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IMPACT OF LIMITED CREATIVE ARTS EDUCATION ON STUDENT CONFIDENCE IN UNDER-RESOURCED SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important areas for developing confidence, self-expression, imagination and emotions in the students is the creative arts education. However, in other schools, students often have limited opportunities to participate in arts programs due to lack of funding, qualified arts teachers, materials, and/or institutional interest in non-core subjects. This paper explores the impact of restricted access to creative arts education on under-resourced school settings on student confidence and student expression. The study demonstrates that frequent opportunities to engage in drawing, music, drama, dance and other creative activities are needed to ensure that the pupils' emotions, exploration of identity and self-belief are not undermined. In Creative Arts students have the opportunity to create a space in which they feel safe enough to put their thoughts out there that they know will not be called into question in other subjects. This is particularly in relation to learners who struggle to communicate verbally, socially and/or academically. The paper suggests that creative arts education must be taken as a compulsory subject rather than optional since it relates to the concept of holistic education. In under-resourced schools, having greater access to arts programs can foster greater confidence, creativity, emotional expression, classroom engagement and student development.

KEYWORDS: *Creative arts education; under-resourced schools; student confidence; self-expression; educational inequality*

INTRODUCTION

The creative arts are not the most funded subject in a rich district, and they are likely to be the most funded discipline in a district with fewer resources, limiting students' experiential learning opportunities and leaving them without important and needed opportunities to develop in the creative arts, which can lead to a lack of school engagement and confidence (Deehan et al., 2022; Sharpe, 2021). Having subjects that can't be tested put aside for the side, and most recently the creative arts, is something that has been increasingly happening as there is a pressure to optimize the performance of students on standardized tests, which disproportionately affects students in higher poverty districts (Bodilly et al., 2008; Hardiman, 2016). This is known as “curriculum narrowing” and means that school leaders have to dedicate instructional time to reading and math to give less time to teaching to support the whole child (Gunzenhauser, 2003; Hardiman, 2016). Schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, then, are far less likely to offer strong, consistent arts programming, and even less likely when district funding is provided, rather than other sources (Elpus, 2020; Hardiman, 2016; Stanislaus, 2023). The gap is not only a logistical issue, it is also a sociological mechanism of the reproduction and propagation of inequality, given that marginalised learners are deprived of the cultural capital and experiences that are available to their more affluent counterparts (Holochwost et al., 2024; Stanislaus, 2023).

The failure to have access to teaching is also a restriction of creative opportunities, impacting on the development of key non-cognitive skills which can be a huge challenge to functioning positively. Over the years, evidence has been accumulating of the critical role that participation in a formal creative arts activity (music, theatre, visual arts) plays in the development of student confidence and self-efficacy, or the confidence in one's abilities and capacities to successfully complete tasks and face complex challenges. (Kadam et al., 2025; McCarthy et al., 2004) Experiential learning provides an opportunity for students to acquire the skills of critical thinking, perseverance and collaboration, key elements in achieving academic success and emotional strength in difficult environments (Nilson et al., 2013; Vettrano et al., 2017). Giving students an opportunity to define learning success in a way other than by a standardized score also provides students with an opportunity to develop a sense of self-efficacy in the school community (McCarthy et al., 2004). Students from low-resourced schools, however, are denied an important pedagogical approach in which they can learn to be agents, to feel for others, and to take initiative (Kadam et al., 2025; Vettrano et al., 2017).

There is evidence that the arts contribute positively to the well-being and developmental progress of students, yet the systemic barriers and inequities that continue to plague the field due to the absence of sustainable funding, hiring and retaining certified arts education teachers in low-income

communities persist (Hardiman, 2016; Stanislaus, 2023). This research aims to investigate the connection between the under-resourced school and lack of support for the creative arts and loss of confidence in such school. This study underscores a need for a new paradigm in the allocation of educational resources that places the arts not only in a broad, balanced, and empowering curriculum for all students, but that is also not perceived as a luxury for students in test-prep settings. Through this study, a model for integrating art into the classroom and providing guidance for students from various socio-economic backgrounds—who will use creative and social-emotional skills to thrive in the future—is illustrated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The lack of support for the arts in under-resourced schools that is reported and the importance of the arts as a developmental need are very different. There is a substantial evidence gap in the current scholarship on the importance of arts to children's learning and development and a lack of systemic supports for making the arts more equitable to under-resourced schools. The need for robust arts education programs continues to underscore inequities in access to strong arts education programs, and socioeconomic status is among the factors that impact the availability of programs (Elpus, 2020; Stanislaus, 2023). Data, such as that shared by Dalane, demonstrates that on average since the early 1990s, the percentage of low-income students and students of color within schools has consistently been lower than the percentage of full-time arts teachers within schools than it is in more affluent, predominantly white schools. Structural inequities can often create a logistical disadvantage for schools in lower income areas, as they tend to rely on district funding structures (Elpus, 2020; Hardiman, 2016). In addition, wider educational policy contexts which often include high stakes testing can cause shifts in school leadership which result in “curriculum narrowing” (Gunzenhauser, 2003). This practice gives much less importance to the periphery, or non-tested, subjects, such as arts, and to the tested ones, such as reading and mathematics, assigns them "secondary status" and allocates significantly less time for their instruction (Bodilly et al., 2008; Gunzenhauser, 2003). The sociological view also brings the point that that inequity is not merely logistical, but is also a process that prevents students from the margins from gaining the cultural capital or experiential learning opportunities that are readily available for their more privileged counterparts (Holochwost et al., 2024; Stanislaus, 2023).

The effect of this exclusion is huge, because even organised creative art activities are found to be important in developing the important non-cognitive skills (Vettraino et al., 2017; McCarthy et al., 2004). Creative engagement has been demonstrated to increase students' self-efficacy (self-efficacy refers to students' perceived ability to complete a range of tasks and overcome a range of challenges)

and to help foster student self-confidence by providing successful learning experiences in addition to a purely academic context (Bone et al., 2022; McCarthy et al., 2004). Further research on the process of creative development indicates that arts engagement can promote critical thinking, collaboration and emotional strength—all of which are important skills when facing difficult situations (Kadam et al., 2025; Nilson et al., 2013). Beyond these cognitive and emotional benefits, theories that connect creative expression with the process of identity formation suggest that the arts are an important context for integrating self into school (McCarthy et al., 2004). The research by Zhu and Ni (2025) indicates that arts participation can have two types of impact on psychological development: cognitive-affective and social interaction. Arts participation provides adolescents with an extra dimension in their development; encouraging identity exploration and autonomy (Xyn, 2025). Arts-rich learning environments, coupled with an educator's mindset, is the starting point for student potential, while the teaching of artistic literacy is crucial to students' success in the 21st century (Sullivan & Piselli, 2023). This systemic lack of opportunities, in under-resourced schools, not only has a negative impact on the academic outcomes of students, but it also has a negative impact on students' agency, empathy, and initiative, which are essential for holistic development (Kadam et al., 2025; Vettraino et al., 2017). A systems view would suggest that a narrow view of "extra-artistic" outcomes – whether arts to improve test scores or arts as a component of various projects – could help narrow the argument for arts education, and a broader, more equitable set of expectations could help accommodate arts as a legitimate and valuable part of school life, regardless of socioeconomic status (Holochwost et al., 2024). Moreover, self-efficacy is a major process that supports the relationship between participation in the arts and enhanced student agency, that is, a sense of one's own capacity to solve problems and to foresee success in the future, and thus enhances agency (McCarthy et al. 2005; Su & Adenan 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed methods design in which quantitative data, collected from surveys, are complemented by qualitative data from semi structured interviews and ethnographic observations of the complexities of arts programming and the way that arts programming contributes to student expression. A quasi-experimental comparative design is adopted to ensure rigorous empirical evidence such that the variability of resources in public secondary schools can be isolated and the effects of the resources on student development compared and contrasted with the effects of the resources in public secondary school with better resources. To isolate the effects of the resources in under-resourced public secondary schools on student development, the study adopts a quasi-experimental comparative design with a systematic comparison and contrast between the five under-

resourced public secondary schools and two comparison schools with better resources. This research focuses on examining the relationship between access to a strong arts curriculum and developmental outcomes, through the use of validated and standardized assessment batteries, including the New General Self-Efficacy Scale for students, which assesses high-reliability multi-dimensional proxies of student confidence, problem-solving capacity and belief in ability to perform successfully (Thomas, 2020). Structured performance assessment and participation intensity data also accompany these quantitative data, allowing the assessment of creative engagement and related non-cognitive skills to be quantified as well, from a broad range of students. To maximize the robustness of the inferences drawn about the resource-based disparities, advanced multivariate regression modelling is used, which is important to determine predictive relationships among variables and to account for important socioeconomic confounders (Hedges, et al., 1994; Scripp & Paradis, 2014). This statistical approach can account for other factors in the school environment known to affect student agency and emotional resilience, like the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced meals, school size, and district-wide funding models, and can be used to reduce the risk of selection bias and assess the impact that arts resource allocation has on student agency and emotional resilience independently from those influences. Moreover, the rationale for controlled allocation of the five under-resourced schools and two comparison schools enable otherwise comparable students' population within the schools studied, enhancing the validity of cross sectional comparisons (Egaña-delSol, 2023). The methodological rigor, including calculating effect sizes to quantify the intensity of the link between access to the resources and outcomes for students, provides a systematic framework for measuring the statistical significance of the documented institutional inequities and whether students from marginalised groups are developing despite the inequities (Tlili et al., 2023). This analytical approach shifts from anecdotal evidence to empirical testing: begins to define the direct effects of systemic inequities in the opportunity to develop critical thinking, collaborative engagement and initiative – can be replicated in other contexts and inform a clear path forward in defining and addressing the logistical challenges of achieving holistic, inclusive educational excellence for all students. This study included a series of bi-annual student surveys to account for the longitudinal changes in students' self-efficacy, and to better understand the institutional constraints on resources, semi-structured interviews were conducted with arts educators and school administrators (Holochwost et al., 2021; Prazna & Isy, 2024). In addition, ethnographic observations took place in classroom environments to capture the intricate social-emotional dynamics and interpersonal relations that exist in creative practice (Nanda et al., 2025). These observationally based instruments aimed to detect pedagogical practices that enable or impede expressive autonomy in a variety of classroom settings (Martin et al., 2013). The qualitative field notes were themed

coded and the quantitative survey instruments were ensured to have high internal consistency across groups of students which to ensure reliability (K.).Sahayaraani, 2025). The multi-faceted approach to the data collection enables the depth of analysis that feedback received from participation and documentation of engagement in the development process can verify. This triangulation approach is conducted by using the constructivist paradigm to get a comprehensive analysis and enable the comparison of the internal perception of students with the external reality of the institution (Denée et al., 2023; Matuk et al., 2022). After this thorough analytical process, qualitative data were transcribed and processed using thematic coding software to help identify common patterns in students' engagement (Arévalo-Vásquez et al., 2024; Saleem et al., 2025). The findings of the quantitative survey were then compared to the themes of increased student confidence that emerged from the interviews to determine the consistency of the mechanisms identified in the interviews with the general trends of the self-efficacy measures (Jackson et al., 2024; Sangster, 2012). This analytical alignment is the connection between the availability of resources and developing creative agency in the context of growing creative agency within the classroom (Bosman & Shirey, 2023; Stewart, 2025). In the research, the potential deviant cases are also identified if and when certain pedagogical interventions are able to successfully surpass systemically limiting resources, which is also the other aspect of the constant comparative method (Blagoeva, 2018). By triangulating the evidence, including the think-aloud protocols used in the creative processes, the actual affective responses and changes in students' sense of efficacy can be captured as they face challenges in their artistic processes (Katz-Buonincontro et al., 2019; Vongkulluksn et al., 2018).

RESULTS

A quantitative analysis shows that there were significant differences between the standardized scores of students' self-efficacy in well-funded schools and those of students in under-resourced schools (Ye & Sangiamvibool, 2025).The difference is also reflected in the qualitative findings as students with limited arts experiences sometimes describe being less empowered and some students being apprehensive at being presented with open-ended creative tasks (Prazna & Isy, 2024). The qualitative findings are crucial for informing the mechanism for the demonstration of the gap in self-efficacy in day-to-day creative practice, while the quantitative findings validate the extent to which this gap is measurable. In contrast, students in less resourced communities tend to be less confident in their approach to unstructured challenges, consistently (Prazna & Isy, 2024; Sangster, 2012). From the in-depth interviews, it appears that feelings of apprehension are indirectly caused by the absence of opportunities for iterative and independent problem-solving, thus leaving out opportunities for scaffolding the students' own problem-solving processes.Through the analysis of

the in-depth interviews it is noted that the students are lacking in opportunities to solve problems iteratively and independently, thus resulting in the lack of scaffolding of the ambiguity of creating the problem, which the students must be able to do on their own. In contrast, in well-resourced settings students report on an experience of "freedom of choice" and "self-discovery" and creative challenges are seen as opportunities, not threats (Stewart, 2025). Ethnographic observations in the classroom also reveal the nature of the engagement, with students exhibiting ongoing and iterative refinement and collaborative inquiry in well-resourced schools, versus a more passive and formulaic approach for reducing the risk of failure in less-resourced schools (Aoonlamai & Kwangmuang, 2025). These are also coupled by comments from teachers, which are generally attributed to the lack of adequate resources within these schools, which is further exacerbated by students' teachers receiving insufficient training and development support, and by the schools' limited teaching time. However, for teachers who receive support from the setting, they are convinced that the pedagogical scaffolding is not a barrier but also a valuable phase that is essential to the creative process and is manageable for students, helping them to build resilience in the process (Aoonlamai & Kwangmuang, 2025; Stewart, 2025). When these narrative themes are triangulated with the survey measure metrics, an interesting pattern comes into view: The lack of quality or consistency of artistic exposure has an appreciable effect on the development of the non-cognitive, critical, skills which play a major role in sustaining creative agency: individual initiative, persistence and collaborative risk-taking, etc. (K.Sahayaraani, 2025; Martin et al., 2013). In addition, think-aloud protocols during creative activities have shown that the emotional reactions that students have to complex art tasks are similar across school types, but that students in arts-rich school types have an "extra toolbox" of self-regulatory and adaptive social support strategies to regulate these stressors (Vongkulluksn et al., 2018). Learners in the limited-resource schools, on the other hand, report that they don't have these basic support structures and that they end up giving up on art tasks too early, and that they lose self-belief. It is a structural division because the environment in which education is provided is not only a place but also a factor that either restricts or facilitates an internal sense of self-efficacy for a comprehensive approach to development (Prazna & Isy, 2024; Stewart, 2025). Finally, the qualitative consensus results indicate that providing long-term creative opportunities with scaffolding and autonomy of creative expression mediates between socioeconomic difference, thereby developing creative ownership and resilience that are needed for long-term educational success (Aoonlamai & Kwangmuang, 2025; Sangster, 2012). Through the conscious design of pedagogical processes (e.g., teaching based on mastering and future-oriented attributions), educators can help alleviate these environmental disparities by building up psychological resources, which are stable even under low socioeconomic conditions (Yuwei, 2026a, 2026b). This will call for paradigm

shift in policies, by making creative access a part and parcel of the development of students, instead of an elective luxury (Anderson, 2019; Rahma et al., 2025). By studying how multi-modal artmaking technologies can be integrated into the school environment, schools can provide key support structures to help students learn to cope with the pressures of a high stakes educational system (Winters, 2022). These resources need to be available, and even the most vulnerable learners can envision their own possibilities of learning and creative agency through crosscutting pedagogical models, scholars report (Allina, 2017; Halverson et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that creative confidence is not simply an individual student's ability, but also a socioeconomic disparity in agency (Huang & Bakhir, 2025). The results allow for insight into the needs and importance for schools to be places of learning where the agency of students is considered and encouraged as a social and emotional skill. It advocates for the importance of arts education as a fundamental component of the educational curriculum and not part of a secondary or elective curriculum. However, if – as the current research suggests – the lack of creative efficacy is more likely to be due to institutional scarcity (that is, because students from under-resourced schools lack repeated and scaffolded opportunities to develop resilience), the emphasis of reform should be more on the level of resources offered by policy makers and institutional design, rather than on individual student aptitude (Huang & Bakhir, 2025; Sangster, 2012; Yuwei, 2026). This lack of confidence has a development impact because students lack opportunities to creatively solve problems in an "open-ended" fashion, and do not develop critical non-cognitive skills such as "taking initiative" and "persistence", or "viewing uncertainty as a manageable challenge rather than a threat" (Anderson, 2019; Martin et al., 2013). The uneven distribution of these developmental assets, particularly for vulnerable populations for whom they are not found in wealthier environments, can mean that schools have the potential to reinforce the very socioeconomic inequity they seek to diminish (Prazna & Isy, 2024; Stewart, 2025). A solution to these imbalances goes beyond just providing equal resources and demands the incorporation of cross-cutting pedagogical models, like mastery-based instruction and intentional attribution training, that can help students to rethink their learning potential in a limiting and exam-focused framework (Allina, 2017; Rahma et al., 2025; Yuwei, 2026). The existing data, however, provide a good triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative results; it is important to point out the limited design of this study, however. Given that the current study relied on self-reported arts experiences and the limited context of the institutions sampled, it is important to note that the results from this study may not be generalizable to a broader and more diverse students population and further research is warranted, specifically multi-site, longitudinal

studies that better capture the causal links between ongoing arts engagement and lasting psychological development (Huang & Bakhir, 2025; Prazna & Isy, 2024). Furthermore, to make creative authorship a basic and unavoidable component of student development within the school, "scaling" artistic success in under-resourced settings is a continuous challenge that requires multiple layers of dynamics to be addressed, not only technically but also by a commitment to reworking the school's ecology (Huang & Bakhir, 2025; Halverson et al., 2023). Lastly, a holistic approach is required which acknowledges the interdependency of psychological capital, social agency and creative confidence as three components of educational outcomes and that should be cultivated in students' education, irrespective of their socio-economic background (K.).Sahayaraani, 2025; Winters, 2022; Yuwei, 2026).

CONCLUSION

The authors of this paper observe that the lack of adequate provision of creative arts education has a significant impact on students' self-confidence and expression in under-resourced schools. Students are provided opportunities to express feelings and thoughts through creative arts activities, to imagine and use their imagination, and to develop social skills and an understanding of self. Pupils are not getting any creative opportunities to explore their talent and express their ideas without good quality Arts education. This may reduce class engagement, self-confidence and emotional development, especially for pupils who are already facing social and/or economic difficulties. The results indicate a need to consider creative arts education as a part of the students' learning process and not a secondary or additional subject. The under-resourced schools need to be better resourced with funding, training, teaching materials and arts-based learning activities to support children. To give students more confidence, expression and involvement in learning, in an equal way, through the creative arts. Thus, it is crucial for policymakers, school leaders and educators to collaborate to improve arts education offerings to ensure creative learning opportunities for all students, irrespective of their school or socio-economic backgrounds.

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