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"Me an artist!" Building Relational Communities with Neurodivergent Artists in Regional Australia

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Abstract

Living regionally impacts how neurodivergent populations interact with their communities. Disparate clusters of villages and towns contribute to both geographical and relational distance that can increase segregation and stigma. However, regional art studios can offer a shared space that not only contests that distance but provides a place where individual stories can be creatively communicated. This study explored how group art-making and exhibiting the artworks influenced artist identity for neurodivergent people living regionally on the Mid-north Coast in Australia. The interpretive study included nine neurodivergent participants who regularly attended art-making workshops. They respectively chose eight third-party interviewees who were familiar with the participants' art-making processes. A single iterative case-study design was employed using action research (PAR) methodology. Methods included: three think aloud (T/A) sessions with nine participants; nine researcher observations; and eight third-party interviews. The data were thematically coded then triangulated for the analysis. The process of participating in art-making studios proved to strengthen the identity of the participant as an artist which led to growth in self-esteem. Artist identity was further enhanced by exhibiting their completed artworks locally, which increased regional community connection.

Keywords: art-making, identity, stigma, belonging, agency, neurodiversity, regional, intellectual disability

"Moi, un artiste !" Construire des communautés relationnelles avec des artistes neurodivergents en Australie régionale

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Résumé

Vivre régionalement a un impact sur la façon dont les populations neurodivergentes interagissent avec leurs communautés. Des groupes disparates de villages et de villes contribuent à la fois à la distance géographique et relationnelle qui peut accroître la ségrégation et la stigmatisation. Cependant, les studios d'art régionaux peuvent offrir un espace partagé qui non seulement conteste cette distance, mais fournit un lieu où les histoires individuelles peuvent être communiquées de manière créative. Cette étude a exploré comment la création d'art de groupe et l'exposition des œuvres d'art ont influencé l'identité de l'artiste pour les personnes neurodivergentes vivant dans la région de la Mid North Coast, en Australie. L'étude interprétative comprenait neuf participants neurodivergents qui assistaient régulièrement à des ateliers de création artistique. Ils ont respectivement choisi huit personnes interrogées tierces qui connaissaient les processus de création artistique des participants. Une seule étude de cas itérative a été utilisée en utilisant la méthodologie de recherche-action (RAP). Les méthodes comprenaient : trois sessions de réflexion à haute voix (H/V) avec neuf participants ; neuf observations de chercheurs; et huit entretiens avec des tiers. Les données ont été codées thématiquement puis triangulées pour l'analyse. Le processus de participation à des ateliers de création artistique s'est avéré renforcer l'identité du participant en tant qu'artiste, ce qui a conduit à une croissance de l'estime de soi. L'identité de l'artiste a été encore renforcée en exposant leurs œuvres achevées localement, ce qui a accru le lien avec la communauté régionale.

Mots-clés : création artistique, identité, stigmatisation, appartenance, agence, neurodiversité, régional, déficience intellectuelle

1.0 Introduction

This study reports research which used a neurodiversity model and uses the term 'neurodivergent' to describe a person with atypical neurological functioning (Muzikar, 2018; Singer, 1999). This model was utilised because it promotes diverse perspectives that align with artistic endeavour, whilst challenging medicalised labels born of perceived neurological deficit.

Neurodivergent artists living in regional towns face particular obstacles such as experiencing greater socio-economic disadvantage. They have fewer higher education opportunities, leading to less social and cultural opportunities for participation and authentic inclusion (Coyle et al., 2018). Furthermore, the lack of educational engagement reduces employment prospects, thus escalating inequality (Coyle et al., 2018). Employment opportunities for neurodivergent people are scarce, additionally, rural and regional areas often have ingrained deficit thinking about the abilities of neurodiverse populations (Herbert, 2021). This is further compounded by geographical distance that impacts neurodivergent people's social interaction, affecting already compromised social relationships, identity, and agency (Robinson et al., 2017). Lack of social interaction is a long standing reality for many neurodivergent people (Paterson et al., 2012), and increases both felt stigma and stigmatization (Corrigan, 2014). However, both geographical and relational communities also can emphasise commonalities amongst people living regionally (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Finding commonalities lessens the social comparisons that increase isolation and strengthen identity, thus combatting the stigmatization and segregation experienced by neurodivergent people (Paterson et al., 2012).

Identifying with a stigmatised group challenges the impact of stigma on the individual and increases self-esteem through a stronger sense of identity (Crabtree et al., 2016). Furthermore, utilising strategies that positively re-define stigmatized traits can reduce the impact of stigma (Nario-Redmond et al., 2013). A collective strategy, such as attending an art-making group with the possibility of exhibiting the work locally, provides an opportunity to increase an individual's agency, self-esteem, and identity, and thus contests their experience of stigma in regional areas (Gentle, 2018; Gentle et al., 2020; Gentle & O'Brien 2020). Building a stronger sense of self contributes to cultivating social interactions and strengthening community connections in regional settings (Gentle, 2018; Hall, 2013). These attributes can be fortified through public responses to regionally exhibited artworks, moreover, it offers the potential to increase a sense of belonging to that community (Gentle, 2018; Gentle et al., 2020, Gentle & O'Brien, 2020).

In Australia, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has been set up to give people choice of their services and service providers, which has in turn changed how people access the art studios they regularly attend. This is altering the interactions within and between regional communities because established disability services with attached art studios struggle to remain viable (Knaus, 2017). Thus, it is timely to enquire where art processes and community connections could intersect.

The purpose of this study was to examine if a collective strategy of attending a regional art-making group could provide such a common ground opportunity. Regionality in this research took place with people from two towns that had no connecting transport and populations of 1,000–6,000 people.

There is little research on the use of regional art studios, and how they impact the people who utilise them. As a result, an interpretive action research study (Radermacher, 2006) was launched to ensure that the research design captured

the voice of the participant group. This research explored how attending art studio activities could impact neurodivergent art-makers in regional Australia. This study uncovered a myriad of artistic and social connections both made within the art studio, and beyond into the community. This paper specifically focuses on the development of the identity as artist that arose from such inclusion at a regional level.

2.0 Methods

This study was given ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Sydney and was conducted in full accordance with the "World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki" (World Medical Association, 2013).

2.1 Recruitment

After enquiring at the three local regional disability services providing art-making groups, two agreed to distribute the information sheet and advertised an information session. The lead author facilitated the session where they explained verbally, the easy-read participant information sheet and an easy-read consent form. Each participant signed their own consent form with support from their families, and/or advocates also in attendance.

2.2 Participants

Nine neurodivergent art-makers, five males and four females, were the central participants. All were practiced art-makers attending art studios regularly. One participant attended the art activities of the research project for only 33% of the time. Their collected data to the time of their departure was included with their consent.

All participants indicated a third-party to be interviewed about their arts practice. Each central participant chose either family members or arts workers as their art advocate. They were termed 'arts advocates' because of their familiarity with the participant's art practice.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

A focus group was planned for the start of each of the three phases of the art-making sessions. The purpose of the focus group was to enquire how the participants felt about their art practice within, and external to, the studio. However, the participants indicated that they would prefer to talk about such issues either individually or through quiet dialogue whilst making art in the group, rather than during a formal focus group. Consequently, as the group made art, the lead author used the intended focus group probes and questions in table 1 to guide group and individual conversations.

The focus groups became a form of think aloud (T/A) methodology (Eccles & Arsal, 2017). In T/A the researcher asked the participants what they were thinking throughout the art-making activities enabling her to capture their web of ideas: which more traditional and prescribed methodologies may have failed to pick up (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2013).

Collecting the art-making data also required observation, but as the author was also focused on think aloud facilitation, the workshops were video recorded, allowing observation to be written up retrospectively. Additionally, each chosen third-party interviewee gave insight into the participant's art-making processes, supplying anecdotal evidence that illuminated the data collected from participants within the workshops.

Table 1 *Probes and Questions*

	Think Aloud Probes:	**Art Making Questions:**	**Interview Questions**
1.	How do you feel about coming to the art project?	How would you feel about making some art that is of you?	How do they feel about coming to the art project?
2.	Why do you come to art projects?	Is it OK for the group to talk about your art? Can you help the group to talk about your art?	Why do they come to art projects?
3.	Do you know people here?	Can you make art about this group? Can we all talk about your art again?	Do they know people here?
4.	How do you feel when a project finishes?	Can you make art about what you do outside this group? Can we talk about that art too?	How do they feel when a project finishes?
5.	What materials do you like to use?	Are there materials you like to use? Which ones? Have you thought about what you like about them?	What materials do they like to use?
5.	What other things do you do when you are not here?	Are there people you like to make art with? Do you prefer to make art with people or on your own?	What other activities do they do when they are not making art?
6.	Are there any feelings you want to talk about now?	Are there colours you prefer? Which ones? Do you think about what these colours feel like to you or remind you of?	Which emoji represents them arriving at an art session?
7.	What feelings are there?		
8.	How would you show them? Choose from these visual aids.		

Note: These questions are taken from the focus group questions we have used with the person whom you are guardian/carer/parent of. We will use these again in future focus groups. The focus groups give a subjective view. These questions are to help get another perspective. You can elaborate.
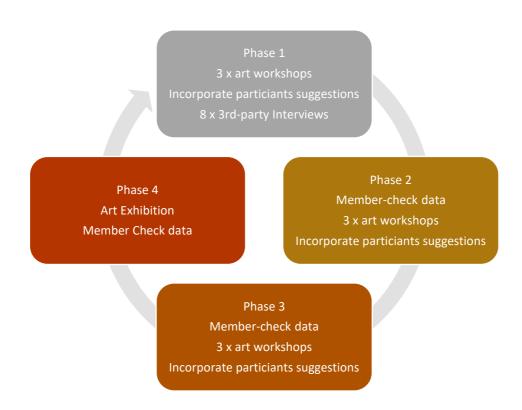
As the researcher is an art therapist, she was able to use her skills to ensure the space was safe and that big emotions were acknowledged and given space to be discussed further should the participant require. It was essential to safeguard against the researcher's bias. This was achieved by the lead author utilising self-reflexivity, which included regular debriefing sessions with the other authors (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). Triangulation of data from three sources helped to ensure robustness and mitigated the influence researcher had on the core participants.

2.4 Design: Participatory Action Research

An in-depth single case-study design using a participatory action research (PAR) approach (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) was employed. The study utilised an iterative three-phase framework of researcher-facilitated art-making groups. Each phase involved planning, action, and reflection in response to the previous phase. All three phases comprised three consecutive art making workshops in a regional art studio over 3 weeks, with each session lasting 4 hours. There was a break of 6 weeks between each phase to allow for participants to have time to reflect on the art workshops and reduce interruption to their weekly routines. During this time the researcher discussed collected data with third-party researchers and then member-checked that data with participants. Figure 1 shows the phases of the PAR cycle.

3.0 PAR Data Collection

Figure 1: The data collection procedures cycle using PAR.

Phase 1
3 x art workshops
Incorporate particiants suggestions
8 x 3rd-party Interviews

Phase 2
Member-check data
3 x art workshops
Incorporate particiants suggestions

Phase 3
Member-check data
3 x art workshops
Incorporate particiants suggestions

Phase 4
Art Exhibition
Member Check data

Source: Gentle (2018).

The three phases (P1, P2, P3) of art workshops were core to data collection and further enhanced by one round of interviews with eight third-party interviewees at the conclusion of the first phase. As the study progressed, the participants discussed wanting to exhibit their artworks. In response, an exhibition was sought in a local gallery, thus this became the fourth unplanned phase (P4), providing a fitting culmination of the PAR project, as it had been directed by the focus participants. The method timeline with the P4 exhibition also allowed for short interviews to occur outside the workshops. See the data collection timeline in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Data Collection Timeline*

Phases & Data Collection	P1 Art Work-shops x3	Code Data/	P2 Art Work-shops x3	Code Data/	P3 Art Work-shops x3	Code Data/	P4 Art Exhibition x1
Timeframe	3 weeks (w)	6 w	3 w	6 w	3 w	6 w	3 w
n:	n:9 + n: 8		n:8		n:8		n:9
Subjective data collection	Think Aloud x3		Think Aloud x3		Think Aloud x3		Interviews
Objective data collection	Obser-vation x3		Obser-vation x3		Obser-vation x3		
3rd party data collection	Inter-views (n:8)						

3.1 Data Analysis

Data from the think aloud (T/A) method, observations, and interviews were themed using a grounded theory frame (Charmaz, 2011), where the data emerged and was then categorised into themes. The Nvivo7 coding system of transcribing data was utilised for this process (Kuckartz, 2014). The themes arising from the participants' responses were developed from the coding Think Aloud analyses. The themes were then verified by the observations of the researcher, and again through the third-party interviews. See Table 3 which provides a data source key used in the results section below.

Table 3. *Data Source Key*

Source	Key
Source 1:	
Participant feedback	Initials used in place of participant's names
- Think Aloud Group (n:9)	T/A1.1; 1.2; 1.3 = Think Aloud Phase 1, Sessions 1, 2, 3
	T/A.2.1; 2.2; 2.3 = Think Aloud Phase 2, Sessions 1, 2, 3
	T/A.3.1;3.2; 3.3 = Think Aloud, Phase 3, Sessions 1, 2, 3
- Brief interview of participants at exhibition (n:4)	Int. exhibition

Table 1 continued

Source 2:	
Observations & reflections	Obs.1.1; 1.2; 1.3 (Observation Phase 1 Sessions 1; 2; 3)
- Observation (n:9)	Obs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 (Observation Phase 2 Sessions 1; 2; 3)
	Obs. 3.1; 3.2; 3.3 (Observation Phase 3 Sessions 1; 2; 3)
Source 3:	
Third-party Interviews	
- Families (n:6)	F/A Int.1; F/A Int.2; F/A Int.3; F/A Int.4; F/A Int.5; F/A Int.6
- Arts workers (n:2)	A/W Int.1; A/W Int.2

4.0 Results

This paper focuses on the *identity as artist* code from the larger research project. The thematic analysis is shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Thematic Analysis (Gentle, 2018).

Source: Gentle (2018).

Three core themes were identified, relating to how participants' identities as artists were developed or strengthened through the art-making process. These themes included *the artist within*, *the evolving artist,* and *the artist in the community*. *The artist within* was shown when the central participants expressed how important making art was to them in their daily life and being recognised

and supported by family members and support workers. *The evolving artist* was found within the art studio where during the workshops the central participants' personal interest in making art was developed through connection with both their facilitator and their peer members in the art-making group. The *artist in the community* was established when the central participants showed their art processes and artworks to their local communities.

4.1 The Artist Within

The central participants arrived at the art-making project expressing how important art-making was to them. It was an integral part of their inner identity. K stated, "I would be totally lost without it" (T.A.2.1); E explained, "it is like eating and drinking!" (T.A.2.1). T added, "it makes me feel as though I have something to do with my life" (T.A.2.1). This commitment to art-making was described by another participant's family member:

> Well, all I know is if you have to make appointments with the
>
> doctors or the dentist you don't make them on Tuesday when he
>
> does art, …[or] Wednesday when he does pottery…the other days
>
> he will give up but he's not going to miss those days (F/A Int.6).

Dedication to art-making was exemplified by how resources moved between the studio and home: "S is painting with his own paint and canvas he has brought in" (Obs.3.1); "E is doing a drawing of the titanic from a book he brought in" (Obs.3.1). An arts worker said: "both T and M have been given sketchbooks and they take them home and often fill them up and bring them back to show" (A/W.Int.1).

The agency of the central participant as artist was also reinforced by family members with one parent commenting:

> He's got books of drawings he's done at home and he's always fine
>
> going out into the garden getting bits of leaves and twigs and
>
> sticking them in the vases—he's artistic (laughs) and makes all
>
> sorts of arrangements which I see (F/A Int.6).

Another parent concurred, "she likes drawing her horses or colouring in when she has holidays she just sits at home and draws" (F/A Int.4). A further parent agreed, "you'll never stop her doing her art, it's part of her psyche—you know because if you go on holidays, she does get panicky because she's not going to be at her art" (F/A Int.3). This sentiment was a reiterated by an arts-worker:

> Like she comes here on her day off, she comes to do art half a day
>
> so that's how much she enjoys painting, drawing and potting…I
>
> think the community has supported her in achieving her art
>
> really...when she walked out today, she said I'll bring my book in
>
> next week and the book is something to draw out of, or show me,
>
> or whatever (A/W Int.1).

4.2 The Evolving Artist

The participants who joined the research group had a background in making art, whether it be at home or at a local service. However, it was coming into the

project art studio and being exposed to new methods and techniques that reinforced their image of themselves as art-makers. Their evolving artistry during the study was illustrated when the lead author semi-directed the group to make a representation of themselves like a self-portrait. From starting the research project as individuals more accustomed to following direction, they showed their ability to be creative with a loose theme by describing their work. S said, "That's me all colour: football" (T/A.1.1). T. C. pointed to his work and said, "this is me" (Blue self-portrait; T/A.1.1). O, who loved horses, laughed and said, "it's a horse!" (T/A.1.1). K had been talking about how angry her family made her and described her self-portrait: "it's a volcano—it's the colour of volcanoes" (T/A.1.1). When the lead author enquired if this was her, she had quietly responded "yes" (T/A.1.1). Another smiled and described her work: "[it's] a waterfall, under water"—using her hands to show the trickling of water (T/A.1.1). M pointed to her work and proudly exclaimed "this is me, scarf, blue!" (T/A.1.1). Members of the group became confident in using symbolism and experimenting with colours and images to represent themselves in a way they were unaccustomed to. They were prepared to experiment and try new things.

Their enthusiasm to try a more experimental approach, developed the participant's artistry. This was recognized when T responded to probes about that day's art-making process: "I don't think it's hard at all" (T/A.2.1); and E reiterated: "it's interesting to see when it is made" (T/A.2.1). Then when probed further about what they liked about making art: O responded with, "drawing, painting"; M said, "it's good actually" (T/A.2.1). K confirmed her enjoyment of trying out new things with "it's great, trying to draw the pictures" (T/A.2.1), while E added "putting pictures on cardboard with paint" (T/A.2.1). S agreed, "I like to draw and paint [this way]" (T/A.2.1). The lead author observed one participant's technique: "she sometimes mixes paints [on the palette] without realizing and muddies them. However, this does not seem to reduce her enjoyment of the process" (Obs.1.1). The following week the researcher had observed S as: "prolific, and focused, and sure of what he was doing" (Obs.1.2). The conviction of the central participants in their applications of art materials demonstrated their commitment within the studio to be creative and expressive.

The group members were used to arts workers 'helping' them to make art that was saleable which restricted their style. Whereas K had enjoyed the loose, semi-direction and had decided she wanted to experiment with collage and exclaimed: "I want to do that!" whilst pointing to magazines (T/A.1.1). Her family had observed her artistic development from the time she began attending local art workshops, "I mean her art has come a long [sic]…it was just a scrawl, now you can see what the picture is" (F/A Int.1). The art workshops for this piece of research were allowing her to experiment and express herself without the confines of creating their usual 'marketable' art.

The artists' dedication to their art was demonstrated regularly: "[he] came in early and started drawing before the group started. He is engrossed in his drawing and making very considered lines that form his drawing" (Obs.3.3). Participants reported actively choosing to make art at least once a week, often more. One third-party art advocate said, "yeah, she will always choose art. If she chooses to come here for her art [on] her day off- then that says something" (F/A Int.3). A third-party arts worker reiterated this commitment to art-making: "it doesn't really matter, the end-result is not important for her—I think…she has always been a great artist…a keen artist" (A/W Int.1).

In the last phase of the research project the participating art-makers indicated their own growth in art-making by working silently whilst experimenting with a variety of collage, paint, clay, and pencils. They often talked with each other and

the researcher but when they were engrossed in the art-making they would fall silent whilst concentrating deeply on their art. As a group they indicated that they did not like talking at the beginning of the art sessions, preferring to get on with making their art. Some continued with their usual style of artistic expression while others had been completely freed up with an experimental approach. An arts worker described one participant's enthusiasm in utilising a variety of materials:

> …whatever he can get his hands on, sometimes you have to hold [him] back from being too experimental. He will sometimes use all sorts of materials, is willing to give something a try and you can think no, no, not that, that's not paint that's black dust falling off the bench (A/W Int.2).

All central participants were keen to be amongst other artists and create with them at the studio which was indicated by showing up and focusing on their artworks weekly. An arts worker explained, "he gets there in the morning and goes straight to the cupboard and gets out his brushes and paints all his clay and usually starts work—he sometimes does a bit of research" (A/W Int.2).

The growing development and identity of the central participants as evolving artists was also verified by the third-party interviewees. One family member commented, "she's just so proud to be involved with the people, the painting and is the artist, she calls herself 'the artist'" (A/W Int.1); another family member commented that "he will say: 'me an artist'" (F/A Int.2); a third explained, "she's really been through and through all her life a little artist" (F/A Int.3). Furthermore, a third-party arts worker stressed how another participant came up with his own ideas from the moment of arrival:

> He likes to look through some magazines that he often carries round…in his bag that he's very interested in and chooses things that he has sort of looked at and makes his own unique interpretations and dreams about those subjects that he really likes (A/W Int.2).

Being recognised for their artistry as well as being paid as an artist was also important to the central participants who exhibited or auctioned their work at annual disability service events. This was well expressed by E who shared: "I drawed a caterpillar and I sold one of the paintings". This professional perspective was also captured in the comment below by a third-party art worker's observation: "He can show off his work and his skills in a different venue. I think [he] sees making art like a job, it's an occupation, it's a practice of something he likes to do" (A/W Int.2).

The central participants identified as artists and were confident enough to communicate that to their families, friends, and local community. A family member noted, "I think he is very confident in his own style and how he does it" (F/A Int.6). A parent reiterated this with "she likes to see herself on the walls so to speak" (A/W Int.1). Another parent explained how this occurred, during an art auction when "a stranger asked if family knew any of the artist's work and M replied: 'yes. I am the artist', and he said: 'oh, are you?' and she said: 'yes, I'm one of the better ones'" (F/A Int.3).

4.3 Artists in the Community

The group decided during a discussion about art-making, that they would like to make art at the beach. In relocating to the sand, they were able to work with any materials they scouted for. In doing so, they engaged with the local community. "Two passer-byes struck up conversations and asked what the group were doing. This meant the participants interacted with community as creative artists, discussing their work" (Obs.3.2).

Art making also lead to other community experiences where participants had been included in associated art groups.

> she was doing art at the [disability organisation] consistently every day and she was part of the project they did there on a mural which I was part of as well. It was between people with disability, as well as my people, and aboriginals. So, there were five people and we worked together and [she] was very proud of her achievements, to be part of the community (A/W Int.1).

Transferring the art-making outside of the art studio allowed for different connections to the community, where they were the artists they aspired to being.

4.3.1 Auction–exhibition. During the second phase of the project one participant talked about an auction that their service put on annually to sell the artworks they had made over the year, and about exhibiting work in an annual local show. The discussion sowed the seed of an exhibition of the works they made during the project workshops, which then culminated the research project. Enthusiasm for showing their art was captured when E indicated he likes putting his work in the shows and said: "I go the show every year".

Another family member commented on the value of exhibiting: "he's quite excited about going to the auction" (F/A Int.6). Annual art auctions also gave the participants something to look forward to:

> …she gets very excited about it. There is no way in the wide world that we could miss it [auction] because that would disappoint. But building up to the next year is great because she's getting out art books and things like that. She's always thinking about it…at the end of the year when there is an auction there is just so much to see (F/A Int.3).

The families continued to express how much exhibiting meant to their sons and daughters, enabling them to be recognised within the wider, less familiar community:

> Well like the art auction is a really great way for him to become involved in the community and get out there and be noticed. In fact, [his] art has been, well most has been bought up by the family— it's quite difficult for people to obtain [his art] because we buy it all back because we love it so much; and so I don't know whether that's made his a little bit more popular because it's hard to get—

> although his stuff is so unique it's just nice to know the people want
>
> it and people want to buy his artwork (F/A Int.5).

Another described, in relation to the project planned art exhibition, how being recognised through exhibiting was very important part to their son.

> [He] really wants to be, he really likes being the centre of attention,
>
> and with unbridled passion…he loves being the centre of attention,
>
> so I would say that would be totally up his alley. He wouldn't
>
> suddenly go into shyness or something like that…he would just
>
> love to show his—well he does do really amazing work, is beautiful but
>
> to him he can be very proud of being able to show that off (F/A Int.2).

Though exhibiting was not essential for the artists, it is enjoyed. This was demonstrated when the researcher asked: "how would you be if there was no exhibition or auction?" and one participant answered, "I'd think about giving it away to the Gold Coast [to family]" (T/A.2.1). The participants were then asked if they would still make art, and they agree they would:

> O: Yeah
> Researcher: What would you do with it?
> O: I don't know
> Researcher: Would you still want to be making it?
> O: Yes (T/A. 2.1)

During the art making sessions the lead author commented, "you all said you would like to display this art somewhere so people could see it. Would you like to hang this somewhere in an exhibition?" All their responses were positive: "yep"; "oh yes!"; and "I would, yes" (T/A.3). This confirmed to the researcher to start looking at how and where the exhibition would take place.

4.4 The Culminating Exhibition

The exhibition confirmed to the participants their sense of identity as an artist while also connecting their work to the wider community. When the researcher asked them how it felt to see their works on the wall at the gallery, M replied: "It feels good, and all that, (gesticulating around her) it feels amazing"; and "very exciting" (Int. Exhibition). T. C. replied: "good and this is the full me", whilst happily pointing at his work (Int. Exhibition). E added, "good…it has been a good time, and nothing is worrying me" (Int. Exhibition). The lead author then asked how it felt knowing that people were going to come and see their work which M answered with "they might think it's really excellent and all that" (Int. Exhibition). T said, "it's very pleasing"; and O pondered, "interesting, it's fun" (Int. Exhibition). E elaborated: "I feel like I've done something that could make me a lot of money, and improved my drawing confidence, and I like drawing for this!" (Int. Exhibition). T. C. beamed with: "this is me! I drew this, I am the king!" (pointing at his self-portrait; Int. Exhibition).

The culminating community event was complimentary to the first three phases of the research, providing an additional fourth phase that had been at the request of the participants. The findings showed how participating in making art with supportive connections at home, in a regional art studio or within the community for neurodivergent people can increase both their identity and skill development as artists.

5.0 Discussion

The regional art studio provided a space where the participants reinforced their artistry with other artists, thus increasing their sense of self (Gentle, 2018; Gentle, et al., 2020, Gentle & O'Brien 2020). The growth of their distinctive artist identity was sustained when they made a myriad of creative choices, applying their agency. This developing sense of self was again enhanced through interactions with their peers and the studio facilitator. Coyle et al. (2018) recommended supporting the development of people's agency to challenge stigma and increase opportunities to reduce disadvantage in this population. Developing a *connection to self* has the potential to counter the compromised social relationships, identity, and agency that neurodivergent people living regionally experience (Robinson et al., 2017). The participants in this study shared their artistry with their colleagues, enhancing their relational community. Furthermore, when they made art outside, or participated in the project's art exhibition, they connected with their geographical community. The studio provided a platform to interact and form the connections that are compromised in neurodivergent populations, exacerbated by living in regional areas.

Being provided with an opportunity to exhibit their works increased their confidence by confirming their identity as artists. Subsequently, viewing their own artworks in a gallery further contributed to the pride and confidence that Crabtree et al (2016) found to be significant in strengthening the resilience needed to tackle stigma. The participants were excited to show their work to guests at the opening event; and to be at an occasion in which they were front and centre of the celebrations. The exhibition brought both the artwork and the artist to the attention of the viewer. This increased their visibility as artists, thus mitigating some of the harmful impacts of stigma (Gentle et al., 2020).

Exhibiting the artworks created an authentic opportunity to increase the participant's connection to their regional communities (Gentle et al., 2020; Hall, 2013). This essential relationship can be further enhanced in smaller communities by publicly celebrating an artist's visual story. These events invite interaction with the art object that can explicitly or implicitly represent not only something of the artist but also of their society (Gentle et al., 2020; Hall, 2013). Furthermore, local exhibitions and auctions have traditionally given artists a distinct presence in their local and surrounding communities.

The central participants of this study valued art-making but had been more used to receiving help in finishing their art to sell at annual service-led exhibitions. They were ready to create as soon as they arrived at the studio. The facilitator guided the group with loose themes and semi-direction rather than using concrete instruction. This technique encouraged the participants to use their agency to experiment with materials, ideas, and methods, which had the advantage of stimulating fresh art practices that were exhibited with pride. Their autonomy in the creation of the artworks contributed to their confidence in applying their unique artistic styles.

Specker et al. (2020) have shown that perceived ideas of what is aesthetically pleasing are dubious, *ergo*, no longer should artwork be judged by traditional standards. Therefore, neurodivergent artists exhibiting in regional galleries need to be on equal footing with artists exhibiting in urban and national galleries. As the NDIS generates support for neurodivergent people to live an ordinary life (Green & Mears, 2014), the possibility of reducing stigma through art pursuit could be further investigated. An art event has the potential to challenge the stigmatising labels that inhibit neurodivergent people's relationship to community (Hamdani et al., 2017). This research has shown that by providing a

safe space where artists and their local communities can gather, absorb, look, and discuss the exhibition as equals, a platform of relatedness emerges. The exhibition promoted connectedness, diversity, and belonging in this regional community. As the NDIS increases funding for neurodivergent artist's choice of studio type and location (Arts Access Victoria, 2019), neurodivergent artists should be able to find increased and affordable opportunities to practice and exhibit their art. The study has highlighted how commonalities within communities can be provided by art events where neurodivergent artists express themselves—communicate something of themselves. This strengthens artist identity which goes some way to combatting stigmatization (Paterson et al., 2012). Our study demonstrated the potential of regional studios and galleries in providing environments that can offer activities that support neurodivergent people to flourish.

The research has some limitations. The small sample does not enable generalisation to all neurodivergent people accessing regional art-making groups; nor can it assume that the findings would not occur if the groups had been facilitated using a more tutor directed framework. However, the study could be a platform from which to further probe neurodivergent art-making groups that utilise person-centred democratic processes.

6.0 Conclusion

Art-making workshops have historically been an important feature of regional disability services, along with other activities that engage participants. However, the ability for artworks to express something of their creator, whilst communicating some of their story to the observer (Hall, 2013) enhances our understanding of the importance of these spaces. As social interactions shape identity, the quality of those interactions increases in importance (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986). Thus, participating in an exhibition offers a creative means to building interactions and connections that further augment a sense of identity (Gentle, 2018; Gentle & O'Brien 2020). Regional art exhibitions connect artists to their local communities and beyond whilst providing opportunity to break free of the stigma that scars neurodivergent populations and their communities. The artist within can flourish when a collective space to create in is accessible to neurodivergent artists. Exhibiting the created artworks provides an equal platform to communicate the nuanced self through both the artwork, and through genuine community interaction that crosses both relational and geographical divisions.

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