

## What's Art Got to Do With It: A Post COVID-19 Art-Informed Self-Study of Two Educators

“The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is-  
it is to imagine what is possible!”  
-bell hooks (2015)

### Context of study

Our collaborative self-study work (Kitchen, et al., 2019) began after XXXX completed his dissertation in 2018 (XXXX was his chair) using his own created art as a reflective tool. As believers in the power of art as a reflective tool that can positively impact self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977 & 1986; Grushka, 2005) we have been pursuing how we might use an art-informed reflection tool with teachers. As bell hooks (2015) states “the function or art is to do more than tell it like it is-it is to imagine what is possible”. This art-informed self-study started with the hope of meeting each of our community’s needs regarding social-emotional foundations (SEF) after teaching and learning in isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker, et al., 2021; Brackett, 2019; Jiao, et al. 2020). Art as a reflective tool serves as the theoretical framework, based in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), that fosters for us our own ‘meaning making’ (Hauge, 2021) and we both advocate teacher reflection is a necessary component of professional practice. We agree with Hauge (2021) that teachers could actively initiate and research their own practice to improve their teaching and professional actions. We had grand plans to incorporate the arts in the professional development planned for teachers that taught in a public high school (XXXX was the principal), and, who were taking courses in a M.Ed. program at a public university (XXXXX was the professor). We wanted our constituents (XXXX’s teachers and XXXXX’s graduate students) to focus on rebuilding their self-efficacy and to take control of their SEF. We were correct that there was a social-emotional crisis occurring for our constituents. We were *woefully* wrong that we could jump in with our plan. We had not anticipated that we, as leadership, would struggle with our own capacity to support others. We had to rebuild our own SEF before we could truly lead our constituents. Two questions became the focus of our arts-informed self-study:

- 1) How do we define a successful SEF re-entry for our constituents to the school setting after the COVID-19 pandemic forced isolation?
- 2) What needs to change for the success of our teachers/students (constituents)?

After 18 months online, and, using distance education, we wanted to develop approaches to building SEF using arts integration to address the needs of our constituents, but we quickly found out that they were not “buying in” to our ideas about using the arts as a reflective tool to build SEF. We took a step back and decided that we had to model/explore our idea of integrating the arts to build our own SEF. By demonstrating this arts-informed reflective process we had

created, we hoped our constituents would be more eager to participate moving forward. This arts-informed self-study tells the story of two educational leaders over the course of 18 months developing a framework to continue to rebuild our SEF using arts-informed reflection.

Self-study practitioners, critically, and, reflectively, examine themselves, their practice and the contexts in which they work (Kitchen & Berry, 2021). What we found was a mess. Our professional worlds consist of two academic settings. XXXXX is an Associate Professor for a public university coordinating the M.Ed. concentration for special education and teaches in the M.Ed. program core courses for all concentrations. XXXX is a principal of a large diverse high school with 1460 students and 135 educators. XXXXX and XXXX, each, earned doctorate degrees using self-study methodology in their research. Prior to entering the world of higher education, XXXXX was a special education teacher and XXXX was an art teacher before becoming a principal. None of these experiences prepared us for the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and what it has done to the self-efficacy and emotional stability of the constituents we serve.

We believe in “self-efficacy” as humans are constantly internalizing social and emotional cues from their interactions and relationships with others, their physical environment, and the prevailing social norms and routines (Allender, 2001; Allender & Allender, 2016; Bandura, 1977 & 1986). We believe that during the COVID-19 pandemic isolation unhealthy social and emotional skills and mindsets—like racism, aggression, and helplessness—were reinforced from the lack of social engagement (Beard et al., 2021; Czypionka et al., 2020). It’s especially important during what we view as emotional recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic for educators to bring awareness and intentionality to a possible hidden SEF agenda.

Our art-informed self-study explores the post Covid-19 pandemic world of public education at the high school and university level. We explored how working through an arts-informed lens, helped us as educational leaders, rebuild our own SEF and prepare to support our constituents. Self-study has important contributions to make in these times for documenting the experiences and insights that come from radical educational change. As a methodology, self-study of teacher education practices aims to understand situated human activity from the perspectives of those engaged in it (Berry & Kitchen, 2020). Over the last 18 months, using our guiding questions, we have utilized our arts-informed self-study knowledge to:

1. Explore our own SEF through our arts-informed reflection process.
2. Explore our procedures for implementing an arts-informed reflective tool that we thought we could implement during the 2021-2022 academic school year.
3. Design a set of professional development procedures for our constituents that we could implement for the 2022-2023 academic year.

## **Aim of study**

We began designing a set of professional development procedures by practicing a form of dialectical discourse (Abbott, 2002; Cousin, 2005; Elliott & Lukes, 2008), that worked for us in our current roles as educational leaders (XXXXX as a professor teaching teachers at the graduate level and XXXX as a high school principal) that we thought we could implement as early as the fall of 2021 with our constituents. We had a “BIG” idea. We would use arts integration to help teachers and students re-acclimate, rejoin, and re-enter the world of school. We were going to focus on building up teacher SEF (Jiao et.al., 2020).

We spent time discussing what we anticipated as the struggle our constituents might have with their SEF (Jiao, et al., 2020). We believed we could use an arts-informed reflective tool to develop and support the SEF (Jones, et al., 2021) of the constituents we serve, after the COVID-19 isolation. We quickly found there was a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989) between what we proposed to do and what we could accomplish with our constituents. We started with two aims for this arts-informed self-study research:

- 1) Define our methodological/procedural steps for our arts-informed self-study research partnership to grow our own individual SEF.
- 2) Implement those procedures for an arts-informed self-study during the 2021-2022 academic year that would focus on using the arts as a reflective tool to build social/emotional capacity of teachers and graduate students.

Those aims were revised to better meet the needs of our constituents:

- 1) How do we define a successful SEF re-entry for our constituents to the school setting after the COVID-19 pandemic forced isolation?
- 2) What needs to change for the success of our teachers/students (constituents)?

The remainder of this chapter will discuss what we learned while implementing an arts-informed self-study as part of our journey to understand our own SEF as education leaders, and, how we could support our constituents, post COVID-19 pandemic. Serving as critical friends (Edge & Olan, 2021; MacPhail et al., 2021; O’Dwyer et al., 2019; Schuck & Russell, 2006; Thomas & Garbett, 2020) we began a dialogue around the worries we had as we headed back into more “traditional” education settings.

## **Methods**

Through our use of dialectical discourse (Abbott, 2002; Cousin, 2005; Elliott & Lukes, 2008; Sandretto, 2009) we discovered that we had to pivot away from the idea of using art-informed reflection to meet the needs of our constituents, and, focus on our own SEF as a principal, a teacher educator, and humans. We were wavering between the postmodern and post-structural (Sandretto, 2009) because we needed to deconstruct our beliefs about ourselves as leader before the COVID-19 pandemic to understand who we were now. By exploring our own

art-informed self-study research practices we would better understand the issues of our constituents. Six pillars were used throughout our exploration: (1) advancing a willingness to improve; (2) acknowledging the power of reflection, (3) examining practice through collaboration, (4) identifying changes in practice, (5) developing new identities, and (6) sharing with others (Diacopoulos, et al., 2021). We would come back to these pillars as we discussed the issues. Our weekly procedures were simple. Each week we engaged in the following practice:

1. Individual Memos/Reflections about our work. Reflections could be in any art form or written word.
2. Critical Friend Weekly Meeting using Dialectical Discourse to explore our experiences each week as education leaders.

We developed a short note method using text message for those quick moments when we had a thought and didn't want to forget it but could not stop our work. We used google docs to store memos, notes, and writings about our attempts to grow our own SEF while leading our constituents. Below is an example of a memo XXXXX wrote after visiting XXXX at school on a day that was all to frequent:

*I see the level of stress everyone is feeling coming back from the isolation of COVID and it is hard to think we will accomplish much this school year. Today, I came to work with XXXX in his office. I am used to the interruptions. He is the principal. His job is to solve everyone's problems. Today, I know why we cannot get to the arts as reflection work done with people in the school. The tension is palpable in the building. There are a lot of fights. Secretary shared with me that she is concerned for XXXX. XXXX said he got kicked. The fight was bad enough that I could hear the kids down a hallway through the walls of the office. XXXX had to stay with the kids. All of this happened in the first 30 minutes of my arriving with lunch. We were going to work on our self-study, but we couldn't because of chaos. (XXXXX, September 13, 2021).*

Crucial to building trustworthiness (Ovens & Garbett, 2020) in our own thinking and as critical friend, we used a recursive process to develop 'new ways of knowing' what is needed to support our own SEF, (Whitehead, 1993; Samaras, 2006, 2011). We completed 32 sessions of memoing, dialectical discourse and cultural experiences (Bauman, 2008) to provide for us a mechanism for growth in SEF (Bowen & Kisida, 2017).

We conceptualize our critical friendship as external (O'Dwyer, et al., 2019) providing for the objectivity to ask each other questions, provide alternative perspectives, and offer criticism with support (Schuck & Russell, 2005). We have no power or authority over each others' positions. Our leadership roles are different in scope, structure and size (Ramirez, et al., 2020) though we discovered we do have overlap in our demographic (XXXX's teaching staff are often my students). We believe we support teachers in their own teaching and learning. Below is an

example of a memo from early summer 2021 discussing my thoughts about being a critical friend.

*I keep thinking about the definition I most often attribute to a critical friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 50). This is what I want to be for XXXX(XXXXX, June 2021).*

We spent a portion of our time together discussing the role of a critical friend. This was very useful when we analyzed our memos and dialogues for themes.

## **Outcomes**

### **Findings**

We chose to use the term “themes” because our work has a theoretical framework based in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the idea of ‘meaning-making’ as a never ending process is important to us as artists. Artists have traditionally derived much of their understandings of the world from affective positions such as an autobiographical knowing linked to personal feelings, experiences, and opinions informed, by and beyond self, to transpersonal understandings (Grushka, 2005). We explored our core themes through dialectic discourse (Fairclough 2009). At this point in time we have three themes we can discuss: *Art-Informed Practice*, *Memo as Reflective Tool in Self-Study Research*, and *Establishing a Research Relationship*.

### **Theme 1: Art-informed practice**

We created an environment that fostered self-study as a deep reflection based on personal epistemology (art as reflection). As we began our dialogue using dialectical discourse (Fairclough, 2009) about the reopening of schools, we recognized the notion of community firmly established in the self-study research literature (Allender & Scarlow-Allender, 2016; LaBoskey, et al., 2004; Placier, et al. 2005). We found that throughout this self-study, the benefit of developing a reflective practice with others to understand and operate in our current new reality. Life for all of us, including the constituents we serve, may always be confronted by real moments of despair, but we have not lost connection with the possibility of possibilities. We are not psychologists but we noticed our dialogues using dialectical discourse provided opportunities to destress from difficult days. A new way to be in our work as educational leaders grounded in art-informed reflection provides each of us with multiple means of distressing, rethinking through situations, and a generally more positive outlook.

Each of us has our own individual artistic interests. Both of us include a creative aspect to individual art-informed reflection. Our dialectic discourse (Fairclough, 2009) provided a means

to explore the arts-informed reflections. XXXX continues to work on his “Reflective Painting” series, from his dissertation, and XXXXX continues to engage in creative writing from her individual self-study. Individual reflective practice comes together through dialectic discourse (Fairclough, 2009). For example, we spent the second half of 2020 and first half of 2021 discovering what it meant to be an artist and “think like an artist” or “maintain a creative/artistic” self. This started with discussing artists we connected to through a humanistic lens (Allender, 2001). We discussed how artists create art and how different approaches could help to guide our art-informed self-study process work. We were developing a way to rebuild our SEF, utilizing arts-integration. We realized our concept should start with integrating the arts in our own self-study practice. XXXXX utilizes artistic thinking (Sullivan, 2001) through storytelling (Golden-Biddle, et al., 2006). For XXXX this work builds on his prior self-study dissertation entitled *Art-Informed Educational Leadership Self-Study to Teacher Instructional Capacity* (2018). XXXX continues to consider his “way of knowing” through art as demonstrated in a Morning Memo from April 12, 2022, he wrote:

*As we move into the Easter weekend and start getting into spring I think of rebirth and restarting. I plan to spend some time working on my studio area so that I can be as productive as possible and situate the arts more centrally in my life. As I do so I am thinking more about what is really important. I’ve consolidated my thinking around three major concepts: art practices, creative design process, and the principles of art as guiding mindsets. The concept of the artist’s practice can be supported by Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way* (Cameron & Bryan, 1992). I have gone through her steps and it has changed my way of thinking. The Principles of Art as Guiding Mindsets: The elements of art the raw materials of creativity while the principles of art concepts that guide the application of the elements. Typically we think of this for design or art related creativity but it can be used for any problem. The design process includes: empathy, problem definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing.*

## **Theme 2: Memo as reflective tool in self-study research**

The “morning memo” (MM) is an integral part of our sustained self-study and it has helped us to form a deeper understanding that braids our individual self-studies, and our relationship as critical friends. This is portion of XXXX’s MM from May 17, 2022:

*The evolution of the relationship between XXXXX and me has been critical at this time. It has gone from a student/dissertation chair relationship to colleague/colleague. In my system I have concentric circles of reflective practice starting with my own reflection, moving to a “vested” committee that is engaged in common work with me, a “critical friends” group that gives me input on my work with a more objective viewpoint. I want to make a change to the system by adding in XXXXX as a collaborative coach/dialectic partner between individual and vested committee.*

Creating and sticking with a process provides a way to bring meaning and structure to our daily practice. The dialogue often resembles our daily diverse experiences but we typically work back to our core themes.

*Our discussions are typically more effective than efficient. We tend to move around topics and connect the sometimes unconnected. We will bring in concepts from our reading but we also talk about other things like pop culture and media. The open ended nature of the conversation is important to get it all out in the dialectic field (XXXX April 5, 2022).*

This memos are defined by our constantly changing work as educational leaders. The world has experienced a great deal of upheaval over the past several years and education including teacher education has been impacted. It has caused us to evolve, make hard pivots, and at times spin.

*A feeling of insecurity and fear permeates classrooms. Teachers and students struggling emotionally to come back to the conventions of the education system after a long haul of online and distance instruction. No one was ready. Not teachers. Not students. Not ready. Not ready at all. (XXXXX 9/02/2021)*

### **Theme 3: Benefits of establishing a research relationship**

The ongoing evolution of our relationship is both an intentional and organic outcome of doing the work. The following describes XXXX's process this past academic year culminating in a professional learning plan for his teachers for the 2022-2023 academic school year.

*With everything coming at me as I return to the principal's seat the discourses with XXXXX have been a way to reflect and put things together. We often dialogue on an instruction, teacher capacity building, or special education level. (XXXX8.15.21)*

We spent a great deal of dialogue and memo time (Kelchtermans & Hamilton, 2004), considering how to bring arts-informed reflection to the professional learning model that would enhance our constituents' SEF. For us, dialectical discourse (Fairclough, 2009) is the nexus of our self-study processes. Both of us have independent objectives in our own practice that come together in a collaborative self-study process. This process also adds an additional discipline subjectivity for both.

XXXX's school is moving to a more distributive model of professional development with a weekly professional development sessions embedded into the school day. This is a new activity for the school so XXXX led his teachers through protocols designed to expose the hopes and fears of his teachers leading to collaboratively defining norms, procedures, and purpose of the professional learning. Over time, XXXX and members of his Instructional Leadership Team, will begin to frame the work around concepts related to the principles of design and the design

process to support creative thinking in lesson planning. XXXX worked through these concepts in a morning memo:

*As a leader I find myself needing to assess the situation or a person's approach to an issue and take the opposite approach. When someone is stuck in a structured rut, I need to move them out of their predetermined thinking and stretch their thinking. When someone is throwing out random ideas, I need to bring structure to those ideas by connecting the dots (that can be connected) and pruning away ideas that don't really fit. I think this area is a perfect place to utilize the design process which is really a combination of divergent and convergent thinking.*  
(XXXX8.31.22)

XXXX attributes his professional learning design for his teachers to the work he has completed through this art-informed self-study process.

We have our individual ways of “knowing” (Whitehead, 1996 ) that works for each of us, and, we come together through the dialectic discourse (Fairclough, 2009; Keltchtermans & Hamilton, 2004). For us, the art-informed reflective practice has supported SEF, and, therefore, gives us the ability to rebuild the self-efficacy of our teachers and students.

## Conclusion

There is an Emerson quote; **“the years teach much which the days never knew”** (1844) that resonates with both of us: because it speaks to the on-going reflective practice we are engaged. It's a reflective practice that is situated in our work, which is situated in the world, that has been playing out over a time that is different from anything we have experienced. This process is helping us to make sense of it all, and, build our self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977 & 1986). We now believe we possess the capacity to grow our constituents' SEF in the world at this time.

*The world is burning. The U.S. is crazy as a country. Women are losing the right to make choices about our bodies. There is a war in Ukraine. The price of everything is going up. XXXX and I, both separate from each other, got COVID-19 in the spring of 2022. Thankfully, we were fully vaccinated so we mostly, just felt lousy. The worst part was the reminder that this pandemic is not over yet. XXXX and I have met almost every week for the last year. We have discovered that the structure we have imposed on ourselves as self-study researchers has paid dividends. We are better in our own self-efficacy and it shows through the interactions with our people (XXXXX, May 15, 2022).*

We started this work to help our constituents become self-efficacious educators in current realities. This includes using the arts in our own lives, as part of our self-study processes, to more effectively help our teachers develop and rebuild their SEF, and, in some cases, stay in the profession. We believe when leadership has a strong sense of SEF (self-efficacy) then we have more capacity to build up our constituents' SEF. We started with two aims:



- 1) Define our methodological/procedural steps for our arts-informed self-study research partnership to grow our own individual SEF.
- 2) Implement those procedures for an arts-informed self-study during the 2021-2022 academic year that would focus on using the arts as a reflective tool to build social/emotional capacity of teachers and graduate students.

Those aims were revised to better meet the needs of our constituents:

- 1) How do we define a successful SEF re-entry for our constituents to the school setting after the COVID-19 pandemic forced isolation?
- 2) What needs to change for the success of our teachers/students (constituents)?

We were able to develop a process for our arts-informed self-study. It has proven to be much more difficult to implement arts-informed self-study with our constituents. Through our continued dialogue about our lived experience as educational leaders we realized that we could not develop a plan for utilizing arts integration with our staff without rebuilding our own SEF. Furthermore, we realized that our constituents should at the very least have input on the plan and at the best become collaborators in developing a plan to utilize arts-informed reflection as a way of rebuilding their own SEF. We took the time to observe/listen to our constituents and reflect for ourselves.

We implemented an art-informed self-study beginning with reflection cycles to better serve our constituents (teachers/students). We are doing the work. We built the system. Our own SEF is more balanced. We believe in the positive difference 9arts-informed reflection has made in our lives as educational leaders.

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