

Honors Thesis: Arts Participation and Future Outlook Among Youth of Color

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Word Count: 8757

ABSTRACT

Previous studies have found that arts education for children can increase empathy, create social bonds, and improve their behavior and critical thinking skills (Bowen and Kisida 2023). I explored the impact of participation in arts-based programs on these benefits and others, focusing on the future outlook for youth of color. I developed the term future outlook, which refers to the perception that one has of their time ahead and any expectations they may have about what they can accomplish. A young person's future outlook can shape how they go about their life, including their decisions and beliefs. Having a positive future outlook means that a person has high hopes for their future, believes they can achieve their goals, and their present situation does not limit them. By contrast, having a negative future outlook means that a person has little to no hope for their future; they may see little use in seeking educational or professional advancement because it will not help change their circumstances or achieve their goals. Many factors, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc., can influence future outlook. I explored whether participation in arts-based programs is one of these factors.

Through observations of arts-based programs for youth and qualitative interviews with youth of color who participate in them, I explored their perceptions of these programs, their future outlook, and how these two factors are related to each other. My analyses of field notes and interview transcripts focus on some sentiments and statements that relate to future outlook, including career, college or educational plans, self-expression and self-efficacy, cognitive ability, and emotional well-being. My findings revealed that participation in arts-based programs has an incredible impact on youth of color, especially their future outlook. The participants I interviewed and observed will come out of their arts programs with new skills and a passion for a career that involves the arts.

INTRODUCTION

Race is a social construct that plays an integral role in people's lives, especially in the United States of America. Race impacts many social and health outcomes, often putting certain groups of people at an advantage or disadvantage over other groups of people. As a result of these disadvantages, people of color have to overcome many generational barriers to the likelihood of having positive social and health outcomes compared to their white counterparts (Hanks, Solomon, and Weller 2018). Historical disadvantages are challenging to break down, but not impossible. Formal legislation and policy are essential to breaking down these historical disadvantages, but they are not the only tools and factors that have the power to do so. Discovering and developing all potential avenues for increasing equity and overcoming generational barriers for underprivileged groups, especially for children, is vital. Investing in youth of color aids in addressing social inequity at the root of the issue by giving young people the tools they need to succeed, build generational wealth, and pass their knowledge and skills down to future generations.

From prior research, it is evident that the barriers youth of color face are likely to impact their outlook on life negatively. Overall, youth of color experience lower academic success than their white peers and are plagued with lower confidence and poorer mental health (Akkas and Corr 2024; Barshay 2024). Much of the research on the benefits of arts participation stems from Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital (1986). Cultural Capital Theory (CCT) states that there are social and economic advantages from having cultural experiences, skills, and knowledge that people typically gain from their family. However, arts education can be a source of cultural capital acquired outside of the family and is linked to a variety of benefits for children, like higher academic achievement, increased self-expression, self-efficacy, emotional well-being, and

cognitive ability (Fisher et al. 2016; Kim and Roege 2013; Iwai 2002). These benefits are all significant dimensions of a positive future outlook. Previous studies have also revealed an imbalance in access to the arts; youth of color are less likely than their white peers to have access to the arts (Alegrado et al. 2020), and this gap has been growing in recent years (Kisida et al. 2018). Racial disparities in exposure to the arts and arts education likely contribute to the lack of research surrounding youth of color and their experiences with arts participation.

The goal of this study is to contribute to research centered on youth of color and the arts. This study asks the question: How does participation in arts-based programs impact the future outlook for youth of color? There are a couple of ways to examine this question in its entirety. Firstly, I need to understand the future outlook of youth of color in general. Secondly, I need to explore the world of arts-based programs. There are many different levels of arts education, from after-school clubs to entire arts-based curricula. It would also be beneficial to note what barriers prevent participation in these programs. In addressing this question, my study contributes to our understanding of how the benefits of arts education are associated with future outlook. By focusing on youth of color, this research also responds to recent calls to racialize cultural capital theory (Cartwright 2022, Richards et al. 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

My research topic aims to explore the relationship between arts participation and the future outlook of youth of color. This literature review examines previous studies with similar topics to provide the basis for refining the aspects of future outlook in relation to Cultural Capital Theory and the benefits of arts participation.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

As mentioned previously, CCT has a strong presence in the research surrounding the aspects of future outlook and arts participation. In CCT, Bourdieu lays out the three forms of cultural capital. In their 2022 study on cultural capital and educational inequality, Jæger described the three forms and their meanings: “Cultural capital comes in three forms: embodied (e.g., taste and behavior), institutionalized (e.g., educational credentials), and objectified (e.g., works of art)”. Although Bourdieu focused on the acquisition of cultural capital through family socialization, studies that use CCT as a framework consider other ways that children can acquire cultural capital outside of their families and the benefits of art exposure at a young age (Bowen, Greene, and Kisida 2014; 2018). Arts education can build the various forms of cultural capital and shape the future outlook of youth participants.

The term future outlook is an abstract concept, but it has a variety of dimensions that can be measured and analyzed. Generally speaking, future outlook refers to the perception that one has for their time ahead and any expectations they may have about what they can accomplish in the future. Having a positive future outlook means that a person has high hopes for their future, believes they can achieve their goals, and their present situation does not limit them. On the contrary, having a negative future outlook means that a person has little to no hope for their future; they may see little use in seeking educational or professional advancement because it will not help change their circumstances or achieve their goals.

Although educational achievement and career aspirations are key components of future outlook, other factors reflect future outlook as well. A study conducted by Hetland and Winner (2000) concluded that it is important to measure educational performance outside of simply grades and test scores. They suggest that understanding a child’s motivation, attention,

engagement, and understanding of the subject matter is just as important as grades and test scores when measuring educational performance (Hetland and Winner 2000).

Other studies have demonstrated similar sentiments regarding exploring the benefits of arts education. The authors of these studies identify self-efficacy, self-expression, emotional well-being, and cognitive ability as benefits of arts participation (Fisher et al. 2016; Kim and Roege 2013). The findings of these studies document a positive relationship between arts education and the previously listed benefits, which I separate into two broad categories: concrete and social-emotional benefits.

CONCRETE BENEFITS

The concrete aspects of future outlook are the ones that people typically think of as potential benefits of arts participation: aspirations and readiness for career and college.

Business Learning Skills

Arts learning skills are not the only skills gained through art participation. Business-like skills are just as important for arts-participating students to have a good future outlook. For example, a study by Miller, Martin, and Frenette (2022) dove into high-impact practices in the arts as a predictor for career outcomes. High-impact practices vary by discipline, but are designed to leave students with the skills and experience necessary to have great college and career success (The American Association of Colleges and Universities n.d.). Some examples of high-impact practices in the arts include portfolios or capstone projects. Miller, Martin, and Frenette (2022) found that students in the arts who completed high-impact practices had a more successful post-graduate career search and were more likely to pursue a career in the arts.

Experience

A 2018 study by Kisida, Bowen, and Greene used an experimental design to understand how youth feel about arts experiences, like attending museums, after participating in an arts program. The findings of this study demonstrated that students in the treatment group, who had participated in the same arts program, had more positive feelings about the arts in general and wanted to pursue more arts experiences than the control group, who did not participate in the program. This study indicated that participation in arts programs is important for encouraging young people to seek more arts experiences.

College

Prior research has found that arts participation is linked with academic improvement and achievement, which gives students more options for post-secondary education. (Jindal-Snape et al. 2018; Martin et al. 2013). Other studies have explored arts participation as a pathway to college. An assistant professor at the University of Maryland, Kenneth Elpus, designed a study that compared arts versus non-arts students in the college application and admission process (n.d.). Using a quasi-experimental design, the results of this study revealed that arts students were more likely to apply to and attend post-secondary institutions than non-arts students.

Career

Research surrounding arts participation and career has revealed a link between the two concepts. A study by Scott and Natalier (2024) analyzed how arts participation relates to career realization. The study results showed that after participating in an arts program, students could imagine a career in the arts and were now equipped with some of the skills and experiences necessary to seek an arts career. The study concluded that arts participation also helps students develop the cultural capital required for a career in the arts.

Cognitive Ability

Previous studies found a positive correlation between arts education and cognitive ability (Baker 2013; Dey 2024). Dey (2024) offered a unique perspective for researching cognitive ability in their study; they used passive ethnographic research with a structured guide to analyze their subjects' cognitive ability. Parts of this guide include observing how the students and teachers interact and the progression of students' work from the beginning to the end of the class (Dey 2024).

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL BENEFITS

Self-efficacy

Moorefield-Lang (2010) carried out a study investigating the relationship between arts education and self-efficacy for middle school students. Through interviews, the study found that arts education and self-efficacy had a positive relationship among middle school students. Moreover, Moorefield-Lang (2010) found that peer relationships among the participants of the arts-based classes provided healthy motivation and competition for the students, increasing their positive perception of their self-efficacy.

Self-expression

A couple of studies analyzed the relationship between the arts and self-expression. In their study, Lee et al. (2020) discovered that marginalized youth experienced a positive increase in their self-expression after their arts program participation. In another study, Lomas (2016) stated the benefits of having a positive and developed self-expression, demonstrating how self-expression is a dimension of future outlook. Lomas (2016) remarked that self-expression is important for individual needs of freedom and autonomy.

Emotional Well-being

Zarobe and Bungay (2017) put together a literature review of research that explored the connection between arts activity participation and emotional well-being. They included multiple arts disciplines in their analysis and found a positive association between arts participation and emotional well-being. In their methods, they included keywords and phrases they used as indicators of mental well-being. Some of these phrases include “self-esteem, confidence, mental health, and resilience” (Zarobe and Bungay:339).

There has been extensive research into the benefits of arts participation. This literature review reveals the many ways that researchers have explored the topic of arts participation benefits. Some of these studies, in particular, highlight the importance of capturing all of the benefits of future outlook, not just the concrete ones. Analyzing the social-emotional benefits in addition to the concrete benefits may reveal more about how students benefit from arts participation and have a positive future outlook. This study also aims to take a different approach from the traditional cultural capital research by asking young people of color directly how they benefit from arts participation instead of relying on their parents’ perspectives.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The goal of this study is to explore the future outlook of youth of color and art-based program participation by asking the question: How does participation in arts-based programs impact the future outlook of youth of color?

METHOD

I combined participant observation and semi-structured interviews as my data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited to answer my research question because they allow for probing, open-ended questions, and the ability to ask follow-up questions. This

interview method also allows me to explain questions and concepts that may be harder to understand to the younger respondents. They can ask clarifying questions and ask for rewording if needed. While attending every arts club meeting, I took field notes documenting my observations. These field notes focused on the functioning of the club meetings themselves. I noted the flow of the meetings, student-teacher interactions and dynamics, the structure of the clubs, peer interactions, and any other important occurrences. These observations helped me paint a bigger picture of the role arts participation plays in the students' lives.

The semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide designed to reflect the research topic while allowing the interviewees to help control the flow of the conversation (see Appendix A). The interviews were either conducted in person with a recorder or over Zoom. Along with questions to build rapport and demographic questions, I asked direct questions related to future outlook.

Table 1. Number of Interviews and Hours of Observation.

Arts Program	# of Students Interviewed	# of Hours of Observation
Lorien Academy - Visual Arts Club (GVSA)	6	12.5 Hours
Lorien Academy - Creative Writing/Theater Club (Chambers HS)	3	8 Hours
Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts + Culture - Youth Residency	2	17 Hours
Other Dance, Music, Photography, and Visual Arts Programs	4	n/a

SAMPLING

The target population of this study is youth of color between the ages of ten to eighteen years old. The sample size is fifteen interviews. All subjects were active participants in an arts program, school-affiliated or non-school-affiliated. I identified subjects by attending Lorien Academy of the Arts clubs and the Youth Residency of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African

American Arts + Culture. The art clubs include the creative writing and theater club at Julius L. Chambers High School and the visual arts club at Governors' Village STEM Academy. These sites are well-suited for this study because they are weekly arts programs that are designed for middle and high school students, with students of color being their main demographic. I recruited interview subjects by building rapport with the students and receiving teacher suggestions about which students would be the most comfortable with being interviewed. Selected students received an IRB consent letter to bring home for their parents to sign. Only students with signed parental consent forms were approved for interviews. I interviewed eleven students and supplemented them with four interviews previously conducted by Dr. Vaughn Schmutz and his research team with young people participating in similar arts-based programs. The interviews included similar themes related to the benefits youth perceived from participation and their plans for the future.

The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts + Culture - At the Table: Youth Residency

The At the Table: Youth Residency is a cohort-based program that starts in October and ends in March. There were six students in the observed cohort. There were two instructors for the residency, one being a Gantt Center employee and the other being from an outside organization. The instructors held the meetings weekly following a hybrid schedule. For a majority of the sessions, the students would come in and have a set task to complete, working toward their main project. Typically, the students divided the work amongst themselves based on their strengths and weaknesses. Some sessions would involve listening to guest speakers, filming Youth Residency content, or going on site visits. The students had access to all of the Gantt Center's equipment, including MacBooks, cameras, Adobe software, and a digital art studio. The student's main

project was a partnership with a Charlotte non-profit to provide the organization with marketing and other business services.

Lorien Academy - Creative Writing/Theater Club (Julius L. Chambers High School)

At Chambers High School, the creative writing and theater clubs are heavily intertwined. Many of the students in creative writing also participated in the theater club. The instructor for the creative writing club was one of the instructors for the theater club. For a majority of the observed time, it appeared that the theater club took precedence over the creative writing club. The theater club had set plays and other performances that the students had to prepare for. Most of the time when this happened, the students practiced, and the instructor did not hold a creative writing club. There were only three observed strictly creative writing meetings. All of the creative writing sessions followed the same structure. The teacher would give the students five minutes to write as much as they could following a prompt. After the time was up, the students would go around the room introducing themselves and telling everyone what they wrote about. Then, the teacher would give the students a specific writing task to work on for the remainder of the session.

Lorien Academy - Visual Arts Club (Governor's Village STEM Academy)

The visual arts club at Governor's Village STEM Academy experienced a major change from the first semester of observation to the second semester of observation. During the first semester, the instructor of the club was a student from UNC Charlotte who had run the club the previous school year. Club meetings were held every Thursday for an hour. The students would come in and immediately grab snacks provided by Lorien. The instructor would then tell the students what they would be working on for that day's session. The activities ranged from making sculptures out of clay to painting to poster making. Towards the end of the semester, the

instructor revealed that they would not be returning for the upcoming semester. At the start of the spring semester, the new instructor took over the club. Visual arts meetings were now held on Fridays for one and a half hours.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis began with transcribing the interviews using Microsoft Word. I transcribed all the interviews verbatim and analyzed the fieldnotes in NVivo. Analysis was based on a codebook that outlines the dimensions of the variable future outlook and other potential themes relating to arts background and arts exposure (see Appendix B). Dr. Vaughn Schmutz previously developed this codebook to understand arts benefits. I built upon this codebook based on the literature review and emerging themes. I identified sentiments or phrases from the interviews and observations related to the dimensions of future outlook. In terms of concrete benefits, I coded for mentions of arts learning skills, which refers to concrete/tangible arts knowledge and skills that are acquired through the arts by participants. I coded for mentions of business learning skills, which refers to concrete/tangible business knowledge and skills that participants acquire through the arts. I coded for mentions of experience, which refers to tangible examples of having new experiences through the arts; this includes opportunities to travel and “see the world” or broadening experiences in other ways, such as attending concerts, visiting museums, performing at a venue, etc. I coded for mentions of college, which refers to mentions of higher-education aspirations. I coded for mentions of career, which refers to career aspirations. Lastly, I coded for mentions of cognitive ability, which refers to any tangible connections between the arts and improved intellectual capacity, better academic performance, enhanced ability to learn, to think critically, to gain additional knowledge, etc.

In terms of social-emotional benefits, I coded for mentions of self-efficacy, which refers to the discussion of the arts boosting confidence, self-esteem, or related concepts; includes feelings of empowerment and self-worth; increased belief in one’s potential, etc. I coded for mentions of self-expression, which refers to opportunities to be creative, engage in self-expression, have a creative outlet, develop individual creativity, etc. Lastly, I coded for mentions of emotional well-being, which refers to any form of mental health benefits, stress relief, anxiety reduction, or other therapeutic, psychological benefits; response to trauma, or tragedy; includes “healing”, calming, improved mental state, and other types of personal well-being.

After coding, I used an iterative approach to data analysis as best described by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009). I analyzed what the data was telling me, identified what I wanted to learn from the analysis, and noted any connections between the two. This process allowed me to identify emerging themes that appeared in the interviews and field notes.

Findings

Table 2. Frequency of Child Codes for Future Outlook

Aspect of Future Outlook	# of Mentions
Career	31
Arts Learning Skills	30
Self-efficacy	29
Self-expression	25
Experience	23
College	17
Business Learning Skills	14
Emotional Well-being	10
Cognitive Ability	2

The interviews and observations revealed that all respondents could articulate how participating in the arts has positively impacted different aspects of their future outlook, with respondents mentioning some aspects more than others. The students mentioned correlations between arts participation and career the most, with 31 mentions. Many students talked about how they want to pursue art in some form as a career ambition. One student spoke about various art careers they would like to pursue in multiple fields:

“I'm like, I can do album covers. I can animate for people's videos. Yeah. I can do art in general. And the last one stuck with me. I was like, I can just do art in general. Why do I have to stick to music? I might even cast a Disney studio animation. It doesn't matter. So many opportunities are here.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

Another student detailed how participating in the arts could help someone be prepared for a career as an art teacher:

“Like if they want to do art or be like an art teacher when they get older, they have like different ways to show, to do the art and help them out. That's an outlet to practice the skills that they need to do.” - **6th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

On the other hand, some respondents preferred to pursue non-art careers, but find ways to incorporate art into their lives as a hobby:

“But I feel like it's a fun activity. Like maybe if I am a lawyer and one day I feel stressed out, I can put it into art. So I can use like art as like a stress relief or as like a hobby.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

The respondents mentioned the connection between arts participation and arts learning skills, the 2nd most amount of time, with 30 mentions. Most respondents stated that participating in their arts programs exposed them to new art skills and mediums. Two students spoke about the opportunity to explore new skills:

“And then also, of course, the arts, like they are very good at helping us kind of work on the skills that we already have and branch out into other things. We're not

only encouraged to do what we like, but maybe since we're interested in one thing, we'll find an interest in something similar. And they give us a space to do so exactly.” - **12 Grader, Gantt Center Youth Residency**

“And in the technology aspect, MODA has, it's like a newer innovation, and being able to have access to a lab, cameras, graphics, and all this, I feel like it's giving me a different perspective on the use of technology and how important it is to what we're doing today.” - **12 Grader, Gantt Center Youth Residency**

“The rest of the class, the students worked on free art while the instructor had a few conversations with them about what they wanted to learn this semester. One student said that they love to draw and would love to learn more about perspective drawing. Some other recommendations from the students were: 3D art, skin tones, proportions, eraser art, and blending different mediums.” - **Field Notes, Visual Arts Club**

Another respondent had this to say about their experience:

“I love it so far because there's so many different materials I've worked with that I haven't in the past and she's introducing me to things that I haven't seen or done before.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

Self-efficacy was another well-mentioned facet of future outlook, with 29 mentions. One particular student voiced how their instructor instills the club members with confidence and encouragement:

“Definitely confidence, definitely. She encourages us every day to believe in ourselves and also to always trust our gut.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

Another student detailed how their confidence has transformed since being a member of their art club:

“I'm usually a very quiet person, but since coming here, I've been more out and open with other people.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

“The teacher instructed the students to state their name, why they do art, and their favorite thing about themselves.” - **Field Notes, Visual Arts Club**

“They began to rehearse, but they had a few blunders with remembering all of their lines correctly. I noticed that the teachers of the club didn’t have to be physically present for the club members to carry out their tasks.” - ***Field Notes, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

“The instructor told the students not to be afraid to stand up for themselves, even when it’s to a teacher.” - ***Field Notes, Visual Arts Club***

Self-expression was the next most mentioned aspect of future outlook, with 25 mentions from the students detailing that they could express themselves through their arts programs. Three students had this to say about their self-expression:

“It's encouraged me to express myself by drawing or painting” - ***7th Grader, Visual Arts Club***

“I feel like the values that she wants us to take away is from the club to like express ourselves, but through art. To really express yourself and how you feel that day.” - ***6th Grader, Visual Arts Club***

“I think being in art helps me when I draw express my emotions and how I feel.” - ***7th Grader, Visual Arts Club***

“They were working on posters that were supposed to represent them. The students wrote their names on their posters in various ways and then drew different pictures that related to them. One student’s poster was just a variety of snacks that they loved. Another student’s poster was just a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos. Other students drew flowers, Hello Kitty, and Kanye West album covers.” - ***Field Notes, Visual Arts Club***

Students mentioned experience 23 times. Many of the students cited arts opportunities they were given through their arts participation. One student talked about getting the exposure to join other after-school clubs from being in the theater club at Chambers High School:

“I'm getting more opportunities out of it because I didn't think to join creative writing or be in weightlifting until the people in theater told me. And then I'm like, OK, yeah, if y'all join, I'm going to join.” - ***12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

Another respondent talked about getting an invitation from their art instructor to participate in an art activity outside of the after-school program:

“Like last year, she invited me to a thing where you could paint bookshelves. Oh, wow. I was really the only student from the class there. So I felt that that was very, very special.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

A majority of the students articulated connections between art participation and college (17 mentions), with many of the students having set collegiate goals:

“Um, it has made me want to join theater in college. I feel like joining like a theater club and seeing like different types of art. I've also kind of shifted what I want to do because I've always loved to draw. I've always loved to do art. I've always been like a musical person and like it's kind of just given me like an opportunity to be like yeah I can just join like a theater club in college and not have fear of being judged or like being seen as a different person” - **12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club**

“Yeah, I feel like since I would have more experience, I could definitely go to a great college like Juilliard. I would love to go there.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

In contrast, one student stated that they were unsure about going to college and revealed that they hadn't had encouraging conversations about attending college:

“I'm not sure...So, like it's been about that my mom had to stop going to college because she was pregnant with me. And then my dad, he didn't go.” - **5th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

After continuing to engage this student in conversation about the pros of college, they announced that they would love to be a veterinarian and decorate their office:

“A pet doctor...So like if I get my own like office, I can like draw like other like animals I like and like design my own office and stuff.” - **5th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

There were 14 mentions of the link between arts participation and business learning skills, with the youth residents from the Gantt Center emphasizing the importance of incorporating business into art:

“I think it was the fact that it was arts-focused and also business-focused. Once again, I do really want to go into film, but I'm also doing marketing in school. So the opportunity that it kind of proposed to blend the two, I was like, this is exactly what I want to do in the future.” - **12th Grader, Gantt Center Youth Residency**

“So we each are assigned different roles, but basically we're taking our perspective as youth and creatives to kind of help them grow their brand. They need a lot of help with social media and just getting more youth engagement. So I'm currently working on an outreach for schools to kind of draw in students to come and volunteer with the organization.” - **12th Grader, Gantt Center Youth Residency**

“At the end of the school year, the students would have the opportunity to place their art in an exhibit, where they could make money from selling their pieces. The students had to learn the process of successfully showcasing and selling their artwork” - **Field Notes, Visual Arts Club**

A member of the creative writing club detailed their experience holding a leadership position in the club and the skills they gained:

“Because I have to overlook everyone else, planning all these different events, and like, what's going to be the content? What's like the theme? What are we gonna write about? Felt like, I don't know. I felt like I was like a corporate office, girly or something.” - **12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club**

On the topic of emotional well-being and arts participation, many students felt that being in their arts programs and participating in art in general was a great stress reliever (10 mentions). Two students expressed how they've changed emotionally since being in their art clubs:

“Yeah. I'm way less sad now.” - **12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club**

“I feel like I'm more energetic now.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

One creative writing and theater student shared how attending the clubs provided a distraction from everything else and allowed them to just focus on the art:

“Most of the time, like theater and creative writing, are kind of like a getaway from my stress. I'm able to come here and not think about it and work on different things rather than just think about what's going on behind the scenes.” - **12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club**

None of the students specifically mentioned cognitive ability in their interviews, but the topic came up in my observations a couple of times:

“While the instructor and I were walking to the theater, we talked about the improvements the students had made from the start of the semester. They said that the students had worked hard to grow their capabilities, in the club and school.” - **Field Notes, Creative Writing/Theater Club**

“Some of the students had only been in the club for a couple of weeks, but a few students had been in the club since last school year. The club's teacher said that the students with the longest tenure reported back that they were grateful to apply the skills and lessons they learned in the club to the classroom.” - **Field Notes, Visual Arts Club**

One emerging theme the respondents continued to mention was the importance of the social bonds they developed in the art clubs. Many of the students made new friends in their clubs and felt a strong sense of belonging:

“But now I'm kind of getting more friends out of it because at first I only had like two or three friends. Now I have a whole bunch of people. Makes me feel more included in the school, if that makes sense. Yeah, a lot of friendship.” - **12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club**

“I think I continue to stay more because of the people I met there.” - **7th Grader, Visual Arts Club**

“I feel like I can talk to like more people, then connect to people that like have similarities with me and like seeing like different people who like the same kind of musicals, different like um people that I saw last year that I couldn't talk to,

being able to talk to them this year, making like new bonds, like new friendships. It's been very nice.” - ***12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

Another emerging theme was the issue of barriers to the arts. Two students mentioned transportation problems that made it difficult for them to attend club meetings:

“Because last year, I couldn't stay at theater because I didn't have my own car. So I couldn't stay after school because I didn't have anyone to pick me up.” - ***12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

“Probably that. And then transportation. My mom gets annoyed because then she has to wait for me to get home and it kind of messes up her plans and stuff like that.” - ***12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

A few students mentioned that they felt like their schools (past or present) often overlooked the importance of the arts:

“My middle/elementary school didn't really care about art because they were more focused on STEM. And now my high school doesn't really care about art because they're focused on sports. We've had like multiple times where we've had to have our shows shut down because it interfered with something that one of the sports teams was doing, or so they could be put first.” - ***12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

“Other than that, they, it's kind of, they treat art like an afterthought.” - ***12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

“Positive experience, as in like financial support from the school? No.” - ***12th Grader, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

The creative writing and theater club instructor told me about a barrier that the theater students experience at a competition:

“The Chambers theater students recognized they were the only Black/students of color in the competition...the song “Cotton Eyed Joe” was played loudly and all the students rushed to do the line dance, except for the Chambers’ students” - ***Field Notes, Creative Writing/Theater Club***

Discussion

Future Outlook

The interviewed students described the impact and importance of arts participation on almost every aspect of their future outlook. Based on the students' responses, they were able to directly connect their arts participation with their career, arts learning skills, self-efficacy, self-expression, experience, college goals, and emotional well-being.

The interviews revealed that the students had great ambitions for their future careers, most of which they discovered through the arts. Some students wanted to be dancers, animators, writers, musicians, filmmakers, and so much more. On the other hand, some students were interested in pursuing a career not directly related to the arts. These students wanted to be lawyers, teachers, veterinarians, and biologists. Although these students do not want to pursue art careers, they all desire to keep art as a hobby for stress relief and to keep up with their skills. Some non-arts career students also mentioned how they can still use art in their careers.

Career aspirations were not the only well-mentioned facet of future outlook. The students consistently connected their arts participation with social-emotional benefits - self-efficacy, self-expression, and emotional well-being. The connection between the arts and the student's social-emotional benefits is consistent with literature that studies arts benefits (Fisher et al. 2016; Kim and Roege 2013)

As expected, none of the students related their arts participation to their cognitive ability in the interviews. However, the observations revealed that the teachers recognized the growth of the students during the duration of the clubs. The teachers detailed how their students' skills and capabilities grew with consistent practice and dedication. As found by previous studies, using

observations to understand the students' cognitive ability was a better data collection method than interviews (Dey 2024).

Emerging Themes

The students continued to mention the meaningful social connections they developed in their art clubs. Many students made new friendships and developed relationships with people they would not have outside the club. A majority of the students enjoyed being in a space with people with similar interests, which made them feel like they could be themselves without being judged. The benefit of social bonds from art participation is found in other literature (Ennis and Tonkin 2018; Hughes and Wilson 2004).

The interviews and observations revealed that there are still many barriers for youth, and youth of color specifically, to participate in the arts. Many of the students noted the difficulty of joining their art club without reliable transportation. Unlike the Wake County Public School System, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools does not have an after-school activity bus program. Students have to rely on their parents, friends, or other relatives to pick them up after school. Many parents work full-time jobs and can not afford to get off work early to pick their kids up from school. Some students had to wait to join an after-school program until they could drive themselves home, which cannot legally happen until students reach sixteen years of age.

Similarly, the students at Julius L. Chambers High School felt that their school did not invest in the arts in the same way as other activities. Like Chambers, many Title I schools in CMS are struggling financially. CMS is facing major budget cuts, with \$7 million in grant funding already gone (Woodard 2025). Schools are trying their best to stay afloat, which places extracurricular funding on the chopping block.

The observations revealed that there are still racial barriers in the arts, particularly surrounding diversity and inclusion. As stated previously, the Chambers students' experience at their theater competition left a bad impression on them. From biased scoring to culturally exclusive celebrations, the competition did not cater to a diverse audience. Students of color belong in all arts spaces and should be made to feel as though they are not an afterthought.

Conclusion

This study has important implications for equitable access to arts participation for students of color. This study has demonstrated that transportation remains a barrier for students to travel to and from arts programs. A busing program for after-school clubs would be a great way to make sure students can participate in clubs without having to worry about finding a way home. Promoting diversity and inclusion in all arts programs, including competitions, is another way to expand access to the arts. Students should feel comfortable expressing themselves freely without feeling excluded or ostracized. Instead of deterring students from pursuing art opportunities in the future, arts programs should be doing the opposite.

This study also has important implications for creating an arts program that helps students better develop their future outlook. Based on the findings, art program designers need to be intentional about the outcomes they want the students to have, concerning their future outlook. Intentional design means creating a curriculum that allows students to gain and develop specific skills and competencies related to the desired outcomes. Whether the objective of the program is to provide students with concrete benefits, social-emotional benefits, or both, the program itself needs to reflect these goals.

This study has important limitations. There was a small sample size, the data were self-reported, and the study followed a cross-sectional design. These limitations make it difficult

to understand the long-term outcomes of arts participation for youth of color. Despite these limitations, the study was a good first step towards understanding the benefits of arts participation from the youth's perspective. Future research could use a longitudinal study design with a larger sample size to better understand the long-term implications of arts participation. A longitudinal study would help understand if the respondents' sentiments toward their arts participation and future outlook have changed over time. It would also help to observe if the respondents' realities align with the aspirations the respondents expressed in the interviews.

More research is also needed to identify all of the ways that youth of color benefit from arts participation. Future research may look to do a comparative analysis of students from different art programs and potentially look for differences among demographic groups, like age and race. As there are limited studies that focus on youth of color, there is a need for more studies that employ youth of color as their target subjects.

Appendix A

Interview guide (individual)

Arts-based social mobility: Exploring cultural capital in Charlotte, NC

NEA Application: 1863443-38

IRB Number: 19-0751

Interviews with participants in arts-based programs with social impact

Topic 1: Personal background in the arts and/or arts education

1. How old are you?
2. What is your racial identity or ethnicity? (may need to be explained depending on the age of the interviewee)
3. Tell me about your background in the arts and creative activities
 - a. Describe some of your earliest memories associated with the arts
 - b. What education or training have you had in arts-related fields?
4. Describe your family's involvement in creative activities.
 - a. What arts-related activities did your [parents or other family members] participate in?
 - b. In what ways were your parents or other family members involved in your arts-based activities?

Topic 2: Motivations for participating in the program

1. How did you become aware of [insert art club name]/The Youth Residency?
2. What motivated you to get involved with [insert art club name]/The Youth Residency?
 - a. How did you first get involved? What has kept you involved?
3. What do you think motivates others to participate in [insert art club name]/The Youth Residency?
4. How would you describe the values of [insert art club name]/ The Youth Residency?
5. What has your experience participating in [insert art club name]/The Youth Residency been like?
6. What do other people you know (e.g., friends or family) think about your participation in this program?

Topic 3: Beliefs about cultural capital and social mobility

1. Tell me what benefits you get from participating in [insert art club name]/The Youth Residency.
 - a. Confidence? (self-efficacy)
 - b. Self-expression?
 - c. Mental health?
 - d. How you process information or approach tasks? (cognitive ability)
 - e. Arts skills?
 - f. Business skills?
 - g. Experience with art? (attending museums, art demonstrations, etc.)
 - h. Service?

- i. Action? (actually getting things done; can relate to completing art projects, service projects, future planning etc.)
2. Do you think participating in [insert art club name]/The Youth Residency has a positive impact on others? On yourself?
 - a. What opportunities might come from participating in art/creativity?
3. What would you say to convince someone of the benefits of participating in [insert art club name]/The Youth Residency?
 - a. For people interested in creating economic opportunity in Charlotte, how would you convince them that investing in programs like The Youth Residency is worthwhile?
4. Why do you think participation in the arts might contribute to a positive future outlook?

Topic 4: Goals and future aspirations

1. What are your goals in terms of participating in art or other creative activities?
2. Tell me about your aspirations for the future.
 - a. How does art and creativity fit into those aspirations?

Topic 5: Experiences with arts-based social mobility

1. Have you seen or heard any examples that show the arts and future outlook are connected?
 - a. Any examples you have witnessed? Any you are aware of?
2. Do you think involvement in the arts has had an impact on your future outlook?
 - a. Explain why you feel that way.

General wrap-up questions

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the impact of arts-based programs?

Are there any other questions you think I should have asked? Please share with me anything else you feel might be relevant.

Appendix B

Future Outlook

ARTS LEARNING SKILLS

Refers to concrete/tangible arts knowledge and skills that are acquired through the arts by participants.

BUSINESS LEARNING SKILLS

Refers to concrete/tangible business knowledge and skills that participants acquire through the arts.

EXPERIENCE

Refers to tangible examples of having new experiences through the arts; this includes opportunities to travel and “see the world” or broadening experiences in other ways, such as attending concerts, visiting museums, performing at a venue, etc.

CAREER

Refers to mentions of career aspirations.

COLLEGE

Refers to mentions of higher-education aspirations.

SELF-EFFICACY

Refers to the discussion of the arts boosting confidence, self-esteem, or related concepts; includes feelings of empowerment and self-worth; increased belief in one’s potential, etc.

SELF-EXPRESSION

Mentions of opportunities to be creative, engage in self-expression, have a creative outlet, develop individual creativity, etc.

COGNITIVE ABILITY

This code should be used for any tangible connections between the arts and improved intellectual capacity, better academic performance (including better at math), enhanced ability to learn, to think critically, to gain additional knowledge, etc.

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Refers to any form of mental health benefits, stress relief, anxiety reduction, or other therapeutic, psychological benefits; response to trauma, or tragedy; includes “healing”, calming, improved mental state, and other types of personal well-being.

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