The Potential of Creative Arts as a Medium for Mental Health Promotion in Schools: An Exploration of Meaning-Making, Belonging and Identity Using Creative Processes

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*Education is only possible because the human being is a being that can transcend itself*
Many thanks to:

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Note:

The terms creative art practices/processes and art are used interchangeably, though ‘creative processes’ I feel provides a wider understanding of Art Making – as a process including all disciplines and creative activities. For the citations that use ‘man’ I understand this to mean ‘humankind’.
Abstract

This document explores the potential of creative art processes as a medium for progressive Mental Health Promotion in schools. These processes have been chosen because of their capacity to deepen transformative experiences. When engaged with the major themes of identity, belonging and meaning-making, their experiential nature and multi-sensory approaches provide insight into and support for emotional, mental, physical and spiritual well-being.

Introduction

Gyorgy Kepes notes that we respond to the images of the artist because their forms and harmonies touch us at various levels of our being: sensational, rational, and emotional....Art more and more is relied on to restore the wholeness of human experience.²

The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) recognizes the potential of the creative arts and art processes for Mental Health Promotion (MHP) and has most recently used drama and the plastic arts in awareness raising road shows, which toured schools throughout 2000. Process drama approaches have also been employed in curriculum resources such as the Year 7 and 8 Mental Health Matters and Natural High, a mental health promotion approach to alcohol and drug problems.

With the growing understanding that improving people’s health is much more than a medicalised emphasis on disease, attention is now being focused on enhancement of health and well-being. Health Promotion (HP) and MHP in school settings, including curriculum based activity, are playing a major part in these developments. Educational programs are being used as a means of preventing and controlling health problems. The MHF’s Mentally Healthy Schools pilot projects and the Health Promoting Schools movement are examples of such initiatives. HP for example now acknowledges the inextricable links between the education and health needs of young people. It also appears that positive educational outcomes are heightened as the health needs of both students and teachers are addressed.

The development of innovative programmes for MHP using the creative arts to explore meaning-making will provide a crucial framework for development in this area. In particular the experiential aspects of creative art processes have the potential to directly engage young people with a comprehensive exploration of mental health. Mental health being that which the MHF describes as “the quality of a person’s psychological, social, and behavioural functioning in the world.”³

As Arohanui Grace, the Project Manager for Education, MHF says, this work is about building Hauora⁴, which Robertson and Dickinson describe as an:
….holistic understanding of health as total well-being or hauora, that focuses not just on the physical – taha tinana, but also the social – taha whanau, the mental and emotional – taha hinengaro, and the spiritual – taha wairua, and the interconnectedness of these dimensions.⁵

To achieve their full potential, young people need opportunities to explore their physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions. Engaging with creative processes provides opportunities to explore a multileveled understanding of identity, initially through an internal dialogue, and then in relation to their peers, the wider school community and their family.

The following document comprises five sections, starting with introductions to the two key elements of this inquiry, the reason for using creative art processes for MHP and an explanation of meaning-making. These are followed by a discussion of Resilience, how this approach to MHP is most effective when it fits with the curriculum and the need for ‘Whole School’ action to implement it:

- Why Creative Processes?
- What is Meaning-Making?
- Building Resilience
- How it Fits with the Curriculum
- Whole School Action
Why Creative Processes?

Creative processes require experiential approaches and it is this that allows an expanding exploration of ‘self’. When applied to MHP the deepening will occur in relation to a growing understanding of Hauroa. Their universality as exhibited by their language of symbols is what enables them to bridge social, educational, racial, and economic barriers. The great social reformer and dramatist Augusto Boal explains:

At its simplest, the idea underlying this is that ‘a picture paints a thousand words’; that images can be closer to our true feelings, even our subconscious feelings.\(^6\)

This is true for all creative processes, for the images produced be they made of gesture, sound, brush or stone, can speak for all of the parts of us. Boal says that art is “immanent to all men.”\(^7\) The idea that we are born ‘knowing’ art explains how creative processes enable us to make images which reflect, communicate and at times weave our disparate views of the world into something universal. It may also explain their intrinsic therapeutic benefit. Friere in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, suggests that when all members of what he’s named the ‘culture of silence’, are given the proper tools to look critically at the world in relation to others, the old paternalistic teacher-student relationship breaks down, so allowing "people (to) educate each other through the mediation of the world."\(^6\) And as the new Arts Curriculum states “The arts enable people to participate in collaborative and individual pursuits that contribute to community and personal identity.”\(^9\) When individual identity meets something universal through creative process, it can create a powerful sense of belonging and an expanded sense of ‘self’. Learning in the disciplines of the arts impacts strongly on how students think and expands the ways in which they can express ideas, feelings, beliefs and values and understand those of others. Such learning leads to the development of what can be termed ‘literacies’ in the arts.\(^10\)

I would paraphrase this as ‘literacies’ in meaning-making, for as students develop practical knowledge in all aspects of art practice, including exhibition and performance, they are learning how ‘meaning’ is made and then communicated.

Developing a range of ‘literacies’ has always been a primary component of Steiner educational philosophy. It encourages the practical application of the body, mind, feelings, spirit continuum, giving equal status to the training of abstract or logical abilities, pictorial holistic thinking and emotional responses. In *Education Through Art*, Nobel introduces the Steiner concept of the ‘third factor’, that is the gestalt created within the individual, when “living form springs into existence, (the) necessary third realm between soul and reason, the world of art.”\(^11\) She believes that the current emphasis in state systems on analytic ‘mechanistic’ approaches to learning, is inhibiting this vital aspect
of learning. It needs to be rebalanced by giving equal status to experiential (art) practices:

If an individual’s talents are not encouraged to grow, and if he is not trained continuously in the active creation of knowledge, but is given all his information…following a mechanical view of knowledge, the individual will lose faith in his own part in the thinking process and he will be unable to form an idea of integration and will only see splintered fragments.\(^\text{12}\)

Adam Dubignon a Steiner educator working in Auckland echoed this need for a more holistic approach when we spoke. He believes that many young people suffer frustration because the world they live in doesn’t hold meaning for them. He feels this comes from the conflict of what he termed their global (or expanding) consciousness, with the empirical systems they are surrounded by. This disjunction causes a sense of fragmentation, pain and frustration.

Stephen Bell, Director of Youthline finds that the multiple levels of fragmentation in the lives of the young people that his organisation works with are having a devastating effect. Miller in *Educating the Soul* explores this growing problem, when he contrasts the ‘empirical’ with the ‘global’:

....unlike cognitive logic that seeks the right answer, soul logic seeks the healthy answer that serves the whole being. Sardello states: “Illness occurs when something partial is taken to be whole.”\(^\text{13}\)

Youthline’s dedication to holistic learning can be seen in their MHP programs, in which they provide experiential interactive learning environments. In the over eight hundred programs in schools, which they have carried out since their inception, they have moved far beyond the simple delivery of content. What follows is a brief overview of the concepts, which support their *Action Education* Philosophy:

- Group settings foster the sharing of information and life-experiences.
- Debate and discussion can occur with respect for differing attitudes, values and experience.
- Learning is most effective when the process of learning is taken into account. The experience is as important as the knowledge.
- A healthy self-image and self-esteem are the basis for and generators of learning and positive change.
- Acknowledge the importance of maintaining the respect for the knowledge and potential of everyone.
- Creativity is not confined to a special minority, but is inherent in everyone.

These guidelines support the concept of our inborn ‘creativity’ and the need to recognise it as a powerful tool for change. As Dewey states it “breaks
through the crust of conventionalised and routine consciousness.” Friere expands on this:

….man’s ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively.”

Opening to these possibilities, through the use of innovative creative arts programs requires a (school) culture, which “encourages diversity and tolerates the seeming ambiguity that such diversity suggests.” While Eisner’s calls for a particular school culture to support these programs, Shirley Coyle has shown in her work in New South Wales, Australia, that the arts also prompt the development of new school cultures. Coyle used art processes in a program to counter racism, and its direct and positive impact on the culture of the schools she worked in, was recently recognised by UNESCO. Eisner further explores this ambiguity implicit in comprehensive holistic learning environments, when he presents creative inquiry as one in which a focus is sustained while ‘gaps’ in meaning are investigated. He describes the individual engaged in this process as a “system in tension, sensitive to the gaps in his experience and capable of maintaining this state of affairs.”

Modes of Knowing

While these ‘gaps’ exist in all forms of inquiry, art practices provide the opportunity for a multi-sensory and therefore deeper experience. In the current educational environment there is a growing awareness and acceptance of ‘sensory response’ as it relates to the concept of different ‘learning styles’. Contributors to New Horizons: Arts Studio, emphasise the need to provide for the symbolic systems of the visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, and the musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, which they say have until recently been dominated by the verbal/logical intelligences.

Dickinson quotes the United States Department of Education’s report: Schools, Communities and the Arts: A Research Compendium, in which it was found that students who struggled with (verbal) instruction based programs, showed marked improvements when they engaged with processes that required their visual or kinaesthetic abilities. She supports this with research from Specific Diagnostic Studies, which shows that:

….students whose strongest learning channel is auditory comprise less than 15% of the population. On the other hand, students who demonstrate a visual learning style are about 40% of the population…. There are also many students who must hold ideas in their hands before they can understand and learn….These kinaesthetic or haptic students form about 45% of the population….The arts offer especially valuable tools to facilitate learning for those who are primarily visual and kinaesthetic.
Eisner’s educational philosophy also incorporates different ‘modes of knowing’: knowing in language forms, in visual and plastic forms, in qualitative and sensory, practical and technical forms. He expands this to describe every mode of knowing as ‘co-creation’, or “participation in the continual creation of the universe of one’s self.”  

**In Summary:**

- Creative art processes provide the universal language of symbols which all people can speak.
- They integrate mind, body, emotion and spirit.
- They provide opportunities for an expanded understanding of ‘self’ as they bridge the individual’s inner world with that of outer concrete reality.
- They provide opportunities to experience ‘process’ from beginning to end, so expanding participant’s range of literacies.
- They merge the learning of process and content, so connecting thinking with doing.
- They exercise and develop higher order thinking skills, including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and ‘problem finding’.
- They ground personal insight, for what is created in the art process provides a visual, written, musical or dramatic form, which then reflects that insight. This reflection or ‘space’ is where meaning is made.
What is Meaning-Making?

Meaning-making is the construction of 'comprehension' from an individual's experience. This may be the discovery of completely new core constructs or the reframing of current ideas. It requires an engagement with people, places, ideas or things, to create an 'internal' space in which an energetic information exchange can occur. This is what enables the individual to grasp an understanding of the unity between their 'inner' and 'outer' worlds. In the 'space' that creative process provides, one recognises themselves as this is reflected back by the image/word/sound they have made, and so comprehension expands.

By way of example an art-based meaning-making project is outlined by the art educators Honigman and Bhavnagri. Their Painting with Scissors program was based on the work of Henry Matisse. Though they were working specifically with the plastic arts and a particular age group, their description of the children's engagement in a creative arts process is elucidating:

> During the process, children were inventing, discovering and problem solving, which is necessary for meaning-making….and for developing a broader mental functioning….the children were able to think like artists because they had to figure out how to use visual forms to convey an idea. Remarks such as “I am putting lots of colors real close to each other so people know it’s fireworks”, demonstrate their understanding that shape, color and composition are elements of a language, just as the spoken and written work and nonverbal gestures are elements of a different kind of human language.21

Dosamantes-Beaudry uses such a language, which she describes as a ‘nonverbal mode of expression’. As a dance therapist working cross-culturally through ethnicity and physical difference, she has explored ‘disjunctive moments’, in which her ‘culture’ inhibits communication with another. She terms her ground of meaning-making the ‘cultural unconscious’, and while in this context it is applied to ethnicity and physical difference; these are the singular pools or areas of difference in which we all swim. As they are equally relevant to any meaning-making process being sensitive to them is important:

> ….cultural differences exist in the way members of different cultural groups approach and interpret their unconscious symbolic experience and in the kinds of defences they resort to when protecting themselves against the experience of a loss of self-integrity.22

The ‘gaps’ that occur while meaning is formulating need to be treated sensitively, for as Dosmates-Beaudry found, ‘self integrity’ or ‘identity’ are fragile here and may be negatively challenged. Eisner also calls for caution as he believes that the ‘whole being’ is continually affected, for we are in fact in a continual state of meaning-making:

> ….it is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making. There is thus no
feeling, no experience, no thought, no perception, independent of a meaning-making context….because we are the meaning-making context.\textsuperscript{23}

By acknowledging that we in our process of being, become the ‘place of meaning’, also establishes a context for the art process. And in this internal space we may encounter what Eisner calls the ‘suprasensory’. For by entering “new ways, new knowledge, new relationships, new awareness,”\textsuperscript{24} we can engage with the transcendent. Before engaging with multi-layered ‘suprasensory’ worlds, he suggests “mining the veins of various religious traditions”\textsuperscript{25} for the language of the transcendence. These histories, stories, myths, paintings, songs and poems, hold symbols of ‘otherness’, which can be used to gain insight.

In her project \textit{Stories and Art} the American educationalist Alice Arnold presents story telling as a ‘multisensory teaching process’ in which, “stories can provide a point of departure for art explorations that allow multiple levels of meaning to emerge.”\textsuperscript{26} Creative processes provide sensory rich ‘states’ in which many layers of understanding can be observed. The process being engaged, becomes the “organising principle by which knowledge of the human condition is rendered into a form that makes thinking possible.”\textsuperscript{27}

The rhythms of movement from action to reflection and from reflection upon that action to new action are required to do this. They are the rhythms of learning that Heathcote sought recognition for throughout her education reforms. She states it simply, as knowledge having two aspects: “How you \textit{get} experience, and how you \textit{process} experience.”\textsuperscript{28} This principle now underlies the new Arts and Health Curriculums:

\begin{quote}
….the cycle of action and reflection is a dynamic process that unites theory and practice. It is common to most learning and teaching situations and fundamental to this curriculum.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Boal’s concept of \textit{metaxis} also embodies the ‘action reflection’ principle. In essence it suggests that the space between the world in which one lives and the fictional world created in art processes, is the place that meaning is made. It is in this ‘gap’ between the two worlds that one is able to simultaneously reflect on and possibly reframe aspects of both places.

These cycles require a movement from old to new meanings, a process that Piaget termed ‘decentration’. This loss of an old centre for the new is:

\begin{quote}
…..the beginning of a history of transformations, each of which is a better guarantee to the world of its distinct integrity, a history of successive emergence form it (differentiation) in order to relate to it (integration).\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Eisner cautions that “every mode of knowing is a mode of being open, vulnerable, and available to the internal and external world.”\textsuperscript{31} To explore new aspects of ‘self’ is to risk an encounter with structures that are beyond our
knowing, potentially both a challenging and exhilarating experience. Allowing an openness to the 'unknown', a vulnerability in the internal landscape, is to encounter “a function of the permeability of the boundaries in the inner personal regions that are usually blocked from consciousness.”\textsuperscript{32} Creative processes provide the balance to these explorations, as their material requirements ground the suprasensory.

The educational philosopher David Best believes that the reification of these ‘states’, has relegated them to an ‘occult’ function of the elite artist/art student. By doing this their significance is lost, both to that individual and their community(s). While not denying their power or meaning, he suggests that it is more useful to view them “as rooted in natural reactions and cultural practices,” so emphasising the “inseparability of art and life (as) the arts are rooted in the shared human life.”\textsuperscript{33} Speaking of processes that contain both ‘transcendence’ and ‘natural reactions’ may seem paradoxical, but the development of MHP creative arts programs in which the richness of this spectrum is encapsulated, will provide the participants with a comprehensive understanding of Hauora.

Values

In calling for ‘real’ experience as the subject of these processes, and instigating practices that acknowledge and honour it as their foundation, one needs to be mindful of Levis’ insight that “sincerity is inseparable from reality.”\textsuperscript{34} Real engagement is necessary when working in the realms of meaning-making, and it underpins another fundamental aspect of this area of learning, which is that of ‘values’. In making his case for the cognitive character of ‘feelings’, Best explains that sincerity provides “a clearer understanding of the poetic criteria of feeling (which) is inseparably related to the possibility of deeper and more discriminating feelings.”\textsuperscript{35}

Champion provides the example of her program \textit{The Adolescent Quest for Meaning Through Multicultural Reading} at Hialeah High School in Dade County, Florida. It focused on personal myth and the archetypal hero to explore the role that the library media program played in easing adolescent migrants struggles to assimilate. It was found that:

> When the students were asked to discuss their immigrant experience, their descriptions centred on common values and sensitivities. The differences traditionally ascribed to race and ethnicity were missing in their accounts. Beyond the common adolescent preoccupations with self, clothes, hair, members of the opposite sex, music, cars, and parties, students demonstrated an uncanny awareness of the universality of the human condition….Furthermore, most expressed a desire to understand how to make meaning out of these experiences.\textsuperscript{36}

This program grew from an understanding that adolescents are in an accelerated state of ‘becoming’ in which making meaning and relating the resulting realisations is a priority. Using the archetypal hero as their subject provided the participants with a positive symbol to engage with as they
explored their current identity. One student poignantly describes his discoveries:

…. I have felt so alone. I thought I was the only one with problems, but when I read the line – ‘Tis not too late to seek a new world’ spoken by that old man Ulysses, I felt I had a better shot than he did.\(^{37}\)

As the group moved through the creative writing program, it was found that cultural difference ceased to be a problem. The disparate individuals became a coherent group, joining and interacting as ‘culture makers’ and ultimately as new ‘culture bearers’. They discovered personal meaning in their situations, named it through the story-making process and integrated these new meanings into an expanded sense of ‘self’.

Ron Phillips of the South Auckland Adolescent Youth Mental Health Unit in Papakura, has been using a similar program, with extraordinary results. His book *Gem of the First Water*\(^{38}\) contains a myth which he uses with a range of art processes to assist suicidal young people in their recovery. It appears that engagement with the narrative of the fable allows the young people to create a space between their internal dialogue and the external world in which they are struggling. In so doing they are able to relocate themselves in both places in a more meaningful way.

Providing a forum for the ‘deeper feelings’ or multi-layered responses that can occur in creative process, is to supply a means to exercise values. The current Health Curriculum emphasises the need for values-based programs and provides examples of the areas in which it can be done, some of which are: ‘the strengthening of personal identity and enhancement of a sense of self worth, the examination of discrimination and stereotyping, and the understanding of interpersonal skills and development of healthy choice-making’. Values-based MHP programs operating in these and other areas need to address both the climate in which each program is developed and also the ethos of the school in which it is delivered.

**In Summary:**

- Meaning-Making is the construction of ‘new’ knowledge from experience.
- Creative art processes allow communication with nonverbal ‘languages’, so bridging ‘inner and outer’ worlds.
- The individual is the ‘meaning making context’.
- Multi-sensory approaches allow for transcendent moments in which ‘new’ aspects of self can be accessed.
- Combining both realisations from transcendence and natural reactions, through creative art processes, can provide a comprehensive understanding of Hauora.
• Action and reflection within creative processes unite theory and practice.

• Creative art processes which explore meaning making also supply a means to exercise values.
Building Resilience

While many young people in our schools do not experience the difficulties associated with being a new migrant as described in Champion’s program, their problems with communication highlight the potential for misunderstanding between the many diverse groups, which coalesce within every school. As well as the obvious disparities there are the more subtle but equally important developmental ‘differences’ of adolescence. These accelerated stages of ‘becoming’ can potentially create gulfs in understanding between peers, family and community.

Methods to bridge cultural and developmental difference, need to include the resiliency paradigm or strength-based approach that frequently underlies MHP enterprises. The promotion of mental health as described in the MHF’s Mental Health Promotion in the School Arena, is about the development of ‘positive self regard’, supported by ‘positive schools’, through the three key components of: ‘feeling secure, feeling connected and feeling valued’. Joubert and Raeburn in Mental Health Promotion restate these in their ‘Resourcefulness/Resourcing Framework’, which presents resourcefulness as resilience and resourcing as supportive environments. It is supported by their model of ‘Being, Belonging and Becoming’: with Being relating to how the individual feels about themselves, Belonging to social, cultural and environmental aspects, and Becoming to aspirations and development. They also emphasise that it is the “subjective experience of life that counts.”

The concept of resilience is directly linked to that of meaning-making, for the building of competence or capacity comes about through an exploration of ‘identity’. Joubert and Raeburn found in many of their community-based projects that the strengthening of “developmental factors, such as a sense of identity, autonomy, accomplishment and belonging (enhanced) individual’s capacity to face the ever changing and challenging realities of life.”

The ‘resilience paradigm’ is founded on the understanding that most people have the capacity to act on their own behalf, “to learn and grow in the fight to prevail.” It is as Project Resilience suggests a shift from the ‘risk paradigm’, in which the investigation and identification of pathology emphasises vulnerabilities, to a ‘resilience paradigm’. They propose that the most important part of a strength-based approach is to believe that young people (all people), have strengths and can act on them.

The psychologist and anthroposophist Ann Nobel found this time and again in her hospital-based practice. She recalls her initial impressions of the ‘at-risk’ children she worked with:

It used to amaze me at the time what great inner resources these children proved to have. This was especially noticeable when they were allowed to express themselves artistically.

As Champion discovered the transition from ‘culture maker’ to ‘culture bearer’ in her literature program, so to did Desetta and Wolin in their project Youth
Communications: A Model Program for Fostering Resilience Through the Art of Writing. They also found that as the participants ‘constructed’ their story, it ‘re-constructed’ them! In the reframing of their experiences, troubled young people experienced the therapeutic benefits of recognising “previously unseen elements of their struggles – clients will reinterpret themselves – construct a new life story that will (then) be the basis for living well in the present.”\(^4^3\) It is as these new understandings grow, that the opportunities for an embodied comprehension of Hauora follows. Arohanui Grace, MHF, spoke of the creative arts as a conscious medium for building qualities of awareness in relation to well-being; that is the building of resilience.

Project Resilience was based on in-depth interviews with 25 adults who had successfully overcame very difficult childhoods. On answering how they did this, many recalled that they had “relied on writing to gain insight into their lives, and how that insight in turn, was central to repairing the harm they had suffered.”\(^4^4\) In the Mentally Healthy Schools Initiative the MHF established that programs to support the formation of these kinds of insights need to provide a:

- A sense of a secure environment
- The skills to participate and contribute
- The opportunities to participate and contribute
- A sense that the contribution is valued\(^4^5\)

As Prue McDougal, an Art Teacher at Selwyn College, Auckland, simply stated about her teaching style: “I make the kids feel successful.” Once a deepening understanding of Hauora is established these programs support the development of positive self regard. This includes ‘feeling of influence’, for to feel of influence is to feel of value. As Gibbs agrees in Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together:

When one has no stake in the way things are, when one’s needs or opinions are provided no forum, when one sees oneself as the object of unilateral actions, it takes no particular wisdom to suggest one would rather be elsewhere.\(^4^6\)

Being of influence relates to another HP concept that of ‘self determination’, which according to Joubert and Raeburn is one of the three core values of MHP, the other two being ‘enabling’ and ‘empowerment’. All three are essential for creative arts programs that address resilience and meaning making.

It can be said that the arts supplanted ritual as tools of meaning-making, though their relegation to the ‘territory of the occult’ or as a practice of an elite, has seen this function denied to the majority. The theatrical work of Brecht and Boal among others, are political statements demanding the return of these tools to ‘the people’. They have reintroduced the means and place for all people to express themselves, create meaning, and find a place of belonging. It is well known that without this space our well-being suffers. Art processes provide the more flexible symbolic language with which young
people can engage and begin to redress the fragmentation and ensuing mental health issues, which they currently face.

It still might be asked how necessary these sorts of programs are? Recent research into adolescent health and youth suicide indicates that they are vital. Particularly marginalised groups of young people with no means to express themselves, often feel left with no alternative. There is an urgency for new and innovative MHP programs for young people. Bennett and Coggan reiterate this in *A Comprehensive Evaluation of the Mentally Healthy Schools Initiative*:

In recent years both Health and Education authorities in Aotearoa/New Zealand have recognised that young people may be particularly vulnerable to emotional distress and poor mental health. It has been estimated that between 10 and 20 percent of adolescents at some time will require professional mental health services. Other research indicates that by the age of 18, more than one third of young people will experience some type of mental health problem to which a diagnostic label could be applied.47

**In summary:**

- The communication problems created by cultural and developmental diversity can be addressed with programs that support the development of positive self-regard.

- Self-reflection in creative process enhances the development of resilience, which includes feeling of value or influence. Feeling of value relates to one of three core values of MHP, that of ‘self determination’, the other two being ‘enabling’ and ‘empowerment’.

- Resourcefulness and resourcing are key concepts in MHP, which can be translated to resourcefulness = resilience and resourcing = supportive environments.

- We are currently witnessing a shift from the ‘risk paradigm’, which focused on pathology and vulnerabilities, to a ‘resilience paradigm’, which acknowledges individual strengths.

- There is an urgent need for innovative MHP Programs, which address the health and well being of young people in New Zealand.
How it Fits With the Curriculum

We believe that integrating creative arts programs, which are aimed at improving young people’s understanding of Hauora, with the curriculum, will help alleviate some of the problems described by Bennett and Coggan. This also depends on other factors such as school ethos and the provision of accompanying teacher development programs. We are aware that any such program will be most effective when done in collaboration with current school and community interventions, awareness raising programs and direct curriculum activities.

Engaging in curriculum integrated, multidisciplinary creative art processes will provide a more holistic understanding of Hauora, particularly if they are cemented by peer group learning and the support of the wider school community. As Nichol and O’Connor suggest in Natural High, the result of a comprehensive health education that emphasises holism, will provide participants with “personal and interpersonal communication skills (and) with elements of problem-solving, decision-making and assertiveness.”

These sorts of gains are reflected by Dickinson’s findings, such as the example she quotes from the United States Department of Education’s 1995 report, Schools, Communities, and the Arts: A Research Compendium, which states that “using arts processes to teach academic subjects results not only in improved understanding of content but in greatly improved self-regulatory behaviour.”

These programs are very timely, as their philosophical underpinnings match those of the new Health and Arts Curriculums. Their Hauora focus reflects what we believe to be a general trend towards a more holistic understanding and approach to Mental Health, for: “Positive Mental Health is a prerequisite if students are to reach their highest academic, physical, and social potential.”

The concepts of Hauora/Wellbeing, Health Promotion, The Socio-Ecological Perspective and Attitudes and Values are the four underlying concepts that support the framework for learning in the curriculum areas. As can be seen from this document, they also match our own imperatives. They are then supported by ‘Essential Skill Areas’, which include: Communication, Social and Cooperative, Problem-Solving, Self Management and Physical Skills. Young people engage with these skill areas through the distinct disciplines of music, dance, drama and the visual arts, and similarly in the Health Curriculum. In both of these curriculum areas there are the opportunities to participate in collaborative multi-disciplinary projects across subject areas. From the Arts Curriculum for example the conjunction of Dance and Mathematics allows students to “investigate and explore patterns, relationships, symmetry and transformations in choreography and performing dance works.”

These types of cross-disciplinary approaches, or ‘blurred genres’ as Heathcote describes them, require the whole person’s involvement, which in
turn is what allows a deeper exploration of personal identity. The current trialing of this interface of disciplines and subject areas in the new curriculums, will we believe provide the necessary framework, for the kind of MHP Programs we are suggesting.

Tina Hong, national co-ordinator for Dance in the new Arts Curriculum, suggests that a partial shift from discrete disciplines to a more generic approach, allows for the accommodation of different learning styles and the development of new art ‘literacies’. This provides a wider forum for the conceptualising of ‘self’, within the context of the individual ‘creative process communities’. Hong also suggested that a sense of belonging develops when creative art-making processes provide the participants with opportunities to come to terms with ideas, feelings and beliefs within a social and collaborative structure. Group identity is forged as participants develop the means to turn new concepts of ‘self’ into public statements, so redressing common themes of alienation and fragmentation. She feels that the strength of the new Arts Curriculum is its emphasis on awareness raising within the context of ‘different ways of knowing’, in other words the development of new ‘literacies’.

In a more pragmatic vein, it also appears from an American example that the integration of creative processes across the curriculum has positive academic outcomes:

In Needham Massachusetts at the John Eliot School, the arts are fully integrated throughout the curriculum, and academic achievement is soaring….John Eliot does not cater to superior, talented students and many are economically disadvantaged, but nonetheless their 1992 MEAP (Massachusetts Educational Assessment Program ) scores were the highest in the state.\(^{52}\)

**In Summary**

- Engaging in mental health promoting cross-disciplinary creative processes will provide a more holistic understanding of Hauora, as they involve the ‘whole’ person.

- Such processes support the development of interpersonal communication, problem-solving, decision-making and assertiveness skills.

- The introduction of these programs is timely as their philosophical underpinnings match those of the new Health and Arts Curriculums.

- Creative arts programs, which effectively interface with the curriculum impact positively on academic outcomes.

- Multi-disciplinary creative MHP projects provide participants with the opportunity to come to terms with ideas, feelings and beliefs in a collaborative structure, where group identity is forged and a sense of
belonging, which can redress current problems of alienation and fragmentation.
Whole School Action

...learning environments are agents of social change and can provide an environment that reinforces social cohesion, healthy values and collective well-being.\(^{53}\)

Acknowledging the importance of an interdisciplinary approach necessitates the inclusion of the concept of ‘interconnectedness’. Programs that acknowledge ‘wholeness’ also recognise the interconnection and overlaps of all of their parts and the affects of these amalgams. School ethos for example will directly impact on the success of MHP programs, as both the implicit and explicit values of the school will either support or stall it. It is important to be aware of inconsistencies between intended school ethos and what is actually happening. Bennett and Coggan provide a number of examples in *A Comprehensive Evaluation of the Mentally Healthy Schools Initiative*, for instance they ask:

What message do teachers and students get about respecting others and not using violence if other people use verbal (or physical) violence against them?\(^{54}\)

As has been mentioned earlier school ethos has a direct impact on the mental, physical and emotional well-being of the individuals of the school community. Every aspect of the school including teacher training support and involvement has an impact. The long-term sustainability of these programs "is contingent on the tangible and sustainable support provided by school management representatives."\(^{55}\)

Comprehensive MHP processes incorporating a 'Whole School' approach, honour every member of the school, incorporate all aspects of the school and allow inclusive entry points for these multiple strands to join. The Treaty of Waitangi provides a framework for this type of approach:

In Aotearoa/New Zealand the philosophy of Health Promoting Schools is underpinned by the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, that is, working in partnership with the whole school community and through advocacy and mediation enabling participation and ensuring the protection of all members of the school community.\(^{56}\)

Participation and protection are just two of a number of tenets that support the concept of environments of interconnectedness, as represented by ‘Whole School’ action. Eisner translates these webs of interrelationship into a universal context, in which they become an 'energy system', this he believes is not so much in us, but something that we are in. It is “an energy system of all living things.”\(^{57}\) Anthroposophical educational philosophy provides for an awareness of these multiple levels of interconnection, narrowing the gap between theory and practice to engage the whole person:

The student as well as teacher must be in a position of continuously experiencing as well as creating the knowledge and the material with
which he comes into contact. Without such an inner effort, and the formative, shaping aspects which it involves, no real insight is achieved - no knowledge of life in its full extent....by introducing a creative, artistic element into the process of knowledge, the material can be given a concrete living form and thereby the interplay and unity between form and content, as between Nature and Spirit, the inner and the outer, can also be experienced by the person. 

Boal's *Invisible Theatre* also widens the possibilities for the dissolution of limiting individual roles, thereby creating the blurred boundaries, which are necessary for a comprehensive educational exchange. His invention of the ‘Spect-actor’ breaks down the barrier between actors and spectators for "all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society." Equally for successful educational exchanges all members of the educational environment need to become ‘social actors’, rather than ‘social spectators’. It is as Boal suggests we need to change the monologue of life to a dialogue. Echoing this call for change in role assignment and definition, Heathcote affirms that the paradigm of ‘teacher as subject of the learning process and pupil as object’ is now outmoded. "The liberating educator is with the students, instead of doing things for the students; we give something to the students only when we exchange something."

Heathcote speaks of a 'silence' similar to Friere's and while his philosophy developed out of direct political action as opposed to educational reform, it mirrors her call for the active engagement with and naming of one's experience. Friere believes that, "every human being, no matter how 'ignorant' or submerged in the 'culture of silence' he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world", and in this act the "individual wins back the right to say his or her own word, to name the world." Heathcote found a 'culture of silence' in the classrooms, where students become non-participants as they internalised passive roles scripted for them:

The students are silent, because they no longer expect education to include the joy of learning, or even that education will speak to the real conditions of their lives.

Addressing these 'real' issues echoes Best's call for 'sincerity', which requires an exploration of the 'real' conditions of an individual's life. Direct links into real experience cement productive meaning making processes that can facilitate the development of positive self regard. Boal has developed processes in his *Image Theatre*, which support these kinds of explorations:

The participants in Image Theatre make still images of their lives, feelings, experiences, oppressions....however the image never remains static - as with the Theatre of the Oppressed, the frozen image is simply the starting point....the bringing to life of the images and the discovery of whatever direction or intention is innate in them.

To facilitate these types of creative learning processes Gibbs presents three fundamental elements: the encouragement of active participation, cooperative
group learning using collaborative approaches, and most importantly the application of democratic processes. Processes of this kind have also been developed and trialed by the educational psychologist and theorist William Glasser, based on his Control Theory. It is a 'biological theory' in which he "maintains that all we do is behave and that our behaviour is internally motivated and chosen." These processes are underpinned by five core principles:

- All behaviour is purposeful and is chosen as an attempt to satisfy basic needs that are built into our genetic structure.
- Each of us has our own specific, unique pictures of how we can get our needs met.
- Behaviour is total - it has 4 components: Acting, Thinking, Feeling and Physiology.
- When we change the actions and thoughts, the feelings and physiology follow.
- All behaviour is flexible and creative.

Glasser's approach and that of Heathcote, Best, Boal and others are all valuable epistemologies to draw on to support this framework for innovative MHP programs. It is also important that they are sustained by a healthy school climate in which there are:

- Clear but flexible school goals, rules, visions and expectations;
- Equal treatment for all students, including teachers interest in students and opportunities for student success and empowerment;
- Curriculum relevant to life and world outside the school;
- Empowered, enthusiastic, supportive and approachable teaching staff and senior school management committed to school improvement; and
- Active student and parent involvement in school processes including governance of the school.

The success of this type of program also depends on its ability to be self reflexive, that is open to feedback from all participants and having built-in evaluative mechanisms. John Wenger the manager of the Alternative Education Program at Youthline outlined the importance of this precept. He explained that the young people they are working with have fallen through the cracks of the conventional school system, primarily because they weren't able, for many different reasons, to form relationships with peers or teachers and therefore freely communicate their needs. First and foremost he believes that any such program needs to be about heart, and about coming from a
place of wanting to do good. This is then supported by a culture that values healthy relationships, which is about feedback and change, and remaining open to concepts from other ‘traditions’.

Finally as Bennett and Coggan say these initiatives are already sought by many young people:

Interestingly, adolescents report a greater interest in mental health rather than mental illness, and perceive accessing prevention/promotion information and techniques for mental health and well being as important to their needs.67

In Summary:

- Comprehensive MHP programs are underpinned by the concept of ‘Interconnection’, which supports approaches aimed at the ‘whole’ person.

- Sincere and open exploration of the students ‘real’ experiences in creative MHP programs, facilitates a comprehensive understanding of Hauora

- All aspects of the school need to be taken into account, in particular school ethos and teacher training and support.

- The teacher as subject of the learning and student as object is an outmoded paradigm.

- Successful programs need to be self reflexive – containing opportunities for feedback and evaluation.

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