

## **Examination of the Impact of Involvement in the Arts on Student's Decisions to Stay in School**

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### **Abstract**

This educational research study was designed to examine various factors related to involvement in The Arts that have encouraged students, in grades 7-12, who are not otherwise academically inclined to stay in school. This project used photo journaling to document and gather evidence from selected students/subjects as to the influences (teachers, peers, self-expression, etc.) that enabled them to stay in school, namely Schools of the Creative/Performing Arts. Another tangential aspect of this research was related to the possible link between involvement in an Arts curriculum and self-confidence, self-esteem and related psychological factors in these students. Site visits to three Schools of the Creative/Performing Arts were conducted in order to interview students and gather data. Students were selected based on criteria such as identification by teachers and administrators as potential dropouts had it not been for their involvement in The Arts.

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## **Introduction**

### Description of the Project

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This study was potentially significant in that any and all light that can be shed on means to keep students, particularly students who are not mainstream academics, in school and achieving success is crucial to students' futures.

### Goals/Objectives of the Study

The goals of this study were to investigate:  
The influence of an Arts curriculum in aiding students, who are not academically inclined, to remain in school; and possible connections between developing a talent in the arts in relation to building self-efficacy, self-confidence and/or related images of self.

### Project Background

Over the last few years several things happened which started me thinking about this project. As I taught ED 770 “Integrating Art, Music, and Movement into Elementary Classroom Instruction”, I started to think differently about the role of the Arts in education in the very broadest sense. How does the Arts affected students’ development? I could not help but notice a distinct difference in the ways students at Stivers School for the Performing Arts (Dayton Ohio) conducted themselves when compared to students from similar backgrounds in other schools. In conversations with the secretary, the principal, and the assistant principal, each revealed that they had had many visitors to the school remark similarly. My observation to date was that students looked you in the eye, were very friendly and said “Hello”, initiated conversation, appeared to be self assured and confident.

After these questions began to form in my mind I started reflecting on what I learned from my doctoral research on Bandura’s work on the psychological construct of self-efficacy (1977-present). Self-efficacy encompasses deeply held beliefs as to one’s abilities to perform a task in order to attain a goal. Similar to self-confidence, the psychological construct of self-efficacy is developed over time and from interactions, both positive and negative, with other people and life events. My recent thinking about the components of self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-concept and how these traits are fostered was triggered by the previously mentioned observations of students in local middle and high schools.

My doctoral research examined how to increase teaching self-efficacy so teachers gained confidence and taught science effectively. While my dissertation examined development of self-efficacy in relation to teaching, particularly in the area of science (Ramey-Gassert 1993, 1996), the psychological construct is a very broad concept.. Several possible parallels crossed my mind, and I began to wonder if self-efficacy and related levels of self-confidence, self-esteem, and so on was also associated with accomplishments in the Arts.

### Relevant, Related Research

During this same time, the National Network for Educational Renewal News (2002) reported on their “Arts in Teaching and Teacher Education Initiative” provided information about their research project concerning the importance of the Arts in education. In May 2002, USA Today reported findings of a two year study by James Catrell that examined 62 research reports stating that the role of the Arts is pivotal in providing all students with a well-rounded education. Then The National Arts Education Consortium published their final report for the five year study entitled, “Transforming Education Through the Arts” Challenge Project (2002). These three pieces added to my collection of possible evidence as to the importance of the Arts in education and piqued my curiosity as to the role of the Arts in development of self -- be it self-efficacy, self-esteem, and/or self-confidence. Were these the self-images that students held internally, which then translated to the external as they interact with the outside world?

Being an educator, I wondered -- is there a method for aiding more students to gain self-confidence, self-assurance to meet the demands of life by involvement in a substantial Arts program? We hear of and see too many middle and high school students with low self-esteem who withdraw from their young lives. The focus of this project was to learn more about the role of the Arts in building a positive self-image -- something that would help countless students who are not academically inclined. I was particularly interested in young adolescent students who could otherwise “fall through the cracks” as a follow-up related to my doctoral research but potentially examining self-efficacy and related factors in a broader sense.

### **Research Questions, Methodologies, and Modes of Analysis**

The following questions guided this study:

1. What involvement in The Arts build self-esteem, etc. to enable otherwise at-risk students to better handle academic problems in order to stay in school? Do teachers at these schools have different/more successful ways to reaching and working with students to aid them in academic success?
2. What impact does a proficiency in music, performance, or the visual arts, or related area (given the amount of focused practice and self discipline it takes to gain such proficiency) have on a student's sense of self and build self-efficacy that translates into positive self-esteem, a self-confident manner?
3. And if this is the case, what is it about involvement and success in the arts that fosters self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy?

My sabbatical leave focused on collecting and analyzing data related to these questions. I visited three Schools of the Creative/Performing Arts in Dayton, Cincinnati, and Sarasota. Video journaling, interviews, shadowing and other data collection techniques will be employed to triangulate data on several selected students at each school. Other background information was collected from teachers, student's peers, school administrators and others.

Students were selected by teachers, school counselors and/or administrators based on the criteria that he/she had been a potential dropout prior to or while attending that school but now is in good academic standing. Release forms to participate in the study will be signed by all participating students and their parents/guardians.

A questioning protocol was developed and followed as closely as possible in interviewing students related to the research questions stated above. Other background information and verification data was obtained as needed, keeping in mind issues of student confidentiality.

Videotaped interviews and other collected data were analyzed utilizing qualitative research methodology to identify common themes. Patterns in the data were verified using triangulation of data and other qualitative research

methodologies (Guba and Lincoln, 1990; Marshall and Rossman, 1998; Seidman, 1998).

In this study the role of the researcher was primarily photojournalist as well as qualitative researcher. In this role, I had the greatest flexibility to pursue the necessary data and to capture the nuances of the student's thinking and feelings as the interviews progressed. I also analyzed the information collected and triangulated the data to uncover patterns and trends.

## **Findings**

The socio-economic backgrounds of the students were extremely diverse: they ranged from a hand-to-mouth, nearly Welfare home life in a mobile home, to several from low to middle income backgrounds blue collar families, to several who were from quite affluent homes where their parents were professionals, an M.D., a judge, a psychologist, a lawyer. About half were from single family homes or their birth parents were remarried. It was interesting to note as well that several of the students had mild to moderate learning disabilities, and this finding too, cut across the socio-economic backgrounds of the group.

With the degree of diversity stated above, it was surprising that several commonalities surfaced in the interview and other data collected on the student subjects. The common patterns revealed from the data collected included: First, each student had at least one adult mentor or “cheerleader” who was instrumental in persuading these students to stay in school. For some it was a parent or grandparent, for others it was a teacher. The adult(s) were there to talk to the students about the “bigger picture” and to listen as they discussed grades or other factors that were causing them to question if they should remain in school. Secondly, all thirteen students were positioned to graduate from high school. The ten seniors all had a solid post high school plan. Nine were going to continue on in the Arts in college, most with scholarships. One was joining the

Navy with the recruiting promise of continuing to perform vocally. So, these insights appear to indicate that for these 13 students, successful involvement in the Arts contributed to their decision to remain in school, to graduate, and to make post secondary plans.

One short fall of the project was that no direct data was collected on the measures of self, be it self-confidence, -image, self-efficacy or other related aspects of the students. Perhaps because the data collection was not as aimed at gathering information about development of self-image in relation to involvement in the Arts as it was focused on retention factors, inferences about efficacy and related factors are more indirect in nature, but it is arguable that success is a likely outcome of self confidence.

### **Results and Potential Contribution of New Knowledge**

The focus of my sabbatical leave has relevance for educators in general. In that my findings may bring to light connections as to students' successful involvement in the Arts and success in completing school. Any understanding that furthers our ability to help students remain in school and to continue on with their education has the potential to better equip them to face the demands of life. Hopefully, insights gained from this study can potentially help educators enable less academically inclined students to stay in school and tap their potential via the Arts or similar "hook". In other words, keep them in school by what ever means necessary!

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