

# The Experiences of Parents with Mentally-and-Physically Challenged Students in an Art Group

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to enhance the lives of parents of mentally and physically challenged students through participation in an art group. It was well understood that these parents had much more pressure than other parents in bringing up their children, and thus needed an outlet to release their tension. Learning to use art seemed a beneficial way to empower these parents to deal with their often difficult situations and enhance their understanding of and relationship to art. The objective of this study was to use art activities as a medium to nurture the parents physically and mentally. This study applied art-based research which uses art as a method to free a person from the master narrative of the authorities and to

listen to the minority voices. In such a method, the meanings are constructed multiply by the art participants (Rolling, 2010, p. 106; Leavy, 2009, p. 8). The objective was to enable the group participants to expand their vision of the world through their appreciation of art, and to relate to themselves and others through creative art activities.

Six art-making activities focusing on self-exploration were developed to carry out the main theme of this study: Staying Healthy With Art: A Spa for the Mind. The parents' art group had 13 members. The art activities ran for two hours per week for seven weeks and were conducted in classrooms, museums, and outdoors.

The focus of this study was not on enhancing the participants' drawing skills but on improving parents's understanding of aesthetic experiences and concepts, and providing them a social outlet. Because the parents dedicated so much of their energy to caring for and educating their children, they had limited time away from home, which limited their social interaction. However, through their appreciation and creation of art-works, parents's social communication improved through involvement in the art group and their family dynamics also changed. They gained more awareness about themselves, other people, and supported each other with empathy, joy, and humor. Moreover, parents significantly improved their relationship with art as self-expression.

The parents' reactions to and performance in each art group activity were recorded and analyzed. Their change in attitude toward art during each activity was our special concern. The participants agreed that art could be personal and enhance their otherwise mundane and difficult lives. They learned how to use art to look at the world and their relationship to it both at home and away. They changed their stereotyped attitude toward art and became more confident in their children and themselves as a result. They could rest, relax, and make friends in the parents' group. They felt growth and inner calm, and communicated better with their families.

The results of this study provide specific ideas and approaches for adult art education curriculum. We hope these results can help other educational and social organizations design better content and activities for future parent support groups.

**Key Words: Art Nurtures Life, Parents with Mentally-and-Physically Challenged Student, Growth Group**

## Research Background

Our philosophy of life and experience in special education sparked our interest in the self-exploration of parents with physically or mentally challenged children, especially through art. We hope that the establishment of an art support group will enable these parents to appreciate the visual arts and experience artistic creations through artistic activities. We also hope that, besides developing interest in self-exploration, they can form better interpersonal relationships and experience personal growth during the process.

We ourselves have now reached middle age, and what concerns us at the moment are the impending problems of impaired vision, graying hair, memory loss, and declining physical abilities. “Staying healthy” becomes the biggest issue for us. What kind of learning, then, can stimulate the minds of adults and satisfy their need to stay young? The answer, we believe, is art. Artistic learning can encourage adults to talk and think beyond their customary logic and learn to express their inner feelings and thoughts with visual images. Appreciating a work of art is like reading a book or making a friend. It helps the viewer learn an artist’s philosophy of life. Through the artist’s insightful observation of the world, the viewer can learn to look at important issues and meanings of life with a new perspective. As a result, we believe that “staying healthy with art” is an essential lesson. Regarding “staying healthy with art”, art education professor Ching-Fang Lee (2010), the third researcher in this study, says, “Staying healthy requires nourishment, nutrients, and nurturing. Art has the power to nourish life, so the minds of art-studying adults are resistant to aging” (p. 31). The concept of “staying healthy with art” as presented in this paper does not lie in the design of health-oriented activities. Instead, this paper aims to encourage adults to study art and arouse their interest in order to remain healthy. Through participation or involvement in artistic activities, we believe that people can enrich their spiritual lives and stay mentally healthy. It is hoped that, through artistic learning, people can come to view art as an attitude toward life. and understand that everyone is an autonomous person. If adults

have a clear vision of their interests and situations in life, they will not fear retirement, solitary life, or elder care homes when they grow old.

We are three researchers, two of whom have served in the field of special education for 15 years. During this period, we often had the chance to interact with parents with physically or mentally challenged children. In these interactions, some parents mentioned difficulties facing them and the family and their mental dilemmas. Indeed, the birth of a physically or mentally challenged child will have a huge impact on a family. This unexpected event will not only disrupt the normal developing process of a family, it will definitely bring relationship changes to the family system and may even trigger violent emotional storms among family members. In addition, the difficulties of bringing up physically or mentally challenged children and solving the complexities of sibling relationships bring considerable pressure to parents. What worries parents further is that the pressure will be present throughout their lives. Different stages in the child's development will produce different problems, so parents frequently face various trials in life (Xu, Hou, & Han, 2008; Deluca & Salerno, 1984). Therefore, we hoped to establish an art support group for parents and help them to face the ups and downs in their lives, using the theme of "staying healthy with art."

During the course of an artistic activity, a personal creation is a person's inspection of his/her inner state, while a group creation is a driving force behind the group, which can create more possibilities, sharpen parents' abilities to know themselves, encourage them to utilize resources for self-improvement, and subsequently increase their participation in the education of their children. Therefore, the goal of this study was to show parents how to open their minds when appreciating artworks, refine their cultural viewpoints with group creations, and explore the experiences and potential of artistic creations. The participants in this "support group" were parents whose children attend special schools, and the research results present these parents' experiences of participating in the art support group. We thus posed the following research questions: What are the experiences these parents have gained through participation in these artistic activities?

What are the reflections we have gained through participation in these artistic activities?

## Concepts Behind Art-Based Research

The principal research method used in this study was art-based research. This section will discuss the connections between art-based research and qualitative research, the characteristics of art-based research, and its assessment criteria.

### Connections Between Art-Based Research and Qualitative Research

Art-based research is a method that has departed from the traditional discourse which dictates a single authoritarian explanation and places more emphasis on freedom, diversity, and the importance of presenting voices and opinions of the vulnerable minority (Rolling, 2010, p. 106; Leavy, 2009, p. 8). Art-based research is not a new research method. It simply redefines artistic areas that have not been highly valued in qualitative research. As Rolling (2010) points out, art-based research uses art as a means, discusses art, or treats art as a framework for discovery research. In addition, Leavy (2009) has observed that a typical requirement of the conventional qualitative paradigm is to denote meanings through a self-proclaimed inductive research design, but in fact its research process is often hindered by preconceived language, code categories, and guiding assumptions. In contrast, art-based practices in the domain of qualitative research are a research design that helps research subjects to evoke multiple meanings.

### Characteristics of Art-Based Research

Barone and Eisner (2006) believe that there are two criteria for art-based research: one is the enhancement of humanistic perspectives with activities relevant to art; the other is the presence of aesthetic qualities or design elements in the inquiry process and research text. They also argued that “the ultimate goal of art-based research is the deepening of conversation and the enhancement of perspectives” (p. 95). In other words, art-based research is predicated on raising good questions to deepen a conversation and increase one’s knowledge about opinions and

perspectives. Art-based research texts can go beyond the conventional standardized design and add a diversity of artistic qualities.

In terms of the process of art-based research, McNiff explained that it involves sensory experience, direct observation, and pragmatic procedures (Wu, trans. 2006). Ruth Leitch (2006) also pointed out that art-based research valued research subjects' feelings and interpretations in the midst of an artistic activity, emphasized personal experiences of art, and encouraged subjects to explore and converse with their inner selves through art. Leitch echoes Gerald Corey's employment of Gestalt theory to explain the occurrence of growth, which takes place through personal experiences, not through the researcher's techniques or interpretation. As a result, the activity plan derived from Gestalt theory focuses on helping participants be immersed totally in the here and now and on expanding their self-awareness of what they are doing (Li, trans. 1997). In other words, changes happen when a research subject's spontaneity is born and when the subject has the sensory perception to feel ongoing activities. Therefore, an activity should be designed in ways that can stimulate subjects to take a more active part in the process. Corey has also argued that to encourage subjects to focus on and tell important life stories, a researcher must provide a climate and atmosphere that is beneficial to the flow of dialogues during an interview process. Moreover, the researcher must examine artistic creations with artists to help them understand their own works and themselves. In this case, open-ended questions can spawn life event narratives with better results (Xiu. et al., trans. 2009).

### **Assessment Criteria of Art-Base Research**

Both Leavy (2009) and Barone and Eisner (2006) have argued that art-based research differs from quantitative research—which bases assessments on trustworthiness and validity—and traditional qualitative research, whose examination emphasizes reliability and authenticity. McNiff suggested that aspects used to assess the outcomes of a research included: change of content in the research subject's artistic expression, change of expression quality, improved spontaneity, increased passion in artistic creations, and enhanced aesthetic fulfillment (Wu, trans. 2007). Leavy (2009)

showed more sensitivity. She regarded “expression of feelings” as an index for assessing art-based research. On the other hand, Barone and Eisner (2006) based their appraisal of a given study on four criteria: illuminating effect, generativity, incisiveness, and generalizability. However, the aforementioned scholars have not proposed pragmatic practices for evaluation. This lack of concrete approaches is captured in Eisner’s view of “art-based research”: “We have ... concretized our view of what it means to know. We prefer our knowledge solid and like our data hard. It makes for a firm foundation, a secure place on which to stand. Knowledge as a process, a temporary state, is scary to many” (as cited in Leavy, 2009, p. 9). That is to say, a final conclusion on what comprises “art-based research” assessment has not been reached. On the other hand, we may say that the “lack of final conclusions” is exactly one of the assessment features of the diverse and formless art-based research itself.

## **Artistic Learning for Adults**

The subject of this study is an adult group targeting parents. The main types of artistic activities were the appreciation and creation of artworks. This section will discuss important concepts behind artistic learning for adults from the following three perspectives: reflections on art education/art therapy/staying healthy with art, productive pleasures, and self-exploration in contemporary art.

### **Reflections on Art Education/Art Therapy/Staying Healthy with Art**

“Art education” is a part of school curriculum; “art therapy” is a popular form of psychotherapy; and “staying healthy with art” is the mindset and action of self-cultivation that nurtures life with art. From the viewpoint of art education, contemporary art lessons no longer focus on modernist aesthetic elements. Instead, they are moving toward postmodernist diversity, and stress the importance of art in life. According to Michael J. Parsons (1998), art education must emphasize the importance of connections, that is, the connections between art and the living meaning of its milieu. Examining the same point, Olivia Gude (2007) argued that just as contemporary art education has valued the ways in which art or images improve the interactive

relationships between human beings and their living environments, learners must be allowed to explore and express their own experiences if personal meanings were to be produced. In addition, James Hutchens and David B. Pankratz (2000) also referred to the fact that learners could contemplate the meaning of individuals, society, and culture through artistic learning. In other words, art is a thinking tool, so the content of the thinking process – not the perfection of an artwork – is all that matters.

In terms of art therapy, Lu Suzhen (2005) pointed out that it is the combination of art and psychotherapy, and is used to concretize and externalize inner senses and feelings in the form of visual arts using painting, arts and crafts, writing, photography, and aesthetic games. As for group work in art therapy, Liebmann pointed out that the main reason for using artistic materials in a group was because they could achieve both personal and social purposes. Art therapy for groups is not confined to helping people with special needs. It can also help ordinary people search for the essence of humanity, explore themselves, and enhance their personal skills and feelings (Lai Nianhua, trans. 2002).

However, “art education” and “art therapy” unavoidably remind one of a hierarchy, which is the relationship between teacher and student, therapist and client. Such a view echoes the power structure proposed by Fiske (1989). Relations within a power structure are those between the domineering and the dominated, that is, the controlling and the controlled. This results in an unknown, occult distance. On the contrary, “staying healthy with art” is a term that shows a subjective self-consciousness. It demonstrates an autonomous individual’s care for his/her own life and his/her expectations for improvements. As an individual becomes a subject under the concept of “staying healthy”, a stronger personal attachment can be formed. According to Lu Suzhen (2006), art therapy is better designed as an activity of self-cultivation than perceived as a form of psychotherapy. If everyone can accept “staying healthy with art” with a relaxed attitude, they can nurture their body and mind with artistic creations and discover the passion and energy in their lives. Is this not the best way to practice “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”?



The subjects of this study were adult women who had long ago left school and were dedicating a large amount of their time to their families and their physically or mentally challenged children. At mid-life, the women seemed to be in great need of pampering themselves and staying healthy, so “staying healthy with art” is closely related to their life stories. The theme of this program was family and marriage-related life experiences. Every session had the potential to offer these women the inspiration to embark on a journey of self-discovery. This study involved an aerobic exercise for the mind and embodied the philosophy of “staying healthy with art”.

### **Productive Pleasures**

John Fisk (1989) explained that productive pleasures in popular culture could be divided into two categories: “productivity” and “evasion.” He also argued that productive actions could help the public produce pleasures in their minds, create new joys and values, and avoid pain in the real world. In an artistic activity, productive actions take place when artworks are created and when personal interpretations are formed through the appreciation of artworks. Fisk’s argument has helped shape our attitude toward leading artistic activities. The artistic activities in this study were not about improving adults’ drawing skills. Instead, they helped the participants recognize their potential and discover self-confidence to face their lives through an appreciation of art and the pleasures of creation. The message received by adults participating in the appreciation of artworks would help them understand how artists transform their mental images and conflicts into artistic creations. In the end, these adults would be able to find emotional outlets for their inner problems and obtain freedom through productive actions.

### **Self-Exploration in Contemporary Art**

In *Interpreting Taiwan’s Contemporary Art in the Post-Martial Law Era*, Cai Zhaoyi (2006) argued that “questioning established values, subverting traditional stereotypes, and manifesting self-awareness are the important roles of contemporary art” (p. 58). Although many contemporary artists are good at making allusions to national identity based on their own observations or life experiences, there are people who criticize young artists in

contemporary Taiwan for their lack of concern for the overall social environment. Artists' self-expressions are regarded as egocentric mumbling which shows their ignorance of human suffering. However, in an article commenting on James L. Jarrett, Wang Liyan (2008) used Jung's theory and argued, "The goal of life lies in opening the eye of the mind, candidly facing one's real self, and changing and improving oneself through a dialogue between the id and the subconscious" (p. 109). That is to say, an artist's self-exploration of his/her life begins with things that matter to him/her. Contemporary artistic creation is a dialogue between artists and their inner selves. It is also a visible sign of their self-exploration.

Externalizing conversation is one of Michael White's methods of tackling trauma. This technique objectifies the problem, so the problem is the problem; it is not the person. When the problem is separated from the person, people are no longer confined to the only "accepted account" of self identity or hindered by negative labels attached to their lives. It is thus more likely for them to take new action to tackle predicaments in life (Huang, trans. 2008). When we apply these viewpoints to the artistic field, we can say that works of art represent a concretized form of the artists' inner conflicts. The artworks externalize the problem, so artistic creation or appreciation is a way of looking at internal problems from an objective point of view. Artists' interpretations of themselves are the results of refraction through different angles and dimensions. Artists delve deeply into their unconscious desires and innermost darkness, explore them, question them, and reflect on them. Therefore, the process of artistic creation is often to find reconciliation, healing, and cleansing amidst turbulent and depressing conflicts. Through the appreciation of an artwork, the viewer can also feel that their repressed feelings are sympathized with, understood, and freed.

In *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Gerald Corey described Carl Jung's contribution to our deep understanding of the human personality, especially middle age. Jung strived to understand the key impacts of one's psychological changes in middle age on his/her personal life. He believed that human beings had to let go of the multiple values and acts that had governed their earlier lives before confronting their own subconscious. Getting involved in creative activities such as writing or

painting is a way to accomplish this task. According to Jung, because we possess both the forces of creation and destruction, it is necessary that these two forces be integrated. Consequently, everyone must whole-heartedly accept the dark side (or shadow) of their nature, recognizing it as a part of their inborn character (Xiu et al., trans. 2009).

We think that everyone may have dreamed about doing things that contradict social norms, ethical standards, or public perception. If desires are repressed by cultural inhibitions, the individual cannot grow healthily because his/her turbulent mind is like a battlefield in which the unrestrained id fights vigorously against the ethical super-ego. As a result, it is not difficult to find during our appreciation of a contemporary artwork that genuine villains are more adorable than hypocritical heroes. That is to say, an artistic creation which demonstrates the dark desires of the “genuine villain” inside an artist’s mind can more easily strike a chord with the audience than a work that shows the placid image of a “hypocritical hero.” What is revealed by “genuine villains” are the unspeakable collective desires in mankind’s collective subconscious. Artists express human beings’ collective anxiety over ethical standards and social regulations.

## Research Methods and Designs

Why did we choose art-based research? Because it is a descriptive, inquisitive, and phenomenon-centered qualitative research and not a scientific quantitative research technique that emphasizes controlling and manipulating variables. More importantly, art-based research highlights the process by which meanings are produced (Leavy, 2009), so its methodology and characteristics exactly met the needs of this study. Therefore, we adopted art-based research as our methodology. The following provides detailed descriptions of the role of the researchers, group member recruitment and event schedule, and event procedure and presentation.

### Role of the Researchers

A researcher is often trained to hide his/her personal traits in a research work and to avoid prejudice. However, sometimes the lack of personal traits and identity is a problem. As Leavy (2009) argues, “Traditional research, at

times, keeps research as it is and is rarely related to the researcher's life and feelings" (p. 2). Moreover, she believes that in art-based research, art is art as well as the trinity of a/r/t. She further explains that a/r/t is a metaphor that represents artist, researcher, and teacher respectively. In addition, these three roles merge knowing, doing, and making. In this study, these characteristics of art-based research were the best ways to help us to expand our self-awareness. These techniques also manifested our personal lives and learning experiences. As researchers we were event designers and leaders as well as innovative artists who attempted to devise a distinctive personal style.

### **Group Member Recruitment and Event Schedule**

The parent support group in this study was a small structured and closed group of 13 people. Group members were comprised of parents with physically or mentally challenged children in special schools who accepted the invitation to participate in this event, which was scheduled to take place once a week for 7 consecutive weeks. Every session lasted for 2 hours, and artistic activities were designed using the theme "Staying Healthy with Art: A Spa for the Mind."

We understood the parents' expectations of the support group through interviews and based our event schedule on their opinions. "Self-exploration" was at the core of all artistic activities. We devised six major topics: 1. Self-Other Relationship – Cultural Diversity; 2. Self-Other Relationship – Being Alone and Being Lonely; 3. Self-Exploration – Division and Integration; 4. Mankind and the Environment – Dancing with Nature; 5. Self-Exploration – Abstract Lyricism; and 6. Treasure Hunt in an Unfamiliar Place – Imaginary World of the Artists. The first three topics were designed based on texts and observations of parents' everyday activities. They were expected to encourage parents to make multiple forays into artistic appreciation and creation. The last three topics were founded on interviews conducted before this research. They were designed in response to parents' expectations of the group. In general, the schedule followed the structured procedure of warm-ups, artistic appreciation, creation, feedback, and sharing.

## Parents' Experiences of Participating in the Art Support Group

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Data such as original activity records and research journals were collected throughout the six artistic sessions. They were arranged to show the process of each themed lesson and the parents' experiences of individual artistic activity.

### Topic: Self-Other Relationship – Cultural Diversity

Under this topic, we selected the following works to display the variety of artistic activities conducted by people with different physical disabilities: oil paintings by Huang Meilian (an artist with cerebral palsy), wash paintings by the foot and mouth painting artist Grace Yang, and sculptures by the blind artist Russell Schermer. This was to improve the participants' knowledge of cultural diversity in a self-other relationship.

In the creative activity, some parents were blindfolded to imagine what it was like to be blind. Because they could not see, they could only shape clay by listening to their partner's description of an object's appearance and features. Then the blindfolded people exchanged roles with the guides. Although the guides could see the objects clearly, they were only allowed to offer verbal descriptions, not helping hands. The following is a collection of these parents' experiences.

### Understanding of Parent-Child Interaction

Throughout the activity, the parents gradually understood the limitations of their guidance. Even if they were desperate to offer a helping hand when the clay produced by their partners was out of shape, they had to resist the urge. The guide must have a thorough understanding of his/her role. The whole process was like a parent-child interaction. Even if the parent wanted to help the child, it was essential that the child complete the task on his/her own.

"... It was just like bringing up my kid. When she fell short of my expectations, I really wanted to help her. But I still had to let go and let her finish the work on her own. In fact, her artwork is really quite nice"(Yan, Journal, September 7, 2010).

The parents learned how to guide others through picture descriptions. They also saw their blind spots where educating their children was

concerned. “Sometimes we seem to be too eager. We know he has acted in the wrong direction and want to pull him back to the right track... But he cannot see, and he has not had any experience of it, so he is completely in the dark”(Dashu, Journal, September 7, 2010).

Nana developed her own opinions when shaping clay. “We should not be nervous when forming a piece of work. Likewise, when we are educating our kids or living in the family, we should not be nervous, neither. We must slow down and be considerate to understand children’s thoughts and acts...” (Na, Journal, September 7, 2010).

### New Sensory Experiences

Creating an artistic work with their eyes covered enabled the parents to perceive new sensory experiences (see Figure 1). They said: “I depended on my sense of touch when I shaped the clay! I felt with my heart although my eyes were covered...” (Win, Journal, September 7, 2010); “The sense of touch on my hand became sharper. You normally wouldn’t notice how your hands feel when you hold something, but when your eyes are covered, you develop a keener sense” (Ling, Journal, September 7, 2010).

In addition, shaping clay with their eyes covered using the guide’s orders helped the parents to know their personality and what they were like when interacting with others. “... I am highly subjective, so I kept asking my partner: ‘Is it the right place?’ I really could not bring myself to trust others’ eyes. I do not have a strong sense of security, so the work I made was still something I would have made on my own” (Dashu, Journal, September 7, 2010). In this activity, Dashu responded that she was a rather subjective person, so it was difficult for her to follow her partner’s guidance at ease. She was aware of this.



Figure 1. The thematic lesson is in progress. Participants are learning with their eyes covered.

## Topic: Self-Other Relationship – Being Alone and Being Lonely

In terms of artworks, we chose the following pictures to show the relationship between numbers, human relations, and mental states: Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, which shows a woman in a meadow, Yue Minjun's *Blindfolded Man*, which depicts a blindfolded, laughing man, René Magritte's *The Lovers*, which portrays a couple embracing and kissing each other with their heads shrouded in cloth, and Zhang Xiaogang's *Big Family*, which presents a family of five.

Regarding the creative activity, the participants were divided into groups of two. Within the small group, one lay on a big sheet of drawing paper, and her group member used a crayon to draw an outline of her body. Later they switched roles. After outlines were drawn, these parents used different materials to complete their own life-size pictures. In the end, they cut out their works, brought them back to the big group, and discussed with other parents where they would like their life-size pictures to be on the big sheet of drawing paper.

### First-Stage Creation

Drawing life-size self-portraits was meant to offer an opportunity for participants to have a dialogue with themselves. During the creation process, everyone was fully occupied with their own self-portrait. Busy hands freed the mind, and these participants were able to take their mind off their troubles in life. "When I was cutting and pasting my own life-size picture, I felt I really possessed some me-time. In the middle of the pasting and drawing, I felt I was doing something for myself." During the DIY time, Xiuling experienced the pleasure of having a dialogue with herself. "Although it was only an imitation of my body contour, I felt quite satisfied. I loved that kind of feeling, but I still adjusted the lines to make the figure slimmer so that it fit my expectations" (Ling, Journal, September 21, 2010).

Dashu sighed about her declining physical strength and cognitive abilities. She had detected signs of aging, and to us, a group of women in their forties, these problems had lately been preying on our minds. "I feel that there are so many things to do, but I do not have enough physical strength. I usually feel tired by 10 p.m. Because I hope I can be stronger and more spirited, I drew this

picture.” Dashu expressed her wishes all at once. “... This activity helped me relieve my mental pressure and have a dialogue with myself. It was like I was really drawing things from the bottom of my heart. This is a habit we can develop on our own to prevent us from feeling lonely. When I am lonely, I can calm myself down and have a dialogue with myself, and I can find an emotional outlet...”(Dashu, Journal, September 14, 2010).

“... I think the most important point about this activity is that it made me vividly realize my own presence. As a mother or a wife at home, we play an important role, but more often than not, no one notices us or thinks we are important. Everyone takes it for granted that I should be doing what I am doing”(Ling, Journal, September 14, 2010).

“I’m actually very poor at drawing because I lack talent. But I’m alright today. My self-portrait was really pretty. It looks like a mermaid” (Win, Journal, September 14, 2010); “I have been thinking if I can take things easy and be pressure-free. If I have a way to get rid of my negative emotions, I don’t need to always trouble my husband with solving my problems” (Lan, Journal, September 21, 2010). In the course of having a dialogue with themselves, these parents saw a hope of self-reliance. When they were involved in a relaxed creation process, they seemed to find some tips to relieve their pressure in real life.

## Second-Stage Creation

In the real world, it is impossible to always be on one’s own. We still have to interact with others. When it was time for the participants to paste their life-size pictures on one big sheet of drawing paper, it meant that everyone had to find his/her own niche in a family or a group.

After everyone pasted their life-size pictures on the drawing paper, background creation followed. These parents discussed with their neighbors which kind of paper to use to design a background that was acceptable to all of them. Themes included sunrise, dusk, starry sky, ocean blue, grassy green, and so on. With 30 minutes one week and another 30 minutes the next week, the group creation was finally completed.

“Thank you, everyone, for working together to complete such a beautiful picture. My mind is broadened when I look at it. This is myself. I’ve wanted to throw myself into nature or go for a walk outside. That will put my body and mind



at ease and help me unwind” (Dashu, Journal, September 21, 2010). Xiaoshu, who had been a keen listener, first lost her inhibitions in speaking.

“... We were next to each other, so I considered what color Qiuyan would like to put on. Then I was thinking how we should divide the section and still look connected. I later discussed with Huilan and Shuhao and decided to connect our sections with the color of grassland...”

In the final background creation, these parents had to interact and collaborate with others in order to finish the group work. During the process, they also reflected on themselves and discovered the most appropriate ways to bond and interact with others (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Sense of accomplishment derived from group creation

### Topic: Self- Exploration- Division and Integration

Because all the parents in the support group were female, we chose female artists' works to serve as a starting point for female projection and sympathy. The three works by Barbara Kruger and Frida Kahlo all display split female images: the broken image that resembles shredded glass in *You Are Not Yourself*; the stark contrast, conflict, and division in *Your Body Is a Battleground*; and the two figures representing the painter's split self sitting side by side in *The Two Fridas*. These three artworks all demonstrate the artist's inner conflicts and dialogues.

With regard to the design of the creative activity, photos of the parents were used as a catalyst for their artistic creation. The researchers encouraged the parents to place the emphasis on “themselves.” These

parents had been devoting a lot of effort to the care of their challenged children, so here they were invited to pay more attention to themselves. However, not all plans could be carried out as intended. Because the previous activity was delayed, the participants only had time to appreciate artworks as a group, and the DIY activity became their homework. We handed out an A4 passport photo to all the participants, asked them to destroy it, re-construct it, and then share it with the group in the last wrap-up session.

Dashu used fire to destroy her photo. "I burned it with a lighter because I wanted to rise like a phoenix from the ashes. I wanted to create a different me, a me that is different from my past self..." Then she used magazine photos to produce a collage of her future self-expectations. "I want to have a largely vegetarian diet, and I don't want to kill animals, so I'll give myself a warning when I'm about to eat a delicacy. I also hope I can be discreet in both word and deed. Every day I'll look at everyone and this world with a smiling face."

Xiuling used four masks with different facial expressions to represent her divided state of mind. "These four masks represent those times in life when we need to wear a mask to confront a situation. There is a happy mask, an indifferent mask, a mask with forced smiles, and a tearful mask..." Despite the split, Xiuling was still very positive about her own mental state. "... We're living a life, not counting the days. If you count the days, every day is invariable. As a result, we must enjoy the minute fractions of happiness in life as much as possible" (Ling, Journal, October 19, 2010).

Miyu's work was full of her expectations of life. She told her high-school daughter all her wishes and instructed her to finish this work. "I hope to have a big tree to support me... This big tree can share my pressures... When I'm free, I can sit under the tree and relieve my pressure. I want to live a more relaxed life" (Yu, Journal, October 19, 2010).

Yujie apologized to everyone at the beginning, because she asked her high-school daughter to do the homework for her, and she thought her daughter had painted an ugly picture of her. "... I haven't got any talent for painting, and I didn't know how to destroy my own photo. I thought my daughter is better at painting, so I asked her to help me. But I don't know what she was thinking about when she painted this picture. She said I am a nagging, domineering

mother, so she was angry with me and wanted revenge. That's why I'm so ugly in the picture..." (Jie, Journal, October 19, 2010). We found the conversation between Yujie and her daughter very amusing. Although she did not finish the homework on her own, this activity indirectly enhanced their parent-child communication.

The reserved, quiet Shuhao broke the traditional taboo about photos. She really tore her passport photo to tiny shreds and pieced them together again. "When I was working on this picture, I had wanted to tear the entire photo. But my husband said, 'Am I that mean to you?' I thought twice and gave up the idea. I tore up half of the photo and pieced together the other half like putting together a jigsaw puzzle..." (Hao, Journal, October 19, 2010)

These parents' works were beyond our imagination. We had thought they would lack motivation since they took the works home, and did not expect many of them to complete their works. To our surprise, however, their works were fascinating, and the explanations they offered were logical and coherent. Although some parents were not confident enough to finish their own works and asked their daughters for help, the unintentional effect resulting from this act was an interesting form of parent-child interaction (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Some of the works were the results of parent-child interaction.

### **Topic: Mankind and the Environment – Dancing with Nature**

We introduced two artists with distinctly different artistic styles. One was Andy Goldsworthy, who is famous for working in natural settings. He uses natural materials to create art in nature. In contrast, the other landscape artist Cristo has used a large amount of synthetic fabric to wrap spectacular

buildings and to surround huge islands. His artworks are controversial in terms of ecological principles.

This activity gave the parents a chance to visit Qingshuiyan Forest Park for hiking and enjoying the natural scenery. In addition, we shared with participants some works by Goldsworthy and Cristo, collected materials on site, and let everyone experience what it was like to produce artworks in nature.

One parent recalled her childhood games. “I felt young again. I felt I was a bit different. At that moment, I wasn’t a middle-aged woman anymore. It was like having a little bit of fun” (Ling, Journal, October 5, 2010).

“During the process, I gradually realized that there were so many materials in nature which could be adapted to make artworks. And these artworks gave us unique sensations. They were made up of different bits and pieces, which represent ups and downs in our lives” (Yu, Journal, September 28, 2010). Miyu drew her own inspiration from this activity.

“In the past, I always thought art definitely meant painting pictures indoors. I was surprised to find that my first outdoor artistic attempt like this was rather comfortable” (Lan, Journal, September 28, 2010)

Producing artworks in nature as a group, these parents became closer to each other. “When everyone gets together, we’re like sisters, like family members...” (Wei, Journal, September 28, 2010)

Many pleasures were also derived from working in nature. Everyone was amazed by their power of action. Another advantage was that annoying things became insignificant in nature (See Figure 4). Perhaps it was because nature was massive compared to mankind.



Figure 4. Learning in nature is also a way to cleanse the body and mind.

## Topic: Self- Exploration- Abstract Lyricism

Under this topic, the researchers used “Beyond Vision: Highlights of Abstract Paintings” held by the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (NTMOFA) as a medium to introduce the appreciation of abstract art to participants. Replicas of paintings from the exhibition were also utilized to help participants enter further discussions and produce works. These parents were asked to select three works they liked and three works they did not like from 70 cards of abstract paintings. Then they shared and discussed their opinions in groups of two. At last, they picked one favorite and one least favorite, extracted elements from them, and created an artwork on the same piece of drawing paper.

Yiru used a collage of magazine photos to create a work entitled “Stony Sea”. “... I’m not very good at painting. I usually just draw whatever comes into my mind. Drawing makes me feel better. In that way I won’t be troubled by the same thing for long... They’re just tiny dots, but after they were cut out and pasted to the paper, they turned into real stones and seas...” Before Yiyu explained her abstract work, no one could see the concept behind it. Through her sharing and explanation, people developed some kind of feeling and sympathy.

The theme of Huilan’s artwork was “mood”. She said, “... Black represents my past. I think I was more narrow-minded in the past. Then I gradually came out of it. Look at this green part... This color is brighter. That means I think I am better than before...” (Lan, Journal, October 5, 2010).

Yujie’s theme was “imagination”. “When I was painting just now, I felt this was a casual style of art, so I could paint whatever I wanted. I didn’t necessarily need to produce a beautiful and stunning piece of work” (Jie, Journal, October 5, 2010).

In fact, Huilan and Yujie just needed some encouragement to start painting. Once they began, they could go on indefinitely and were unable to stop.

Miyu spent a very long time on her picture. When others were sharing their works, she was still deeply immersed in hers. At last she finally stole a brief moment to raise her head: “This circle represent the many emotional tangles that bother us. I can jump out of it, and I’ll feel very happy. Balloons give one the feeling of flying. In the infinite sky, there are eagles, other animals...” (Yu,

Journal, October 5, 2010) True to her artistic theme “happiness”, she laughed heartily after making this explanation. Then she lowered her head, picked up her crayon, and concentrated on painting again.

Xiuling successfully turned her least favorite picture into her original work. Her theme was “life”. She said with a resonant voice: “I don’t like this withered hand. It looks as if it was begging for something? It seems to have taken away our vitality, so I wanted to turn it into something good—a tree—a tree with dense foliage. The ripples in the background I drew are spreading outward. They mean the power of our life can extend endlessly...”

The topic on abstract painting today helped these parents know that art is not limited to what they learned at school in the past. They also came to understand that artwork is not only limited to beautiful paintings. Art is an ability to speak one’s mind and express one’s feelings of sympathy. When people think of ways to combine things they like and do not like, they can produce a new picture (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. Understanding abstract paintings

### **Topic: Treasure Hunt in an Unfamiliar Place - The Imaginative World of Artists**

The parents had expressed a wish to have an excursion and a visit. As “art” was the theme around which this art support group revolved, the researchers chose the NTMOFA as the excursion destination. Under our guidance, the parents stepped outside their customary circles and enjoyed a treasure hunt in the museum of fine arts. In addition, because “Beyond

Vision: Highlights of Abstract Paintings” was still running, we furthered abstract painting appreciation in the previous activity “Self-Exploration – Abstract Lyricism” to the appreciation of original works. Looking at an original is just like meeting an artist face to face, and the viewer can come closer to the artist’s abstract imaginary world. Apart from “Beyond Vision”, a guide was arranged to take the parents on a tour through the exhibition of contemporary art “2010 Taiwan Biennial: Yes, Taiwan.” In the end, everyone had lunch at Rose House on the second floor of the museum of fine arts, shared their thoughts, and produced their own works.

Before the parents started their tour, we gave them a word of advice: “Visiting an exhibition is like making a friend. It is impossible to get to know everyone. You just want to make one or two good friends. You don’t need to look at every piece of work...” When we first designed this activity, we were a little worried that these parents would not be very interested in this exhibition of abstract paintings. We were also afraid that they would feel bored because they did not understand abstract art. However, having participated in the introductory activity about abstract painting appreciation the week before, everyone, we found, was eager to look at original works of the cards they had chosen.

Xiuling had always shown interest in art. “When it came to abstract painting, I always thought of classical works of art from the West such as those of Picasso. Now I’ve found out the combination of abstract painting and classical Chinese wash painting is very different. It may not necessarily impress you, but it interests you and offers you peace and quiet...” (Ling, Journal, October 12, 2010).

Dashu taught paper clay art and had been to several museum exhibitions on her own. She said, “Appreciating an abstract painting should enable us to use our own imagination. Although the commentary of the museum guide was very clear, it stopped us from having our own opinions” (Dashu, Journal, October 12, 2010).

After this visit to the abstract painting exhibition, some parents obtained unexpected results. “Having been to the exhibition, I think our children can hold a joint art exhibition...” (Win, Journal, October 12, 2010); “When I saw the abstract paintings, I couldn’t understand them. They’re like my son’s casual paintings. If you ask him to produce the same thing, he can do it...” (Hao, Journal,

October 12, 2010). This trip to the abstract painting exhibition seems to have increased the parents' confidence in their own artistic abilities and in the artworks of their physically or mentally challenged children. Works of hot abstraction, in particular, really look like the creations of children's freewheeling painting. The more sympathy these parents felt for the works, the closer they were to art. They were even right in the middle of art at times.

It might be the great artistic appeal of the museum or the power of those exhibited artworks that caused everyone to spontaneously make use of the spare time before and after lunch to produce their own artworks. One artistic work displayed in the exhibition was magazine and leaflet cutting and pasting, so these parents, while having a chat, cut and pasted the museum's leaflets to produce an A4-size work about their visit to the museum. Some of them even created other works after going home. "... After going back, I drew this picture 'The Sky.' I also made this cake. Because the cake Dashu gave me was really delicious, I made a work after it..." (Hao, Journal, October 19, 2010). Visiting the museum strongly motivated these parents to work on artistic creation. The participants were willing to concentrate on cutting and pasting rather than eating. After they returned home, their burning passion for artistic creation supported them to turn their inspiration into action (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Visiting the museum provides another kind of inspiration.

## Conclusion

The following are three observations about these parents' changed perspectives on art after participating in this art support group.



## Parents' Changed Perspectives on Art

### Art Is a Badge of Honor in One's Life.

In the setting of ordinary life, some housewives' family members are ignorant of their talent. "I want to turn that portfolio into something worth recollecting in the future and leave it for my daughter. I want her to know that her mother used to have ideas. Her mother was not an ordinary housewife who was fully occupied with daily chores." (Ling, Journal, October 5, 2010). To the group portfolio, Xiuling contributed not only her homework but also many works inspired by her life stories. She even said she wanted to have a portfolio dedicated to her own works. "It's like the badge or reward a military officer receives. I think this portfolio is a reward we give ourselves, so I felt very delighted when I worked on it."

### Changing Parents' Stereotypes about Art

Art has broadened these parents' horizons and enabled them to see more minute details of life. "I have loved to be quietly on my own, looking at birds, trees... But now I observe things more from an artistic perspective. I observe their colors and not just feel the ambience..." (Ling, Journal, October 5, 2010).

These parents' perception of art used to be more traditional. They had thought a painting or a molded work had to resemble the original or show craftsmanship. However, after participating in this art support group, their established stereotypes were changed. "Actually art can exist in our daily life. It can help us to vent our negative emotions. In fact, art can be flexibly applied to anything. It's not that rigid..." (Yu, Journal, October 19, 2010). Thanks to this discovery, these parents now feel that they have more freedom in artistic creation.

Dashu, who teaches paper clay, now also has a deeper understanding of art. "... In the past, I always made my paper clay works with the doors closed. I thought that was art. I've stopped working these few weeks, and I find my mind has been broadened. I now have a deeper understanding of art..." (Dashu, Journal, October 19, 2010).

### More Confidence in Art

The parents who thought they were not artistically gifted, did not know how to paint, and had never picked up a paintbrush are now more confident

in their artistic creations. “Although I don’t have anything particular in mind, the works I produce are also a kind of art” (Jie, Journal, October 5, 2010). After the visit to the NTMOFA, some parents even developed high hopes for themselves and their children. “We can hold an art exhibition now!” (Jing, Journal, October 5, 2010); “Before I came to this art group, I felt that art was beyond my reach. But now I think everyone has potential. We can all become artists. We can start working as long as we have time” (Win, Journal, October 19, 2010).

### **Parents’ Experiences of the Support Group**

The following are four observations about these parents’ experiences of this art support group.

#### **Getting Relaxation and Rest**

There were two trips organized for this support group. The first was to Qingshuiyan Forest Park, and the second was to the NTMOFA. To these parents, their freedom in life had been restricted, but these two trips offered them opportunities to relax and take a break. “... Family matters used to weigh heavily on me, so I couldn’t find the most comfortable pace of living for myself, and I had to put my family before me. As a result, this trip to the museum of fine arts made me feel very great.” (Ling, Journal, October 19, 2010). Without children around, these parents could enjoy a time purely for recharging their batteries. “I didn’t take my child with me on that day, so I felt more relaxed and more at ease” (Lan, Journal, October 5, 2010). When these parents felt comfortable, their anxieties about their children’s academic performance or physical disabilities were also relieved. “I’m less nervous when I’m here. And I can loosen up a bit. After all, children will slowly find their own ways” (Ru, Journal, October 5, 2010).

#### **Making Mutually Supportive Friends**

In the warm-up session before every main artistic activity, the parents chatted about their latest lives. They often spoke about things that worried them, such as their health problems or their children’s education issues. Sometimes they simply talked to others, but at other times they asked for opinions or advice. In this process, they relieved more of their pressure, better understood others, and made more mutually supportive friends.

Nana's words directly pointed out these housewives' miserable lives. "We have to go out, or we'll be confined to our homes. We're so angry that we want to hit the wall every day, but doing that will hurt our hands. We can't find other places to vent our frustration, so we come here to chat..." (Na, Journal, September 14, 2010). Yujie was frank about her past. She used to hide herself in the home and allowed herself to be entangled in her children's affairs and household chores. Her lack of understanding about relaxation was changed only after she participated in this group. "... Taking part in this group has helped me know more people, improved my communication skills, and has given me courage. It's really great." (Jie, Journal, October 5, 2010). Because most of the group members were in a similar situation, the open-mindedness of the more optimistic parents infected the rest of the group.

### **Personal Growth and Sublimation**

Housewives are often considered by their partners to know nothing more than bringing up children and doing housework. Their efforts in life are not recognized, and they do not have any sense of accomplishment. "In the past I had never thought about learning anything, but now although I have to take care of my child, I still want to see and learn something ore..." (Lan, Journal, September 14, 2010). In this group, they also realized that "one must improve herself, otherwise she will really feel very lonely. It's been so hard for me to go through all that, but now I've gradually come out of it, and I no longer feel the 'loneliness' described by Ms. Ji" (Wei, Journal, September 21, 2010). Awei said these words in a light-hearted way, but her struggles in the long process could not be condensed into a few sentences. In this art support group, the parents discovered that they were not only good at raising children. They could live a better life, gain more self-confidence, and be out-of-the-ordinary. In addition, "Being more involved in this kind of activity, everyone can be sublimated, and their souls can be cleansed... Artistic activities inspire us to think from different perspectives. In the mean time, we can better understand our inner thoughts with the help of artistic creation." (Ling, Journal, October 19, 2010). In general, these parents used to feel that their everyday lives were quite mundane, but by participating in artistic activities, they sensed that their ways of thinking had become fresher. They now have more original ideas of

their own, and more importantly, they can speak about these feelings, which they may not be able to share with family members or intimate friends because these people do not agree with their thinking. Even if these parents live in a community, they feel lonely deep in their hearts. However, with group artistic activities, they have found partners who are willing to listen to their stories, discuss, and share with them. This is a precious experience for them.

### **More Interaction with Family Members**

After the group activities came to an end, artistic ferment began to take place in these participants' lives. They were able to share their group activities with their family and children, and the activities also developed into interesting topics for both parents and children. "I shared them with my children at home. They seemed to share my happiness..." (Jie, Journal, October 5, 2010). When Shuhao was working on her artwork, her husband observed her at her side. "My husband was beside me. He also picked up a color pen, ready to draw something... My son was also going to join us..." (Hao, Journal, October 19, 2010). Art has injected new interactive elements into the participants' family lives. Now their family members care about their artistic activities, and the participants can share their works with their family members, letting them see their artistic side.

### **The Researchers' Reflections**

This section will reveal our opinions and reflections on personal growth, art education for adults, implementation of parent support groups, and practices of art-based research.

#### **Personal Growth**

The topic of this research was a topic that we liked, and the research subjects were disadvantaged mothers who are of similar age to us. To us, this research was a fresh and unusual teaching attempt which differed from our long-term job of teaching physically or mentally challenged school-age children. It also posed a new challenge. These seven group activities shortened the distance between the teachers and parents. We were able to

have heart-to-heart talks with these parents like real friends and share their deep feelings. Although the entire event ended as the solidarity reached its climax, we gained a considerable amount of encouragement and growth to help us embark on a new journey of career development.

However, artwork appreciation left something to be desired. Most of the time, it was the guide who provided commentary. The parents usually just looked on without saying a word. It seems that, in this respect, there is still room for improvement. In addition, feedback and sharing were another problem. Different people need different lengths of time to reflect, so patience is necessary. Some parents in this event were slow to form ideas. They needed time at home to mull things over so as to express their feelings in the next session. However, the efficiency-conscious guide could not help but fill the room with her own voice because she was unwilling to see the time wasted and the scene quiet. In fact, the guide should have been patient and understood that quiet moments are the beginning of idea forming. At this time, another guide should have been composed and believed in the power of silence so that we could calmly wait for the parents' feedback.

After examining the arrangement of our topics, we found they seemed to touch upon too many issues. Perhaps each topic could have become a series of smaller topics to help the parents have a deeper understanding of a given subject. In addition, although we had drawn an outline for discussion before each session, most of the time the discussion did not go as planned. Maybe there were too many questions, so the parents easily got confused. In fact, we probably just needed one question, such as "What are your feelings and thoughts about today's activity?"

### **Reflections on Art Education for Adults and Implementation of Parent Support Groups**

However the Taiwanese secondary education is reformed, it is still dominated by credentialism. Examinations determine the teaching pattern. Such a deformation has pervaded the society for several years. Like a deep-rooted tree of a thousand years old, the old pattern is difficult to remove. Even school principals and directors can blatantly defend the

decision to sacrifice arts and humanities courses. How can art teachers complete their art education mission under the current system?

After reading *Education Reform – From Tradition to Postmodernism*, we have a new idea. In Lin Qingjian's (1996) analysis of Taiwan's educational development, it is argued that reforming school education is no longer sufficient to solve the problems of education. Promoting lifelong learning and establishing a study-friendly society are the solutions. School education is just a short stop of personal learning. It is not the terminal station. If art education cannot exercise its full power in school education, we should consider alternative ways, such as investing in lifelong learning. If postmodern art education places more emphasis on the learning of integrated concepts and the understanding of visual culture, why do adult art courses offered at community colleges and private studios still value the learning of art skills, not the delivery of artistic concepts? After they come of age, why do people still judge their artistic gift by the resemblance of their works to the original?

Now over forty and having been through various ups and downs, we finally understand that optimism is the only antidote. We also understand the maxim which says "when one door closes, another opens." In our opinion, the purpose of art education for adults is different from that of obtaining credentials. Art education for parents should not be focused on the drilling of art skills. Instead, it must help them acquire aesthetic experiences and comprehend artistic concepts. Through artistic appreciation and creation, parents can have more dialogues among them and improve their awareness and in-depth understanding of the self, the other, and the environment.

Why should members of parent support groups learn through artistic activities? It is written in "Record on the Subject of Education", *Book of Rites* that "The education of gentlemen lies in approaches!" In this study, the "approaches" are the artistic means that are used to deliver important meanings of life, especially to women. In other words, metaphors, ordinary language, or methods which are more accessible must be employed to bear education messages. The *Book of Rites* also says, "Those who are good at answering questions are like those who ring the bell." In other words, we have to pay attention to the timing of message delivery and the importance

of getting the gist. In our opinion, the content of a parent support group does not need to lay bare ways of conducting parent-child communication. When art enters a real space, it brings creative changes. Art thus becomes an active practice. What parents feel and learn from artistic activities is like the philosophy behind traditional Chinese medicine: changing the quality of one's body, mind, and soul with the concept of "staying healthy" is the only long-term solution. When parents are encouraged to participate in artistic activities and discussions, they will form their own ideas. Under these circumstances, it is easier for them to internalize these beliefs. We hope that this research will offer a different point of reference for event organizers who plan art education for adults or parent support groups in the future. They can discover multiple possibilities to devise their activities.

### **Practices of Art-Based Research**

Based on the spirit of special education, we value each individual's abilities and multiple ways of teaching. We question the practice of equal treatment in mainstream schools' elite education. Our purpose of adopting art-based research in this research study was to promote the cultural viewpoint and the idea of multiple presentations. Therefore, we fell in love with art-based research at first sight and could not wait to put it into practice. We believe that this approach best captures the spirit of showing respect for the disadvantaged. It can be appreciated by highbrows and laymen alike. In artistic language, art-based research does not favor either fine art or popular art. Emphasis is evenly distributed between academic and nonacademic readings. With art-based research, research subjects are taken into account by readers, and practice processes and experiences are valued. The research process is itself a contribution. It also embodies a reciprocal relationship between us and our research subjects that benefits both sides' learning and growth.

In the authoritative academic field of qualitative research, art-based research is making a strenuous effort to present multiple faces of art in qualitative research. Although it has had a long tradition abroad, it is still an obscure method in the research development in Taiwan. However, different from modernism, which values objective observation and quantification,

postmodernism has completely broken with the tradition which pursues absolute truth. Postmodern qualities are gradually spreading across academic fields. As P. M. Rosenau has pointed out, in the field of anthropology, interpretation gravitates toward “narrative” and places emphasis on “listening to” and “talking with” the other. In psychology, theories of interpretation no longer “probe into the root causes.” Instead, they only “mediate” (as cited in Wu, 2007, p. 33). Listening and viewing art as a medium are to deepen dialogues. This is one of the key characteristics of art-based research.

Any artistic creation has to be set against a particular background to have a unique character. As Huang Yizhu’s (2008) quote in her book indicates, Jacques Derrida believes that in the structure of a text, there are neither laws of logic nor ultimate absolutes. Creativity comes from the deconstruction of the core of logic. It attempts to re-construct a new extensive reading to push the meaning of the text toward life and the existing reality (p. 231). This is the awakening of self-introspection and self-consciousness. In addition, Chen Xiangming (2002) has also argued that an interpretation made by man cannot be completely objective. As we are more strongly aware of self-introspection and self-consciousness, we need to reflect on and share our own subjective perspectives. As Chen’s quote of Clifford and Marcus’s viewpoint demonstrates, “Research is in fact a way of writing. It is an act of writing culture” (p. 40). Another perspective on the reform of art education is proposed by John I. Goodlad (2000), who believes that the ecological model is one of the characteristics of postmodernism. It is also an important breakthrough in the modern linear way of thinking. The arguments proposed by these two scholars exactly attest to the results of this research, which presents both the organic model of life improvement in the support group for parents with physically or mentally challenged children and the authentic developmental contexts of group activities. These traits suggest that this research is distinctly different from the traditional qualitative research, which processes data with coding, analysis, and categorization. There is currently only a small amount of academic literature which covers the practices of art-based research in Taiwan. We hope this article has made some contribution to this small collection.



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