themselves down in middle school. This is what being an adult is. We grow up and around middle age, and we realize that to be the parents,
partners and professionals that we want to be, we have to open up all those places that we shut down, otherwise we will never have access to all the things that we want and deserve. (Brown, 2013, Session 1 5:50)

Coming of age is a significant experience in an adolescent boy’s life. They need a sense of belonging with peers (Brown, 2021; Cleveland, 2011). Most of us in society remember our middle school experience well, possibly remembering what it feels like to be an outcast. Emotional health is dependent on belonging to a group, but here is also a danger for adolescents in confusing belonging with fitting in. Fitting in is changing to be included in a particular collective, while belonging is being accepted by a collective based on authenticity. The greater the sense of belonging, the more chances there are for connection.

Connection is vital in emotional health and expression (Brown, 2021). Brown also emphasizes caution that everyone goes through this process of shutting down emotionally. To attain one’s own emotional health, one must revisit those feelings as an adult in their future family (2020). The earlier emotional skills are learned the better. If parents do not learn emotional skills, this lack of knowledge perpetuates the lack of learning in their children. The suppression of feelings, and emotions can be passed from generation to generation, and seems the worst for boys and men in certain families and situations.

Peggy Orenstein interviewed teen boys at a private school just outside of Boston and made an account of her findings. When any boy mentioned crying, she said she paid particular attention. During his parents’ divorce, a boy who lacked the ability to cry resorted to watching Holocaust videos in an attempt to force himself to express the emotional expression he had taught himself to repress (Orenstein, 2019). This happens to boys because they are shamed by their own family at home, their friends, and even themselves. This is an unhealthy space for
boys; it is a space where they are so disconnected from themselves that they resort to extreme measures to feel. This particular boy watched horrific war images, but others lash out in harmful ways that are destructive to themselves and others, such as aggression, substance abuse, and sexual promiscuity.

**Art and Emotional Expression**

Many emotional experiences are uncapturable by words, and teens may be unable to express their feelings in words. The boy who intentionally watches Holocaust videos may have stifled the ability to express emotions, and is another prime example of dissociation. Therefore, in instances like this where language and expression are inadequate or lost, art finds its place. Adolescent boys who are educated in the process of recognizing, understanding, and labeling emotions may still find it difficult to express and regulate themselves in the current social climate for boys, including the “boy code” that Pollak names. They may find it difficult to find spaces where their vulnerability is cherished and met with empathy; and instead, boys default to shutting down. However, various art forms can be a safe avenue to complete the process of emotional education.

Art creates safety for vulnerable expression. There are spaces where vulnerability is not appropriate, such as athletic arenas, spaces of competition, and relationships where a toxic individual may use a shared vulnerability against someone. Aside from a few exceptional moments, the ability to tap into vulnerability is a vital human need. The beauty and safety of art is that the message can be intentionally cryptic. There isn’t necessarily a human directly receiving the vulnerable expression; the possibility of direct rejection goes away. “Art is about ‘emotions’” (Farrington et al., 2019, p. 34) and students can use art mediums to express the
things of their hearts that they may not have words for. For the boys especially, art can be a safe space.

Art also satisfies boys’ need for movement which enhances their learning experience as youth and adolescents (Reichert et al., 2010; Cleveland, 2011). Smaller projects done by individuals keep hands moving; larger projects or even collaborative art projects of assembly can take care of both the movement and relational movement. Smaller projects can help increase engagement because there is still a sense of doing, and doing helps boys open up.

A friend of mine related that although he hates video games, he plays them anyway because that’s when the boys talk to one another. They casually squeeze in small details about their likes, dislikes, crushes, and even what happened at school that day as they play or through what William Pollack calls “act of doing.” Ordinarily, it is common for parents of teens in general to get an “I don’t know” response to a face-to-face inquiry with a young boy. Another friend of mine, who is a therapist by profession, related that he had an adolescent boy client in his office for four months before he opened up.

Pollock points out that father-and-son relationships are especially built on action (Pollack, 1988, p.101). That is how many males connect, and that concept can transfer to other relationships boys have such as with teachers. Sitting and talking about feelings may come naturally for some boys, but for many others, movement and doing an activity paves the way for connection and a natural opening of the heart and mind. Art creates this mode of connection in a classroom setting easily and naturally. The act of art-making satiates the need for movement and solidifies the concepts for the kinesthetic learner “through developmental experiences—opportunities to act—and sustained developmental relationships with important adults and peers” (Farrington et al. 2019, p.10)
Social and Emotional Learning

The CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (casel.org, np).

A deeper analysis of this definition is necessary in order to relate the skills learned in SEL to art education and practice for students. SEL helps to develop a sense of authentic self. When a person knows themselves, what their values are, what their beliefs are, what their needs are, and how they move through life, they can live true to their story and show it to the world. Living in congruence with these personal ideas fosters mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health. Emotional health takes time and skill to manage: adults can still find this challenging throughout life, let alone teens. Some may feel that a person either has this ability or not, but there is an emotional skill set that can be learned through SEL.

When students know themselves better and can own their stories, they are able to find their groups of belonging, which is essential for human thriving (Brown, 2020). It is incredibly common, especially for middle school students, to waffle from group to group. That is a need and a part of self-discovery. Having their “in group” (so long as healthy) gives students the sense of belonging and a space to practice empathy and vulnerability. Through that support and the sense of being a part of something bigger than themselves, students learn the push and pull of authentic individuality and responsible collectivity.

The goal of Social and Emotional learning (SEL) is to provide students with specific emotional skills that enable them to label and understand their own emotions, as well as manage
them effectively. They may have the option of staying in a specific feeling, or they may choose to change how they are feeling or change their state. “The possibilities for local-level implementations and policy are rich: [for SEL], however, are under-realized” (Edgar & Morrison, 2021, p. 148). A well-developed program is easier to implement than one might believe.

The inclusion of district-level professional development on artistic SEL is necessary to help teachers meet these expectations and maximize instruction time while organically embedding SEL. Finally, school districts will need to support arts teachers as they meet students’ social and emotional health through SEL by (a) including SEL-specific language in both district and fine arts mission statements (b) providing arts teachers with resources to instruct embedded SEL (c) ensuring other resources are in place to aid arts teachers in their mission to support students, which includes a district level-SEL coordinator, adequate mental health professions, and opportunities for teachers to collaborate across subject areas related to SEL instruction (Edgar & Morrison, 2021, p.148).

Social and emotional learning is critical for today’s youth—especially boys. When SEL is brought up around the faculty lunch meeting there are co-workers who feel that this should be taught in homes. I grew up in a home with an educated father and mother, and it was not until I was in my late teens that these concepts were even remotely on their radar. Part of that is due to a societal culture of the past that valued stoicism and pushing through the pain not just for boys but for everyone. There are still those of older generations who do not value therapy or talking about emotions. With this in mind, how can educators expect students to come to school with a toolbox of emotional intelligence?
One useful tool is the RULER, which was co-developed by Yale professor Marc Brackett, the founder of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. RULER stands for the five learnable skills of emotional intelligence: Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotion. Once, his philosophy was to get the education to the children as soon as he could. While teaching and using his emotional curriculum RULER and the accompanying mood meter (see Figure 1), Brackett realized that adults required the skill as much as the younger generations. For Brackett’s curriculum to succeed, there must be school-wide buy-in and participation for the greatest impact—teachers must receive the training and use it themselves. The more expert the teachers are, and the more widespread the curriculum, the better it sticks for the students.

A crux of SEL includes emotional vocabulary. This is valuable for identifying and understanding what an individual is feeling in their own self, but also in identifying the feeling of another (Brackett, 2019; Brown, 2021). Explicitly teaching teenagers facial recognition is also vital in the identification of others’ emotions because recognition paves the way for empathetic responses.
“The three most important aspects of learning—attention, focus, and memory—are all controlled by our emotions, not cognition” (Bracket, 2020, p.195). When students can learn to understand what they are feeling and why, they feel more in control of themselves, are able to reduce stress, and can relate to others better. Although teaching students to Recognize, Understand, Label, Express, and Regulate their emotions is of great value, teaching social and emotional learning (SEL) is valuable for all students, especially males, and art is an effective way to teach it.
**Art and Social and Emotional Learning**

A qualitative study was done in the American Northwest on an all-boys school. The boys were interviewed about their paradigms of masculinity which helped researchers develop a model for what boys need in education found below:

Figure 2. Boy-Friendly curriculum

Figure 2 is labeled as “Boy-Friendly Curriculum” (Imms, 2006, p. 96). Many of the above needs directly relate to social emotional-learning, especially safety, relationships, and freedom. One important finding of this research was that art was helpful for boys because; they could “‘do it’” (p.98) or in other words, they were allowed to move and to actually make something instead of being expected to sit like a learning sponge. The art curriculum at this school was more boy-friendly than other subjects because it accommodated different ways of learning, and accounted for their “natural impetuousness” (p.102). What seemed the most important part, and relevant to social and emotional learning, was that:
The art program in this school addressed the opportunity to develop relationships. The opportunity to develop relationships was addressed by the art program in this school by providing safe opportunities, an accommodating environment, a suitable structure, and a mandate to engage with peers. Boys’ mobility within the classroom lead to conversations, and working groups allowed the construction of a safe environment. Boys opened up on personal issues when in small groups that allowed for discussion and exchange of ideas—they could communicate with peers on sensitive issues. By its very nature, art established a mandate for communication and expression. (Imms, 2006, p. 102)

In other words, through art, the boys found a safe space where their vulnerabilities could be met with empathetic responses.

Many schools with unequal levels of resources have seen massive increases in school connectedness, increased attendance and graduation rates, and in the arts, participation increases. All of these are elements traditionally used to assess schools and teachers and SEL presents a construct to help improve these results. (Edgar & Morrison, 2021, p. 148).

Connectedness is the key word here, especially for boys. Students who are connected and have a support system do so much better. Social connection is the lifeline for humanity and students need empathy, vulnerability, validation and understanding of their own emotions to do that.

The arts are an avenue for processing ideas, emotions and things that are hard. There is a reason there is art therapy. Art becomes not only a safe space for pretending, but also a space for the authentic self of students to emerge and it creates a healthy space for appropriate vulnerabilities. “Pedagogical adaptation in all arts consent areas will be necessary as we emerge post-pandemic, necessitating less focus on artistic performance/product and more on creating, responding, and connecting” (Edgar & Morrison, 2021, p. 149). Having an emotional vocabulary
will make an incredible difference for students as it allows them to gain an emotional intelligence about what they feel, why they feel, and what to do about it. However, there are times and spaces when words will never adequately express what needs to be said and communicated. By giving both boys and girls these tools, they will be better equipped to cope with all that goes on inside their hearts and minds.

By unlocking the wisdom of the emotions, we can develop young people who are kind, caring, and resilient as well as academically successful. We can teach our students to collaborate, take risks, and get up when they’re knocked down. Emotion skills are especially important for students facing adverse childhood experiences because psychological and biological stress responses that accompany trauma impact motivation and executive functioning. If children facing trauma have tools for dealing with their hurt, frustration, and stress, they too will have opportunities to learn and thrive. (Brackett, 2018)

Boys face more trauma than we as a society like to admit. There is a tendency to “only give credence to the most extreme versions of trauma” (Real, 1997, p. 105). Childhood traumas of mistreatment, neglect, and mild to moderate abuse can affect boys and activate their flight-or-flight mode (p. 106) and this causes a domino effect of disconnection from the self, an inability to regulate, and learning difficulty.

**Trauma-Informed Teachers**

While it is not a teacher’s responsibility to walk students through their trauma, there is evidence that most students deal with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) (Romero, et al., 2018). It is valuable for a teacher to be trauma-informed by assuming that at least half of the students have gone through an adverse experience that puts a student’s brain into fight-or-flight
mode, or in other words, trauma mode. Something as simple as constant aggressive communication at home or parental conflict can cause students to be in a heightened emotional state (Romero et al., 2018). The larger class sizes are, the more likely there is to be a student in a state of fight or flight. Brackett states, “The three most important aspects of learning—attention, focus, and memory—are all controlled by our emotions, not by cognition” (Brackett, 2019, pg.193). Thinking and teaching this way takes a shift for most educators. We are trained—at least I was—to focus on thinking and the brain, and that cognition is related to thinking and to the senses. In my teaching classes, it was never mentioned that there is even an emotional connection to learning. Thankfully that mindset is shifting, and the more I am aware of it, the more I am able to see the connection with an emotional education in my students. Additionally, I am aware of these principles in my own learning as well: there is a direct correlation between my emotional state and my ability to fulfill my responsibilities as a teacher. Then, I can then be a better support to students in my stewardship.

**Vulnerability**

Connection is vital for emotional health and vulnerability is the avenue through which connection is achieved, but only when that vulnerability is met with empathy and validation. Looking at the whole boy, from the time they are infants, their vulnerabilities are not met with an empathic response. Brené Brown, perhaps the foremost authority on vulnerability in United States, says:

Vulnerability; we think of it as the center of dark emotions, the center of shame, fear, uncertainty, disappointment, grief…but what we’re starting to understand is it’s also the center and the birthplace of love, belonging, empathy, innovation, creativity, authenticity, accountability, adaptability…The biggest [myth is] that vulnerability is weakness. That
vulnerability is somehow almost a character defect. Vulnerability is showing up for people. How is showing up for people weakness? How is being present with people weakness? It’s not. I’m telling you, that vulnerability is our most accurate measure of courage. To be vulnerable, to let ourselves be seen, is incredibly, incredibly difficult.

(Brown, 2013, Session 3, 36:30)

In my own classroom I asked the question, “What is vulnerability?” to observe what kind of unfiltered response I would hear from 14-and 15-year-olds. A boy raised his hand with one word: “Weakness!” There it was—societal belief. Brown speaks of shame in terms of gender, weakness and vulnerability, and how they connect.

Shame is the same for a man as it is for a woman, but the expectations that fuel shame are organized by gender. For women the number one driver of shame, still to this date, is appearance and body image. For women shame is about doing it perfectly. Do it all, do it perfectly, and look hot while you’re doing it. For men, there are not a lot of competing expectations, there’s one—do not be perceived as weak. Right. Don’t be perceived as weak. And that is an absolute straitjacket for men. It’s crushing. (Brown, Session 3, 0:04)

So, if vulnerability is perceived as weakness, and the biggest source of shame for males is weakness, therein lies the challenge. Explicitly teaching all students about this concept must be a part of social-emotional learning. In my class I have a poster with the words “Empathy, Vulnerability, Validation.” Students, especially boys, must understand these concepts and meaning of vulnerability to create societal change. Brown continues:

Two big myths: Vulnerability is weakness and I don’t do vulnerability. And it’s normally followed up by a gender comment or a professional comment. I don’t do vulnerability, I’m a dude. I don’t do vulnerability, I’m a lawyer. I don’t do vulnerability, I’m an
engineer…I get it. None of us are comfortable with vulnerability. If vulnerability is defined as uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure, you do vulnerability every single day. Every single day. Every time you wake up and love someone, it’s a huge act of vulnerability. It is a major part of showing up and letting ourselves be seen. (Brown, 2013 Session 3, 40:30)

The problem is that since birth, many boys have been taught to disconnect from themselves. Vulnerability may be buried so deep that the boy himself may not even know how to access it. Parents and educators then must take the first step. William Pollack offers a how, or a process. Vulnerability, and how boys are responded to by those around them, is a significant component of reconnection.


When boys share vulnerabilities, they must be met with empathy. Educators and parents must change their social conditioning from “vulnerability is weak” to “vulnerability is the conduit to connection.” Our boys desperately need to connect with their caretakers, others they love, and even with each other. Empathy is necessary for boys to feel safe with their caretakers, teachers, and each other. It is an emotional skill that welcomes expression (Brackett, 2019, p. 51). A lack of vulnerability, empathy, and connection causes boys to sink into depression—they need the connection that vulnerability gives humankind. That is how they then learn to be
empathic. How can a person learn to be empathic when no one gives them a model for how to do it, and how it feels to receive it? (Pollack, 1997, p. 31).

**Male Vulnerability**

How does one help a boy see that a real man connects with a woman? How does one help a boy see that the toughest men are the ones whose strength comes from vulnerability and facing fears? How does one help a boy see that feelings are not feminine. How does one help them balance their physical strength?

Acknowledging the societal demands and confusion males face is an excellent start toward validation. Helping them understand that “power is not bad, but the abuse of power of using power over others is the opposite of courage; it’s a desperate attempt to maintain a very fragile ego” (Brown, 2021, p. xix) When masculine strength and force are used for hurting others rather than elevating others, it creates a barrier so to speak. Abusing power stifles vulnerability. The social reality for all genders is that vulnerability is still perceived as weakness, and the weak will be controlled by the powerful. Many social media platforms, such as *Evolving Man* and *Man Enough* are advocating for this change, yet existing social habits can create their own inertia.

Another media presence, however, is cause for concern. Andrew Tate is a public figure who idealizes misogyny, extreme fitness, toxic masculinity and exploitation of the vulnerable. *The New York Times* published an article addressing how problematic his presence is for our youth, especially adolescent boys. Even though he has been banned and arrested, he is currently infiltrating boys’ masculinity culture and boys are listening because they perceive Tate as having a strong sense of masculinity and money (Bubola & Kwai, 2023). His propaganda pushing the poor treatment of women and power-seeking in toxic ways seems irrational to the rational individual, but impressionable boys believe it. I’ve seen it in my own classroom. This is what we
are fighting against, and connection through vulnerability has no part in it. Tate promotes stifling emotional intimacy and preys on shame to build a legion of followers.

Unfortunately, vulnerability is rarely rewarded in society at large, especially for men. The roles we expect of men in our culture are provider, protector, and warrior. I am not saying men can’t keep these roles; however, if men only fulfill these roles, it can become problematic in relationships. Empathy requires a male to tap into his own feelings and heart to relate to someone else. If the ability to feel his own emotions has been stifled, invalidated, and not felt, there is a lack of space for holding empathy for others. Empathy and vulnerability are the core of human connection, but when a man plays the warrior role, he may tap into emotional stifling, numbing strategies, and coping from past traumas to do the job.

However, when his significant other needs empathy and vulnerability, if stonewalling is his default mode, he may not be able to step into the discomft of letting his guard down and being comfortable with the pains of others. In modern-day relationships, it is common for women to work as many hours as men, yet they are still responsible for home tasks. Women stifle their voices, and men stifle their vulnerability, but “after the woman opens her throat, the man opens his heart, and both have opened their eyes, it is time to bring artfulness to their hands” (Real, 2002).

What is the Ideal of Manhood?

Bell Hooks quotes a Kenyan Maasai Warrior (Maroni) who responded to Terrance Real’s questions about what makes a good warrior, saying,

When the moment calls for fierceness, a good [man] is very ferocious. And when the moment calls for kindness, a good [man] is utterly tender…What makes a good [man] is knowing which is which. (2004, p.120)
For emphasis I have replaced the word “warrior” with “man.” The reality is that women may not hold space for a man who is sweet and kind due to concern that he will lose the ability to protect. That is a fallacy. This wise Morani has presented the idea of a man who is operating in wholeness, and a man operating in wholeness has the power to bring appropriate parts of himself to any situation (Real, 2002). There is evidence of emotional expression and understanding of the self to be able to experience the entire spectrum of human emotion.

Behind the social media platform *Man Enough* is a man named Justin Baldoni. Baldoni is an American actor who started posting honestly and authentically on Instagram about his family and sensitive topics. He started getting positive feedback from women about his content and was eventually invited by the TED Talks organization to speak about masculinity. In his talk, as well as his book, he addresses the need for connection and vulnerability and the shame-based culture that our boys are subjected to if they are perceived as weak (Baldoni, 2022). I don’t know that there is an ideal man per se, but Baldoni addresses how, in private, men and adolescent boys thanked him for his work, which allowed them to feel seen, and like they were not alone.

What society needs today, and what our boys need, is models of men who are strong in their vulnerability, and who are emotionally intelligent: men who are not afraid to seek professional help for the myriad of things that plague our males, including suicide, emotional stifling, disconnection to themselves, and lack of connection with others. We need men permit themselves to put their masculine power, strength, and aggression into protection. They need to know they are needed—all of them. Society must create a space for a reformed spectrum of masculinity as men open their hearts for healing.
Chapter 3: Research Methodologies

This chapter describes a mixed methods approach to qualitative research that includes Indigenous approaches to research within a qualitative case study approach to inquiry. I also adopted a lyrical sociology approach to properly contextualize and describe my approach to the autobiographical reflections that were an important part of this research.

Indigenous Research Methodologies

In a classroom setting, every student comes with a package of cultures pertaining to familial, societal, economic, racial, and religious ideologies. I have always been drawn to a more holistic way of thinking and living. I am a descendant of the indigenous Sami group: as I am only a descendant of Indigenous people and not Indigenous myself, being cognizant and sensitive to any appropriation is of the utmost importance. Their way of doing is not mine to use.

Nevertheless, I am inspired by the Indigenous concepts of connectivity as it applies to research. Connectivity suggests acknowledging that there is more than one cause for an observed phenomenon. For example, the state of boys in education cannot be observed in seclusion. An Indigenous research paradigm is also rooted in relationality.

Relationality seems to sum up the whole awareness of what is Indigenous research paradigm. Just as the components of the paradigm are related, the components themselves all have to do with relationships. The ontology and epistemology are based upon a process of relationships that form a mutual reality. The axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships. (Wilson, 2008, p. 70)

An Indigenous research paradigm exposes two weaknesses of a Western approach: isolating the subject and disconnecting the researcher. So, to take a more relational approach means considering the correlation to a boy’s young childhood, teenagehood, eventual manhood,
parents, friend groups, public education, societal ideologies, family culture, and socioeconomic status. This list is potentially endless, but it strengthens the breadth of data and findings. Additionally, as a researcher, I am deeply connected to my area of study, and I wholeheartedly admit my bias. It is my intention to be as transparent as possible through lyrical sociological vignettes.

**Qualitative Case Study**

In my ninth-grade English class, I taught art education, integration, and practice in tandem with the text *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness. I explored how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons can benefit all students, with a closer focus on the boys. A qualitative case study is used to describe real-world situations in a sociological context, essentially, it is the “study of individuals” (Priya, 2020, p. 97). This lent itself well to my research because it was my objective to cultivate emotional safety for my male students and observe if my teaching methods of art integration would prove to be a safe avenue for them to open up if they so desired. Moreover, the flexibility in any data type and collection allowed me to use student art to learn about their innerworkings (Priya, 2020).

**Lyrical Sociology**

Another methodology is an autobiographical autoethnographic approach. William Pollock suggests that women, especially mothers, “look within themselves to examine their own ideas about masculinity” (1998, p. 95) for the purpose of understanding their role in raising and influencing boys. I think this process is worthwhile in understanding my research bias and how I interact with men generally.

Lyrical sociology is writing used to explore anthropological issues through a type of narrative that is heavily focused on the emotion one feels about the focus issue, as opposed to a
concrete narrative of personal history. Although the sequence of experiences seems similar to a narrative (or even autoethnography which is the researcher’s experience with the social subject) lyrical sociology is the most fitting methodology for the aforementioned introspection. Lyrical sociology uses “a single image to communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality” (Abbot, 2007, p. 73). Because this thesis focuses on liberating young boys from society’s emotional straitjacketing, examining my personal thoughts on that process is an essential component of truth. This solidifies my intent to bring my bias to the forefront and reveal my process as a circular whole, as inspired by the indigenous methodology.

**Methods and Data**

My field notes include journal entries of observations of students’ responses, efforts in artwork they produced, their reflections on their artwork, and transferring skills. I also used surveys and questionnaires to gather data about my students’ responses to the curriculum.

My personal reflections were evidence of how I was deciphering and understanding my own social and emotional learning as I learned how to manage emotions and vulnerabilities properly, and discover the value and connection in vulnerability. I am not far behind the boys and men who may have challenges with these ideas. Perhaps it is more about humanness than gender.

My curriculum explored two questions:

1. How does an art integrated English curriculum focused on social and emotional learning influence my male students’ expressions of empathy, vulnerability, and emotion?

2. How does deliberately teaching social and emotional skills using art influence my teaching experience?
Interviews

I gathered interviews from adult men as another form of qualitative case study data. Human stories are pertinent because I am an outsider to the group I am studying and attempting to gain expertise on. The interviews and conversations with boys and men were crucial for me to learn from their perspective and better understand what happens to boys as they experience vulnerability, coming of age, school, emotional education, family life, masculinity and society at large. The trends are represented and organized in a visual way for an observant reader to come to their conclusive reasoning in addition to my analysis.

I wrote a series of vignettes of my personal interactions with boys and men in familial, romantic, and platonic relationships. They present the fluidity of my paradigm and emotions through my research process, especially throughout my lifetime. They show I am changing for the health of my son. The vignettes also indirectly present societal changes in acknowledging the emotional states and vulnerabilities of men.

I have undergone my own journey of social and emotional learning, discovering the value and connection in vulnerability while learning to manage my emotions effectively. Boys and men are not the only ones who have challenges with these ideas.
Chapter 4: *A Monster Calls* Art Curriculum

Creativity and Vulnerability

Stephanie McFarland-Behlke

Ninth-Grade English/Art Integration
Rationale

Vulnerability; we think of it as the center of dark emotions, the center of shame, fear, uncertainty, disappointment, grief…but what we’re starting to understand is it’s also the center and the birthplace of love, belonging, empathy, innovation, creativity, authenticity, accountability, adaptability. (Brown, 2013)

Vulnerability is a crucial part of “wholehearted living” which includes the artist self. This curriculum was born from an observation that students, especially male students, need to reverse dissociation from their emotional selves, including expressions of vulnerability. Boys, male teens, and men all need more freedom to feel the full range of human emotions. Some do not have the freedom because of social constructs or traumatic events, while others may have never been taught. Although some emotional intelligence is innate to being human, other components need to be taught and practiced. Vulnerability is especially vital in an academic setting, as Brené Brown defines it as feeling with people and perspective-taking (2013).

My curriculum focused on social and emotional learning and was woven into the existing 9th grade English curriculum in order to explore how it might influence my male students’ expressions of empathy, vulnerability, and emotion. I also wanted to know how explicitly teaching about vulnerability and its relation to creativity enhances my students’ self-expression. Can my students become appropriately vulnerable using the skills they gain through art? Can I create a classroom where students feel safe enough to take risks? Can I be appropriately vulnerable within the constraints of professionalism to model my creativity in front of my students?

In my ninth-grade English class, I taught art education, integration, and practice in tandem with the text *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness, illustrated by Jim Kay. I explored how
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons can benefit all students, with a closer focus on the boys. I used this text because the curriculum emphasized empathy, and vulnerability. It is curriculum as research using a qualitative case study approach to describe real-world situations in a sociological context, essential it is the “study of individuals” (Priya, 202, p.97). As a research instrument, my curriculum explores the following questions:

1. How does an art integrated English curriculum focused on social and emotional learning influence my male students’ expression of empathy, vulnerability and emotion?
2. How does deliberately teaching social and emotional skills using art influence my teaching experience?

The curriculum also incorporated the SEL program RULER created by Mark Brackett, and art became a safe place and medium for such expressions. The discussion generated around the aforementioned novel’s main character and his emotional responses also created a safe space for my students to talk about SEL, and vulnerability objectively. I watched my students’ progress and worked with them in close proximity to evaluate changes in their learning and understanding of SEL through speaking language, vocabulary, writing, and art.

I asked for feedback about the content I taught them. For example, I gave students an excerpt from Brené Brown’s book *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Brown writes about why humans need love and belonging, how to get love and belonging, and what potential blocks are. Students gave real-time feedback with facial expressions, engagement (or lack thereof) and the things that they said. One student said, “This is pointless! Why are we reading this stuff?” Another student said, “Is this a part of a book? I love it. What is the title? Because this is so applicable to teens and what we are going through!” There were responses all along the spectrum between the two
extremes which gave me unfiltered feedback about the lesson. I also issued surveys and questionnaires to my students.

The Alpine School District suggests weaving SEL into our lesson plans. Within the Alpine Vision for Learning, teachers are expected to help students develop skills and competency in the areas called the “6 C’s”—Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical thinking, Citizenship, and character. The “6 C’s” are expected to be used as a guideline when addressing themes of these concepts. However, the guidelines are vague enough that I explicitly taught emotional intelligence, and how to use that intelligence in social interactions with their peers. My English classroom class lends itself well to those types of topics.

Although my teaching of SEL content in my class appeared to have a positive influence on my students, the success of a program as extensive as RULER requires school wide implementation.

![Figure 3. Alpine Vision for Learning](image)

I took the 6 C’s into consideration with my lesson plans. The unit designed around the novel *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness and illustrated by Jim Kay created a fantastic connection for art integration. It gave the students a tactile and experiential process to express the SEL, and
vulnerability concepts they learned from the book characters and RULER curriculum. The illustrations kept students engaged, and opened the gate to making emotional discussions less threatening. The art and the character were the conduit for potentially challenging discussions as opposed to inorganically forcing male students into vulnerability. Using an illustrated novel also made art integration much more relevant.

The novel was also adapted into a movie directed by J.A. Bayona, starring Liam Neeson and Lewis MacDougall. The main character, played by MacDougall, works through his emotions using art. That concept is not quite as apparent in the written novel, but is clear and central to the movie plot. It models for students, without words, how art practice potentially enhances their emotional experience and learning.

Figure 4. An Illustration by Jim Kay from A Monster Calls: The darkness of the boy’s face is significant because the monster’s face is completely visible. Through this masterfully created art illustration, the students make the connection that the “Yew Monster” is actually the “You Monster” of Conor, the main character, who is unable to express himself in emotionally healthy ways because of his crippling grief.
My field notes include journal entries of observations of students’ responses, efforts in art, the artwork they produced, and transferring skills. There is also evidence of me deciphering and understanding my own social and emotional learning as I learn how to manage my own emotions and vulnerabilities properly and discover the value and connection in vulnerability. I am not far behind the boys and men who may have challenges with these ideas. Perhaps it is more about human experience than gender.

Themes and Essential Questions

Ninth-Grade English Class—Writing and Art Hybrid

Themes

Emotional Intelligence—Creativity and Vulnerability

Essential Questions:

1. How do we express what we are feeling using art mediums, techniques, and visual languages?
2. What does it mean to be vulnerable?
3. What if self is not a fixed entity, but currently under construction?
4. How can art be a catalyst for social change in regards to vulnerability?
5. How can sketching/journaling in a book be a way to process and express feelings artistically and emotionally?
Objective/Learning Target

Students will gain fluency with visual mediums, and learn visual means and artistic conventions to express their feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Students will develop and enhance their feeling language vocabulary to increase their proficiency in identifying and expressing the entire gamut of human emotions. Students will apply their visual literacy skills to create work that is personally meaningful and evocative. Students will reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

Lesson 1: Da Vinci sketchbook/journaling
Lesson 2: India Ink Portrait Study
Lesson 3: Da Vinci Chalk Pastel Expression Portraits
Lesson 4: How Are You Feeling? Watercolor
Lesson 5: Clay Monsters/Salt Dough smash
Lesson 6: Light and Dark—iPhone Still Life Study
Lesson 7: Collaborative plastic sheet art
Lesson 8: Dream project—mixed media, surrealism
Lesson 9: Final Project “Bit of Vulnerability” Self-Portrait—using acrylic, Primary colors and Black and white
Standards

VA:Cr1.1la

Use multiple approaches to begin creative endeavors.

VA:Cr1.2la

Shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present-day life using a contemporary practice of art or design.

VA: Re. 7.1 lla

Recognize and describe personal aesthetic and empathetic responses to the natural world and constructed environments.

VA: Cn 10.1.8a

Make art collaboratively to reflect on and reinforce positive aspects of group identity
DaVinci Sketchbook and Journaling

Learning objective

Students will keep a journal of sketches, drawing, and writing throughout the semester to track ideas, learning, thumbnail sketches, and rough draft work.

Observing the Journals of da Vinci


After reading the article, students will also observe the writings of da Vinci’s writings in the book referenced on the following page.

Writing is an art form: sketching is an artform. When these two skills are done in tandem, new possibilities of creation and idea-keeping will take form. How did da Vinci do it? Students are given a photo copied page from the referenced texts to glue into their own notebooks for inspiration. The class goes on a walk to do a “study” of the school and students’ drawings act as evidence of observation. They will do this four times per term, and the students will also record responses to daily prompts using their journal/sketchbook.

Essential Questions

1. How do we find inspiration in whatever environment we are in?
2. Do they draw a perspective study of the hallway?
3. Can they view stairs in a new way?
4. Do they see their classmates in a way they never have before as they try their hand at sketching them?
5. What happened to them today that would be valuable for a reader if they wrote about their experience?
6. How should they document the daily life of a teen?

**India Ink Portrait Study (Or black acrylic or tempera paint)**

**Learning objective**

Students will study and practice identifying in shape and value in a portrait study.

Students will take camera self-portraits and upload them to their computer devices. Those images are uploaded into Microsoft Word. Students will select “Picture Format” and choose the version of the image that allows them to see shapes of the values of a face.

Students will take phone camera self-portraits and upload it to their computer devices. Those images are then uploaded into Microsoft Word. Students click on picture format and click on the image that allows them to see shapes of the values of a face. After the experiment with several different variations in the black and white versions of their photos, they choose the most
visually pleasing image and print out the created notan as a reference for their India ink study of value and shape.

Notan (pronounced no-tan) is a Japanese term describing the combination of light and dark elements in the design or pattern of a work of art.

**Essential question**

How does shape and value make believable images?
Leonardo da Vinci Expression Portraits

Learning objective

Students will create a face with an identifiable facial expression using acrylic wash and chalk pastels.

Codex Atlanticus
Refer to https://artsandculture.google.com/story/ten-key-facts-about-leonardo-da-vinci-s-codex-atlanticus-biblioteca-ambrosiana/_Awx3jZHwWiyJA?hl=en or use books that have a compilation of his journals and sketches for a hands-on experience for active and tactile students.

da Vinci’s Drawing Materials

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f0ym3CtleQ

Acrylic Wash

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_hxwZJm4fk

7 universal expressions

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0ouAnmsO1Y

Benefits of reading facial expressions

Discussion Questions

Discuss the expression of the Mona Lisa and da Vinci’s expression. There has been an ongoing controversy for years about what *The Mona Lisa’s* face is saying and communicating. What do you think she is feeling? What do you think she is saying? What do you think the artist was saying through her expression? How does that compare to Leo’s self-portrait? As students compare and contrast, apply all questions to the second portrait, and the other expression portraits.
After watching the facial expression video, students will use graphite and practice
drawing faces with an expression for warm-up. On a watercolor paper (previously prepared by
them with acrylic) students will then use chalk pastels to create a larger-scale expression face.

**How Are You Feeling: Watercolor**

**Learning Target**

Students will associate color with deeper meaning and having the ability to provoke and
symbolize a feeling and deeper meaning rather than literal color.

In preparation, arranging desks in a circle configuration would be helpful for ease of
discussion and expression.

Students can be told ahead of time that they will be sharing about their day went with the
entire class so they can make appropriately vulnerable work that they feel comfortable discussing
with classmates. Read both texts about feelings and drawings. Students will pick a specific
technique that they feel expresses how they felt today.

Ask students to communicate how their day went, how they felt, and why they think the
color and technique represent that experience. Students will then focus on listening to others to
add support while each student learns to account for their day verbally. If it is an early morning
class, and they feel there is not enough content for the day, students may paint for the day before.
When students are done, they can post the artwork on a grid system on the board to create a
collaborative design.
Read the story *What Color is Your Day* by Camryn Wells to students to help them identify the range of feelings and associate it with a color. Express that any color can mean whatever they need that color to mean, and the book is an example of ideas.

Niko draws abstract concepts ideas instead of concrete objects that are recognizable. How can we use shape, line, color, and composition to create an image with deeper meaning and broader interpretation?

**Discussion questions**

1. What happened to you today, and how did it make you feel?
2. How does the color you chose represent what you felt?
3. How does your piece compare as a stand-alone piece as opposed to a collaborative collection of works?
8 basic Watercolor Techniques Video: https://youtu.be/m4Opm8LMAk8
Expressing feelings can be challenging. It’s even more so when there is no language to express it. Marc Bracket created this mood meter to associate feelings with high and low pleasantness and high and low energy. Students are expected to know at least a quarter of these words as vocabulary to help them understand feelings and emotions and the expression of these words verbally and visually.

Marc Bracket said:

“In my book, Permission To Feel, I describe the Mood Meter, a tool to build greater emotional awareness that was built based on decades of research on the circumplex model of emotion. My colleague David Caruso first used the tool to help people recognize emotions. In the early 2000s, David and I reworked the Mood Meter. My research focuses on the role of emotions and emotional intelligence in learning, decision-making, creativity, relationships, health, and performance. At the
Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, I lead a large research team in investigating how emotional intelligence can make the most positive difference in children’s and adults’ lives.”

**Artwork of Emil Nolde**

Emil Nolde (was a German-Danish painter and printmaker. He was one of the first Expressionists, a member of Die Brücke, and one of the first oil and watercolor painters of the early twentieth century to explore color. He is known for his brushwork and expressive choice of colors. Golden yellows and deep reds appear frequently in his work, giving a luminous quality to otherwise somber tones. His watercolors include vivid, brooding stormscapes and brilliant florals.
Clay Monsters/Salt Dough Monsters/Monster Smash

Learning Objective

Students will identify a personal challenge and create a monster that symbolizes that challenge. Students will increase emotional intelligence by articulating a personal monster and creating it as a symbol. They will give it a label, or name with the intent to smash the monster. The process of smashing the monster helps students overcome their fear and regain power over themselves.

Discussion questions

1. Why do we make monsters?
2. How can monsters represent big emotions?
3. What else are monsters a symbol of?
4. What are some famous monsters?


PBS article about people’s obsession with monsters:

Medium:

Clay or salt dough depending on the skill level of the students.

2:1:1 Flour, Salt, Water
Include toothpicks, googly eyes, feathers, and a piece of paper for writing the challenge.
Dark and Light–Still Life Study

Students will create a unique still life with a whimsical touch using iPhone photography and drawing/painting (acrylic). They will focus on use of light and dark in high contrast composition, and what feelings that evokes in both the artists and the observer.

Essential Questions

1. How does light affect composition?
2. What does dark and light mean?
3. What are feelings that are light?
4. What are feelings that are dark?
5. How can that be expressed in art?
6. How can that be expressed in writing?

Feeling Light or Dark? Emotions affect perception of brightness.

Light and Dark in Composition

Samuel Peploe, *The Lobster*, 1903

Still Life With Lemons and Pipe, 1924 Lithograph
Reddit Post by u/ocean432 “Non-Conformist”/Me, 2011

High Contrast Apple on Flicker

https://www.flickr.com/photos/oter/3166907204
Contrast in Art lesson Plan
https://news.masterworksfineart.com/2019/06/06/contrast

Visual Arts Planning, Light vs. Dark
https://www.accessart.org.uk/visual-arts-planning-light-and-dark/

A beginners guide to Light and Shadow

**Collaborative Plastic Permanent Marker Art**

**Learning objective**

Students will practice collaborating in pairs, small groups, and large groups to create images and various designs.

Students can work on a small-scale or a large-scale version of this project.

*For a small-scale version:* All students are given a sheet of 12x12 plastic, a permanent marker, and an art partner. Each partner must draw half of the content on the page. There are no requirements for negative space and colored space. When the students are finished, they layer their plastic sheets on top of one another to see the finished product. They may also experiment with layering only a few others or several. Each layered creation must be documented by photograph.

*Extension Ideas:* several large sheets of plastic are placed on a table with snacks nearby to encourage conversation and socialization as students sketch and doodle on each large plastic sheet. Once a sheet is filled, everyone begins again on a new sheet. Once all of the sheets are
finished, they are hung up against a white wall to allow the negative space to allow the colored space to become more pronounced.

_Extension ideas:_ One group is allowed one color, while everyone else is allowed only a black marker. See what happens with the composition when there is a pop of color. At the teacher’s discretion, add colors as symbols of feeling and experiment with the process without a specific end in mind.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How are peoples’ drawings similar? How are they different?
2. What do those similarities and differences do for the design of the piece?
3. Was it fun not knowing how the end would be?
4. Were you comfortable drawing unpredictably with that many people?

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**Dreams and Art**

Lynda Barry Inspired Lesson Plan (Syllabus, pg. 166)

**Essential questions**

1. What is a dream?
2. Can you recreate a dream?
3. Is a dream autobiography or fiction?
4. What are our dreams an expression of?
5. What is the difference between a dream and a nightmare?
Learning target

Students will conceptualize a dream they had, or a daydream they’ve thought about, or something vivid from their imagination.

Phot: This is the Color of My Dreams by Joan Miro 1925 Joan Miro

Wolves in a tree: Sergei Pankejeff, a Russian aristocrat, had a recurring dream about wolves in a tree. He painted several versions of this scene.

Conor’s dream in A Monster Calls illustration by Jim Kay

Henri Rousseau, The Sleeping Gypsy, 1897. Photo by VCG Wilson/Corbis via Getty Images

Students recreate a dream they had. Materials– panel and mixed medium.

https://www.insightpsychological.ca/blog/the-emotional-importance-of-dreaming/
A Bit of Vulnerability Self Portrait

Learning Objective

Students will create a self-portrait expressing something about their story that others must know about them. First students will use an iPhone photo for reference. They can only use red, yellow, blue, white, and black acrylic paint.

Define vulnerability as Brené Brown does. Use several quotes about her opinions of wholehearted living and creativity, and how that is an expression of our vulnerability.

Vulnerability: we think of it as the center of dark emotions, the center of shame, fear, uncertainty, disappointment, grief…but what we’re starting to understand is it’s also the center and the birthplace of love, belonging, empathy, innovation, creativity, authenticity, accountability, adaptability. So, for us to really get our heads and hearts around vulnerability, what we need to do is we need to talk about some of the myths around vulnerability. The biggest being that vulnerability is weakness. That vulnerability is somehow almost a character defect. When we ask people, “What is vulnerability?” We asked them for specific examples. People said this: Vulnerability is asking for help. Vulnerability is saying I don’t know, [it’s] sitting with my wife making decisions about our kids when she has stage four breast cancer, [it’s] calling a good friend whose child was killed in a car accident, [it’s] loving someone who struggles with addiction, [it’s] getting promoted and not being sure that I’m up for it. [it’s] getting fired [it’s] sending my child to school knowing they are struggling but knowing I need to let them do their thing [it’s] taking responsibility for a mistake. What I would ask you is, in what example is vulnerability weakness? Vulnerability is showing up for people. How is showing up for people weakness? How is being present with people weakness? It’s not. I’m telling you, that vulnerability is our most accurate measure of courage. To be vulnerable, to let ourselves be seen, incredibly difficult. (Brené Brown The power of vulnerability Session 3, 36:30)
How Being Vulnerable in Your Art Can Be the Path to Freedom


https://www.silviokramar.com/blog/how-to-be-more-vulnerable-as-an-artist

https://www.milanartinstitute.com/blog/3-ways-to-express-vulnerability-in-your-art

https://petapixel.com/2021/01/21/these-elegant-self-portraits-are-a-masterclass-in-minimalist-composition/-article explanation of the artist and her method
Framed portraits, *Authentic Self* Collection by Risso Creative. On exhibition at hope street Café South Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
Van Gough, and Picasso
Chapter 5: Field Notes and Reflection

My thesis includes a study of my experiences teaching an art integrated English ninth-grade curriculum focused on social and emotional learning. This section includes my reflections and field notes as a teacher and what happened to my male’s student’s expressions of empathy, vulnerability and emotions when emotional skills are paired with art and literature. My curriculum explored two questions:

1. How does an art integrated English curriculum focused on social and emotional learning influence my male students’ expressions of empathy, vulnerability, and emotion?

2. How does deliberately teaching social and emotional skills using art influence my teaching experience?

It was interesting how many students were willing to admit they loved the art integration of my class, and the lesson plans regarding social and emotional learning. Multiple boys told me they felt safe in my class, and several more boys came in to chat with me on a regular basis compared to previous years. They were able to express themselves and have conversations through the literature about what Conor, the main character, was suffering.

I was surprised by the number of boys who had open dialogue with me about how they were feeling when I asked them to tell me about their art, especially “How are you feeling?” watercolor. Many boys expressed vulnerability in ways I had hoped, not just with me but with their peers. Emotional talk became the norm. There were of course students of all genders who weren’t as comfortable as I would have hoped, but at the very least it helped their ability to engage with their learning as they were not confined to their seats all the time, and the art
became a welcome change of page making an otherwise benign seated process exciting and novel.

*How does deliberately teaching social and emotional skills using art influence my teaching experience?*

I felt closer to the ninth-grade cohort of 2022-2023 more so than any other previous cohort because I modeled my own vulnerability in ways I hadn’t in previous years. I shared with them about what was going on in my life when I taught them. I talked about my feelings and told them about my art. Students mentioned how much they appreciated that about my class. One particular student chatted with me on a regular basis about his girlfriend, his family, and his music, and he even felt safe enough to come back the next year and express that he found out over the summer that who he thought his biological father was, was not actually his biological father. Another student specifically thanked me for creating a classroom where he could truly be himself and not have to filter himself in harmful ways or wear the masks he had to wear everywhere else. Because of these experiences, my teaching fundamentally changed. For the subsequent year, I looked for more opportunities to integrate art and SEL content throughout the entire year (as opposed to a few here and there) with heavy implementation during fourth term. Names have been changed for privacy.

**Field Notes**

*March 15, 2023: Wednesday*

B4—The most interesting thing to note is that Kade came back from the Focus Center. He sat quietly for the first three-quarters of class. Once I started giving the first RULER lessons about emotions, conflict, and diffusing conflict and he said, “This sounds like therapy.”
“Good,” I said, “I hope both are helpful.” The students are usually engaged, alert and on-task. A lot of the boys took some prompting and monitoring from me as I circled the classroom. This lesson was about discussing emotions and some of the “tougher boys” weren’t as engaged. I wonder how things will go when we incorporate “How are you feeling?” or “How was your day?” watercolor to things as opposed to speaking. Males tend to need more physical interaction with a subject. A female student named Anne and several others took a picture of the strategies to diffuse conflict.

My administrator also asked how things were going and invited me to the SEL team meeting next month. She was also wondering if I would be willing to sit through some online training that 3-5 teachers and representatives from the school are asked to experiment with.

March 17: Friday

Students seem to be engaging with the text quite well. There are those few who don’t engage in anything, but most seem quite interested in the illustrated novel about monsters. We went over the next lesson in RULER which was identifying emotions throughout the day. The students marked emotions in the worksheet as positive or negative in terms of whether or not the emotion was helpful when each student felt it. For example, being tired in the morning might receive a (-) because it is not helpful to feel tired in the morning when you have to go to school. Conversely, being tired at night is helpful because the student can easily fall asleep to prepare for the next day. Thus, tired at night would receive a (+).

It was interesting as we discussed the ability to change our state. I wanted to make it very clear that we change our state when the emotion is not serving us, not to bottle or suppress emotions instead of expressing them. One student said that sometimes we have to feel our feelings, I think it was Ben who said this, and I immediately validated his comment because he’s
right. After the students identified their feelings, I had them identify Coner’s feelings in *A Monster Calls*. This was helpful to tie in the literature so that the students could connect with him and look for cues in the writing to identify those feelings in someone else, even if that person was fictional.

**March 21, 2023**

The students on A Day seem to be better artists. They spent most of the class time working very hard on their artwork. I read four chapters out loud to them. They seemed to like the novelty of doing artwork instead of having to read. Several students did really well because they are good at art, and they conceptualized a really great idea for a dream. Other students felt self-conscious about whatever they were drawing. I paid attention to how much information they disclosed. Some students didn’t even use a real dream they had. This idea of dreams relates to the main character because he has two dreams (the monster and the falling) and they are both recurring. There was no RULER lesson today as it was more of an art focus.

**March 28—29 Tuesday, Wednesday**

I taught all the students about reading emotions on faces. The YouTube video about what subtleties in the face show certain emotions kept the students engaged, and I was quite surprised actually. The students got into groups and read each other’s emotions. They seemed to have fun with it because it was an activity that made them get up and out of their seats, but also because they could see the relevance of reading faces in terms of their own communication. Phones have obviously created a decrease of in-person interaction with students and reading faces is a skill that needs to be taught—even especially after masks were worn for an entire year by teachers and students.
March 30, 2023

Class instructions: How are you feeling?—Paint instead of writing. I presented adjectives first, and then I showed them a technique video from my curriculum. They were mesmerized and said they felt like they were watching Bob Ross. I read them the story "What Color is your day?" and then instructed them to "Paint a feeling, or paint multiple feelings that you are having right now. You are going to talk about your painting with people, so you don’t have to tell them everything about it. If you need to express something you don’t want to talk about it, that’s cool. If you do want to talk about it, that’s cool too."

A1—It didn’t go super smoothly because it was my first class period. That’s often the case. I didn’t show my own example. However, Chris created a picture and explained to me that he was having a really, really hard day, and then his friend talked to him, and it was like a bit of light shone through his darkness. Austin drew an Argentinian flag with a smiley sun in the middle. He said he was happy, but if we had done this yesterday the sun wouldn’t be smiling quite as big because the sun wasn’t as happy as it was yesterday.

A3—I showed my own example, and the students were more excited about the project and more willing to be vulnerable. I asked this class if they wanted to share as a whole class or in a small group, and the boys said small group. They found C.C. and Mary, whom the boys trust to listen to their feelings. Kurt and Cole shared their pieces. Kaden talked about how he was happy, but over in the corner, there was the storm (this is the end of March and students could see a massive snow storm out my window), and he said that a sad, bummed feeling was creeping up on him. Cole said he is pretty happy too, but there’s this part of him, represented by the purple, that he is tired and just needs a break because he can’t do it anymore, but he’s joyful so there’s lots of splatters. Amberg was very specific about dealing with very hard things, and she’s talked
about it before. Her painting was incredibly saturated, with very little water. She has a history of abuse, and you could see it in her painting. She showed me, and didn’t address it at the time, but I knew what she was alluding to. Greg just played around. He and his buddies kind of started to draw what they were actually feeling, but I could tell this wasn’t exactly comfortable for them.

A4—The dynamic of the boys in this class was fascinating. Don did a good job compositionally but was guarded, as were most of the boys in this class. The only boy that stuck out as actually using the assignment for what it was Robin. He got in a group with girls and another guy (Dustin, if I remember right) and mentioned how he was feeling, he was open, and visibly irritated with the fact that the other guys weren’t quite being compliant with the activity. At the end of class, I asked for feedback, and Robin piped up and said, “Yeah, I really like this.”

“Really?” I asked, kind of shocked. He’s a football player and I thought he might have been speaking sarcastically.

“Yeah, really. It made me really think about how I’m feeling and be able to talk about it.”

I think having the art to talk about created a comfortable level of detachment so they were talking about the art first instead of just bearing their souls.

It was interesting how Dustin was much more guarded and said, “Oh, I just painted a feeling.” I’m still unsure if he took the assignment seriously, but it’s likely that he didn’t—at least that’s what his track record tells me, which is fine.

March 31, 2023

B1—The boys just messed around and created pictures of their friends. They didn't take it seriously, but they are also boys who tend to prey on each other’s vulnerability. A few class periods before, when I taught the class about the Sentinelese people, one of these boys jokingly
said in class that we should just force them to be like us, in other words, force them to integrate.

“Or we could nuke them!” he shouted.

I was appalled and said, “I need you to listen to me for two minutes so you don’t sound ignorant and uninformed if you say something like that to the wrong people.”

“What does ignorant mean?” “It’s a nice way of saying I’m trying to make it so you don’t look stupid and out of the loop if you say this in front of certain groups.” After that, he listened, and he tried a little harder in my class to be appropriate after that, but there is a wall there, emotionally and even intellectually.

B3—Paul created a piece of art that was very interesting. And he came to my desk to tell me about it. “It’s a secret,” he whispered. “You know how you come to school and all this crap is going on, and all this stuff that’s not good, but you have to have a smile on your face? And the smile is black, but it’s covered with all the crap, but it still has to be there.” I thanked him for sharing. Of all the people I didn’t expect that from him.

B4—Nolan made a Pokémon ball and said that his parents are traveling and leaving him and his brothers with his cousins, and he doesn’t like those cousins very much. He said that is how he will get through the week by disconnecting because he’s not thrilled at all about being there. Branon worked quickly as he always does, but seemed interested in creating a feeling.

April 11 & 12 Tuesday and Wednesday 2023

Clay monster assignment. Students come up with a metaphorical monster that they deal with, write it on a slip of paper, and put it inside a salt dough monster so they can smash it like Conor did to Grandma’s trinkets. The idea is that it’s an opportunity for them to symbolically overcome a challenge or large goal they have in their life. The students, in general, seemed very interested and engaged in participating. They enjoy looking at each other.
B4 was quite interesting for several reasons. Barney is my assistant and he was boisterous as usual, but he is a bright, quick learner. When I had students make the monster, he asked for a reference photo and pulled up pictures of an anatomical heart. Then he proceeded to make a heart out of the salt dough, give it eyes, ventricles, and the like, and then he stabbed it with several toothpicks. I was quite impressed that he made a heart, because I have done artwork with anatomical art themes. Then when another student asked him for help (because he is my assistant) he got frustrated with them when they didn’t put the little paper with their challenge inside the monster. He said, “It’s supposed to be symbolic, you idiot. The paper goes on the inside!” I never saw what either of the papers said, but I could tell he took it seriously, and it surprised me.

The other student that surprised me was Nathan. He brought up his slip of paper to show me. It said, “I am very shy.” Then he put it inside his monster and showed me that too—it was like a melting blob that seemed to disappear into the surface. He was also one who wanted to share his watercolor “feeling” painting.

B1—The same group that painted Darius, their friend in a painting, then made Darius the salt dough sculpture.

I forget what class period he’s in, but Juan decided to show me too. He had two challenges. One was a joke, but the other was not. He wrote, “My parents’ divorce.” It’s hard for kids, and I thanked him for showing me. I bet more kids were taking it seriously than were not; at least that’s what it seemed like to me. I think at the end of all of this, I need to give them a survey.

April 14, 2023—Aria said she really liked making the monster and wanted to tell me that. A male student who shall remain unnamed, who was frequently disrupted finally shared with me
at the end of the year that he had witnessed the murder of a family member. I responded with compassion. I asked other teachers if they had known, and no one else did.

My Art

Teachers often model art examples for students. The following are my examples of what the students were supposed to do. This was also an avenue for me to model emotional vulnerability as I told them about myself through my art. Students listened intently, and many followed my lead. Admittedly, at first, it was a little uncomfortable, but I felt mostly safe to do so, because by the fourth term we had become almost experts as a group in conversation about what emotional expressions and feelings look like, and sound like.

My expression is serene and confident. I have a bit of a side-eye here, too. Maybe I’m expressing slight suspicion, a mask of toughness?

My emotions are feeling complex right now. I have sadness because of all the clouds, but I also feel content and happy because I work out to help keep myself upbeat, and there’s little splashes of joy because I be like, whoo hoo!

It’s really weird. I dream a lot about houses—like a lot—and when I have a house dream, I always write about it in my journal. This house dream was of a house on top of a hill and a waterfall gushing out both sides of it. It wouldn’t stop,
Clay Monsters

One of the characters in the book *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness and illustrated by Jim Kay is a monster that represents the turmoil and grief that Conor, the main character, is having difficulty navigating. Students are invited to anonymously write on a slip of paper a metaphorical monster to put inside a monster that they physically create with their hands and salt dough.

Male students are creating salt dough sculptures with their metaphorical monster to overcome tucked inside.

These boys are painting their “How are you feeling?” watercolor and playing on phones as adolescents do.
This student wanted a reference photo to make sure he made an anatomical heart (or as close as one can with a salt dough medium). He took the assignment very seriously and was a very active learner who benefited from experiential learning.

This was created by a student whose mom passed away suddenly a month before we read the book. He was very introverted, but the feeling here seemed quite well communicated with a gaping hole where his heart would be.
This is a collection of student sculptures. They later went to the back of the school to have a collective symbolic smashing of their monsters.

Students often gave positive feedback for this art-marking activity. Using salt dough makes it incredibly accessible on a budget, and the students don’t have to be particularly skilled in the modality of clay. The movement it takes to construct a creature is appealing to boys. The second half of this art-making is the smashing, which is regarded as entertaining and enjoyable for all students but for the boys especially. They engage their entire body in excitement because they have permission to be destructive. They usually end up laughing and have an opportunity to be rowdy for a moment outside as well. I absolutely let them.

Expression Notans
These are examples of boys’ notans. They thought about facial expressions and how they presented their faces and emotions. Some are more skilled than others, but all of these boys made a concerted effort to represent themselves in a thoughtful way. The boy on the bottom right did not attend very often, and when he did, he was not engaged at all. However, he engaged in the facial expression project.

**How Are You Feeling?**

All year, on a biweekly basis the students write a response to the question “How are you feeling?” with the intent for them to tune in to what they are feeling and why. These responses are kept confidential. During fourth term, they were asked to paint it and share how they were feeling and why. Students wrote on the back of their art what the visual representation was. They also discussed in small groups of 2-4 as I monitored the class. I was surprised at the level of openness boys were willing to express.
I was feeling good and calm and happy, but winter is lasting longer than what I would like, and a little bit of sadness is creeping in with all the darkness and snow.

Feeling good in the day, but sometimes tiredness and sadness comes and creeps in.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>This is a day I was in the dark and sad and angry.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Peaceful and competitive. Sunny and chill. (This student also shared with me that he wanted to give a nod to his Argentinian heritage.)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then my friend cut through the darkness like a beam of light and helped me feel better.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **I was really mad I didn’t get the role I wanted in a show and didn’t get much sleep.** | **People hide their scars.** |

| **I had many emotions at one time, sadness, happy, content and afraid. Blue–pink–orange–green** | **Anger-red, pleasant/calm-purple**  
**Sadness-blue** |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel like I can't find anything good in life. It feels like I can't do anything right.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is a smile of what is going on in my life because of the light is being surrounded by darkness and negative thoughts.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I was feeling a little alone and up in my head with all these colors and feelings.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This was completed by a Spanish-speaking student who understood the assignment after I used Google Translate, but he could not write or speak English. He happily engaged, when work was usually a struggle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dream Art

In the novel, Conor dreams a lot and the reader is left to grapple with what his reality is and what it isn’t. Dreams art for the students helped them to connect with the literature and themselves. What seemed to be a trend with the crayon art was the expression of fear. This was another assignment that they were to write on the back of. Not every dream was fear for every student, but fear was the most common expression among all genders of students. All three of the following examples are from boys.

In my dream I was on a cloud above the ocean. I looked down at the ocean and just decided to leap.

This dream is about me and two of my brothers stuck on top of a huge kua kua with a volcano erupting behind us. It was scary at the time.

The drawing is of the playground at my elementary school. This appeared during a dream I had in 6th grade—and only appeared at night time. I was so afraid of meaning the most of the time I had with my friends.
Chapter 5 Part 2: Adult Interviews

Sitting with men and gathering their stories was a privileged space to be in. I enjoyed hearing what shaped the perspective of each man. They all had personal triumphs and setbacks. They dealt with paradigms given to them, and wrestled with their own as they changed with life experiences. There was evidence of Pollak’s “boy code” woven into several men’s experiences. Some had more rigid ideas about what it means to be a man, whereas others were more fluid. Many linked their profession to their identity, and also considered how their relationships contributed to shaped their ideas and viewpoints. I have included an excerpt from my interview with Jay to illustrate this part of my research.

Jay

Jay and I grew up together, so I observed much of his teenage and young adult journey as a friend. His mother passed away from Cancer when he was serving a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Honduras. There was a memorial walk held at the high school on a night soon after her death. I attended.

During our interview, Jay spoke about thinking he had dealt with these issues, but he was actually numbing and bottling his feelings of loss. He numbed and bottled so much that the feelings started to manifest in negative ways. With the encouragement of his wife, he went to therapy, and as a part of his catharsis, he got a tattoo commemorating his own children and, of course, his mother. Getting the tattoo was part of his healing process, as was the relationship Jay built with the tattoo artists. The tattoo took three installments of several hours. During those hours, he and the artist talked about “everything,” according to Jay: family, his mother, and life in general.
Figure 5. Jay’s tattoo on his left arm. His childhood home was built on the benches of the chosen mountain range. The starry sky holds each of his children’s star patterns. The yellow aspen on the inside of his arm represents his mother which rests close to his heart and is not easily seen by viewers when his arm is relaxed.

Trends

The following trends surfaced during the interview process:

1. Providing and protecting are a man's responsibilities and one of the main identifiers of what defines manhood and masculinity.
2. The difficulty of expressing emotion, and having a moment of coming to themselves and realizing that there needed to be an appropriate place for that expression for their mental health.

3. That expression came in the form of professional support, spousal support, creative endeavors, and close friendships.

4. Some mentioned suicidal thoughts, and deep depressions: others mentioned paradigms being shaped by parents.

5. Most mentioned feeling relieved when having a safe space to express emotion if they did not already have that previously.

A topic that wasn’t common among all men but more common than I thought it would be was incidents of sexual abuse. While this issue is out of the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that the percentage of affected males was higher than I anticipated. This causes me to reflect on the male experience overall and it is my speculation that there is more abuse occurring that merely goes unreported. Perhaps in some cases the “acting out” of men may be a response to unresolved sexual abuse trauma along with the other traumas already examined in the literature review. This issue deserves its own body of research and reflection.

In an attempt to find trends and patterns among the interviews, each interview was transcribed using Artificial Intelligence (AI). In the following images the size of the word is proportional to the number of times it was used or repeated within the context of the interview. After filler vocabulary was removed, words of significance for each individual man emerged. For example, if the man being interviewed repeatedly mentioned his dad it would be the biggest word illustration in the cloud. What this may illustrate is how their own masculinity is framed. The word “people” seemed to connote a concern with society, whereas “friends” or “family”
may be referred to the influence of an immediate social circle for the individual. Names are withheld for privacy. I have included three representative examples.
Vignettes

These lyrical sociological vignettes are a form of my own catharsis as I use moments in time to analyze my personal emotional experience pertaining to boys, men, and masculinity in terms of their empathy, vulnerability, and emotions. It brings my paradigm to the forefront, and gives my biases, and experiences, an artistic presentation.

Sam and Dan

The closest thing I had to older brothers were two boys of my parents’ best friends. We got together about once a month for activities, movies, and lazy nights in each other’s yards. The weekend before school started, we had a night with a pitcher of homemade Orange Julius, and fruit on our picnic table. Sam and Dan, my pseudo brothers, shoved their hands into the cherry bowl.

When something hit the back of my head, I looked down at the grass. There laid a wet cherry pit. An impish Sam trotted around the back of the house with a twinkly little grin. I went to tattle on him. “Dad! Sam is bothering me again. Make him stop!”

“Go play,” he said. My father didn’t move from his lawn chair and dismissed me as he waved his hand. He laughed with his friend who started to play another song on his guitar. Deflated and silenced, I walked to a different part of the yard. Another pit hit my arm, this one with some flesh still intact, and it left a red smear on my skin. Infuriated, I stomped into the old brown duplex. I dodged a few grasshoppers on the way in as they were in peak season.

Inside I watched from the window as the boys played and wrestled. They threw a football and ran into their make-believe endzone, or so they called it. I adored them. Maybe if I tried one more time Sam would play with me instead of pelting me with cherry pits. I decided to become courageous, and emerge from the home once more. I opened the door and saw Sam and Dan
hunched over a bucket full of green and yellow bug prisoners they had gathered from the garden. Samuel reached in and grabbed the largest hopper. It seems as though the bigger the bug, the bigger the brain. He held the creature down so it couldn’t jump, and poured the icy Orange Julius over the grasshopper, which seemed to paralyze it. I started to panic and protest. I was the girl who thought stuffed animals had feelings, let alone this creature.

“You’re hurting him!” I shrieked.

He smiled mischievously and insisted, “He’s fine!” I wasn’t convinced. He proceeded to pluck off the antenna, and poured more drink over it.

“Stop it! He’s trying to get out. Let him free!”

“He can’t feel a thing.” He plunged him into the cup. “He’s numb from all the ice, and his antenna is how he feels and those are gone now,” he exclaimed, holding one of the antennas in his hand. He confidently moved from the bug’s antenna to the springy back legs. “This’ll keep ‘em from jumpin’ out.” The hopper was still trying to drag himself from the child of terror.

Daniel was starting to get uncomfortable, and shoved his hand into his pockets. He could read my panic. “Hey, it’s okay. He really can’t feel anything.” Daniel nodded his head, perhaps trying to convince himself as much as he was me. I went to tell my dad again. Daniel squished it into the pavement, and mercifully ended its life.
George

The other boys in the apartment complex played with George as much as other girls played with me...in other words, they didn’t. Our parents were good friends, so we were best buddies by default. I didn’t know back then how smart he was. Probably a higher IQ than most. Later in life when we were both 19, he let me win as we played chess in our living room. He wrote me a letter that said I was a ray of sunshine, and he called me regularly for a couple of months when we were 20 making efforts to rekindle our childhood friendship. When we were five, all I cared about was that he was nicer than the blond girls who lived on the second floor, made mud pies with me and played monster trucks instead of dolls and princesses. Princesses were ick.

The other boys chanted in the center of the apartment quad, “Georgie Porgie pumpkin pie, kissed the girls and made them cry. When all the girls came out to play, Georgie Porgie ran away.” That rhyme makes absolutely no sense, but the most brutal humans in the 80’s tended to be those under the age of eight and a half. There were no crying girls, but George did. So, we played with each other. Everyday. With all the love a five-year-old had to give, I was certain I would marry this boy.
**Seth**

Seth’s friends laughed across the classroom. The boys looked at me and snickered again. What was it this time? My frizzy hair, my low voice, or my bra strap showing at the neck of my shirt? I didn’t want anyone to know I had just started wearing one. I looked inside my desk, then looked up, and they were still peering at me. My little rosy cheeks burned. The boys attempted swallowing their laughter, which then morphed into giggling. They hadn’t hit puberty yet.

The teacher made us come back to our desks to practice handwriting, but the boys grouped in the corner again, still laughing, but Kolby sat at the desk next to me.

“How’s your cursive goin’?” he asked in a low tone. He hit puberty a little earlier than the other guys.

“It’s good.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“So, you know Seth?”

“Of course, I know Seth.”

“Do you like him?” Did I like him? Absolutely I liked him. I liked his tall chicken legs. His cargo shorts. His Nike shoes. The way he could never sit down. His basketball skills are showcased at recess. The way he held his paper brown lunch bag scrunched at the top instead of folding it.

“What do you mean, do I like him?” I asked for clarification. This felt dangerously close to a social landmine.

“You know, do you like him? Like, like-like him?” Like, like-like? Whoa. Play it cool. I’m sure my eyes gave me away. They have a way of betraying a girl. “You like him,” he said, assured by my bashful pause. “Well, he likes you.”
Joy bubbled at the base of my lungs. It was safe now. “Well, yeah. I guess I do. He’s pretty cool.”

“Well, he wants to ask you out.”

Not as safe as I thought. This is me he was talking about. “Wait, is this a joke?”

“No! I’m serious.”

“Kolby, it has to be a joke. Me? Why would he go out with me?” I’m not even cute, I thought. He liked blonds. I needed validation. I started to sweat.

“I swear. Not a joke,” he assured. “Just tell me yes or no.” I knew him well enough to read his voice. It was true. I scanned the room for the boys. They were well aware of what Kolby was saying to me.

“Well, if it’s not a joke, then…yes!” All my dreams were coming true.

Kolby stood up and whispered across the room. “Seth! She said yes!” Seth looked straight at me and wiggled his eyebrows up and down. He grinned and gawked at me most of the day. Later, I walked past his desk to sharpen my pencil and gave him a smile. I was his girl.

Then I dumped him at recess.
Aaron

I loved him, but I didn’t know it. Love was supposed to be reserved for the basketball players well over 6’2” who shaved their legs and heads and wore the waist of their pants halfway down their boxer briefs. They were loud and boisterous. When they ran up and down the court during games with such power the old wooden gym floor shook the bleachers on the perimeter of the arena. These were the boys I loved. I pined. If only they would look at me instead of the dancers and cheerleaders.

He sat next to me on the bleachers, close enough that he would graze my thigh with his and be able to make it look unintentional. I had my letterman jacket on. He had asked to wear it all day during school, and I let him. It smelled like him, and I tucked my nose toward the collar and inhaled without anyone seeing. “You know, it’s like all the cheerleaders who wear their boyfriends’ lettermen’s jackets,” he had said earlier that morning when he slipped it on, “only you’re not my boyfriend! You’re my McFarland.” It was customary that he only used my last name.

That night, we sat on my best friend’s porch swing. All of our friends went inside her house, but Aaron and I stayed outside looking over the valley. I had never spent that long alone with a boy, just talking. He was always easy to talk to, and he took care of me. His shoulder touched mine, but he wasn’t a basketball player. I just couldn’t do it.

Another night, I hopped into the small red truck that he used to cart around a lawn mower for his summer business, and he drove me to his brother’s apartment in Salt Lake City near the University of Utah. We went together, just me and him, with no one else. I thought he was going to invite more of our friends, but he didn’t. I knew what he was doing, and somehow I convinced myself I didn’t love this boy.
Gordon

He was the Scottish farm hand who got the German farmer’s daughter pregnant in the back of a rickety Chevy Oldsmobile on New Year’s Eve in high school. Some parts of him still seemed to be 17, even after having grandchildren. But then again, a grandfather in his late 40’s isn’t exactly a calm, comforting patriarch with an extra dash of wisdom. No. This man barked orders at his wife when she forgot the butter. This man laughed at 1950’s bikini girls on the back of matchboxes sold at truck stops. This man could barely read.

The Christmas after I turned 12, I wore a Kelly-green sweater. I was only three inches shorter than he was. As an early grower, it wasn’t just my height that had sprouted, but my curves too. I was taller than most boys at school. Usually, I didn’t wear shirts that showed my shape, but the larger I got, the harder it was to hide. At a family Christmas party, though, I figured it wouldn’t be a big deal.

After dinner the whole family sat down to play the latest version of clue. It was unusually picturesque, everyone laughing around an oval table as we picked at treats on the counter that Grandma let us graze on after dinner.

“Professor Plum, candlestick, in the conservatory!” Grandma used her very best detective accent and my cousins giggled. Grandpa rolled his eyes, but he also chuckled. We took copious notes on our detective cards, and although Grandpa seemed disgruntled at the complexity of the game, he smiled more than usual.

When it was time to leave, he gave me an awkward side hug and said, “I’ve been worried about this for a long time. When my girls start to grow up and look like women, I don’t know how to hug ’em.”

I shrank back, ashamed of my breasts. I blushed and nodded.
Carson

We sat on the tailgate of his truck, in October, parked at a Chevron gas station, gazing at what used to be his family’s land. Our bellies were full from a pasta dinner.

“We didn’t sell it to Walmart. The Petersons did. But everyone thought we did.” The yellow haze of the sign mocked him like a commercialized word sun.

“I wondered about your family while you were living in Germany. I knew you were gone. Then your farm turned into a shopping center. And your parents got divorced. And your dad hung his girlfriend’s real estate agent’s sign from the top of his office building.” His eyes started to water and panic settled into my gut. What had I done? Guys hate crying. I changed the subject and made a joke. Something about family dynamics being a pain and then I said, “Sorry, we can talk about something else. I didn’t mean to bring it up.” He stopped crying. Crisis averted.

Two weeks later, he walked into the church building with another girl without a warning. Without a text.

“You could have at least told me!” I objected with my brick phone held tightly to my head while my voice spoke sternly.

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“Well, I mean I get it. It’s over. But can you at least do me a favor and tell me why? I mean, you had me cuddling in your basement and then you turn around and do this?”

“I just couldn’t be vulnerable to you,” he said.
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

Connecting Interviews and Personal Reflections with the Art/English Course

My research included a curriculum designed to investigate social and emotional learning in a ninth-grade English class, a series of interviews of adult men, and personal vignettes from my own experiences with boys and men. The theme of this long term and wide-ranging project was how we need to be paying attention to the emotional connections of men and boys, particularly in education. I used an art integrated approach to explore questions about how an art integrated English curriculum focused on social and emotional learning might influence my male students’ expression of empathy, vulnerability, and emotion. Throughout the project I was also observing how my experiments with social and emotional skills influenced my own teaching experiences.

The interviews added to my classroom case study because the adult men were able to speak candidly about individual experiences that the boys could also be experiencing but it would not have been appropriate for them to divulge in a school setting to an English teacher. Having the adult men’s perspective about maturing, hardships, relationships, and personal traumas opened my eyes to issues my students might be having. It also allowed me to have greater compassion and less judgement for each boy. Being clued into mens’ and boys’ issues from multiple perspectives helped me to see what is common among many boys and what may be more individual needs and concerns. IN all cases, most boys deal with some level of dissociation from the self and that was just as evident in the interviews as it was in my classroom.

Art created the capacity for boys to have choice of what feelings to express and how to express them. Art also fostered a safe space because of that choice. Some boys were able to be
cryptic because they were not forced to share what their art meant with the class. I was privy to that information as they were asked to write the meaning of their art of the back of each assignment. However, I was surprised at how many boys wanted to tell me additional details about their art verbally. The vocabulary we developed using the mood meter enabled boys to understand nuanced feelings and sometimes that subtlety surfaced in various art projects as well.

**Limitations of this study**

My students were not interviewed and there wasn’t a control group, so it could not be considered an experimental study. Nevertheless, as a qualitative and autobiographical case study, the specific contexts observed have resonance with existing research about the education of boys and social and emotional learning. It would have been interesting to observe the classes of my teacher team to see the response and engagement of their students. I would have also liked to hear discussions between students in the halls to see if there was any comparison. Some students were not engaged, and I would have liked to know more about the context of my students' home lives to understand what they were bringing to my class. It would be interesting to note how family culture contributed, emotional habits of parents, or even how socioeconomic status affected my students' receptivity to art integrated SEL lessons.

**Summary of Discovery**

Most students responded very positively to art integration in the classroom. Something I didn’t expect was how much engagement increased for my English Language Learners (ELL). It was a project that they could do independently. It helped them to feel successful in an otherwise difficult situation. For these students, art transcended language.

The text *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness and illustrated by Jim Kay was crucial in providing a person, through the main character Connor, who had feelings that could be discussed
instead of talking directly about each student. What was even more captivating for students was that the feelings Connor deals with are portrayed as a supporting character who is a yew tree monster. The students are thrilled when it starts to become evident that yew is a play on words and the character is a you monster. Big feelings are challenging and teens relate well to having difficulty navigating a hard experience and feeling out of control, much like Connor. The illustrations are captivating and the students took time to observe the art and use it for inspiration in their own art making. Various techniques were used and there is an artist statement in the book about unconventional techniques that were used to produce various effects in the illustrations. Most of the illustrations induce deep emotional reactions and responses from students that can also be discussed within real time.

Art lessons and art making allowed students choice and safety in regards to emotional expression. Boys especially seemed to appreciate my dialogue about acknowledging societal expectations. I was direct about my purpose of giving them projects to help them move their bodies and that the art was to allow them an emotional expression if they wanted. More boys than I expected were extremely open with me when they explained their art. The boys who were less open still engaged in conversation with me through their art projects, and they all enjoyed the freedom of moving about in my classroom. Several even commented on the lack of movement in other classrooms. They said I was less uptight, and they got in trouble less for little things in my class.

It seemed that my own vulnerability fostered a feeling of safety for my students to do the same. Self-disclosure consisted of occasional appropriate comments about my family, interests, and even dating. I would write my own response occasionally to the “How are you feeling”
prompts on the projector for students to see. And I was honest. I showed students my own spectrum of emotions.

In passing many students would say how much they loved doing things in my class. A few boys even lingered to stay and chat with me after between classes, during our school’s designated half-hour homework period, or even after school. I was also concerned about what they were doing with each other and if the new skills were being integrated into the boy code. When I carefully listened in on conversations, they would joke with each other when they weren’t being emotionally intelligent. “Tell me how you’re feeling,” they would say, or “I feel hurt by that right now.” A student named Myron expressed gratitude to me because he felt like he was safe to really be himself in my class and he appreciated that. Mason was not the only one who thanked me, and while not everyone thanked me, their openness was thanks enough. Even as I write this, I remember those boys who gave me their “student heart”, and it is hard not to become emotional.

What Next?

Although my teaching of SEL content in my class appeared to have a positive influence on my students, the success of a program as extensive as RULER requires school wide implementation to provide a consistent reinforcement of ideas about social and emotional learning.

The practice of teaching about emotion and vulnerability will become an enduring part of my classroom to continue the benefits of art integration and male emotional expression. I have already used this curriculum and modified versions in the subsequent year and have also augmented it in other units. In doing so, I am more aware of my purpose in incorporating movement, vulnerability, and emotional expression through artistic capstone
projects in the units. In collaboration with another cohort member, I included communication SEL lessons with a capstone project of creating Italian masquerade masks representing a certain communication type. Students then stood up and role-played how a character would communicate both with and without an emotional mask.

I will continue to explore the *A Monster Calls* this year and in future years if I am still teaching. However, a part of me knows deep down, however, that there is more. Our entire nation is hungry for a healing of the masculine. Currently, there are men at the forefront of social reform, leading a new generation of men to be our relentlessly fierce and softly tender as men and women come together to become whole. It is an area that requires more research and attention in education, particularly in societal context where destructive models of masculinity seem to be becoming more prevalent.
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