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It is striking that dance, a performing art, should turn out to accord these young women more occasions than their schools did to take the intellectual risks and exploratory chances necessary to achieve real growth. Such risk-taking also helps young people develop a durable sense of identity—one that is not fixed but that shifts in nuanced and thoughtful ways, responding spontaneously to the inevitably unpredictable nature of life.... For the young women I worked with, dance enabled them to become the people they aspired to be.¹

—education researcher reflecting on interviews conducted with young women in an afterschool dance program

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How Arts Education Supports Social-Emotional Development: A Theory of Action

Instructional practices rooted in action and reflection could transform how all disciplines build students' competencies.

From 2017 to 2019, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and Ingenuity, a Chicago arts education advocacy organization, collaborated to examine the relationship between arts education and social-emotional development. The project consisted of a literature review and interviews with educators, administrators, students, and parents in Chicago Public Schools. Combining this arts-specific research with multidisciplinary literature on child and adolescent development, we published a report in 2019 in which we proposed a theory for how arts learning experiences can help develop young people's social-emotional competencies.²

Our theory of action starts from this premise: What we usually refer to as arts education—putting on a theatre production, playing violin in the school orchestra, or creating a mural in an afterschool arts program—consists of many smaller daily experiences, or art practices, such as auditioning for a part in a play, practicing a musical piece, or learning to mix paint colors. We argue that each of these daily art practices also have social-emotional components to them. Thus art practices simultaneously offer opportunities for both artistic and social-emotional learning. For example, violin practice could include learning strategies to deal with performance anxiety, a theatre rehearsal could help a young actor learn to work with peers in practicing a scene, and deciding on the subject of a mural could prompt youth to reflect on their feelings about important events in their lives.

Just as daily art practices are the building blocks for developing arts competencies, the social-emotional components of

these art practices are the building blocks for developing social-emotional competencies. In the examples above, sustained engagement in the arts might lead to improved emotional self-regulation, responsibility and collaboration, or confidence in expressing complex ideas stemming from personal thoughts and feelings.

In discussing how education is connected to social-emotional learning, we emphasize that arts education is not a “black box” that magically confers social-emotional competencies. Just as art practices are developed into arts competencies through guidance and intentionality, the social-emotional components of these practices can be intentionally developed into social-emotional competencies. At the same time, arts education doesn't automatically produce optimal social-emotional results; students can learn good or bad social-emotional habits just as they can learn good or bad piano habits.

This theory of action also has broader implications for educators across disciplines. While arts educators seem particularly attuned to the social-emotional opportunities in daily arts practices, other content area teachers can also advance students' social-emotional learning by paying attention to the social-emotional opportunities in the daily practices within their classrooms. Students, in turn, will be better served when they have ample opportunities to access these social-emotional lessons, both in the arts and in other classes throughout their day.

Implications for State Boards of Education

The literature review that undergirds our theory points to strong research into

Camille Farrington and Steve Shewfelt

“Arts gets to some place that I would call intrinsic. It sticks with you in a lot of ways, and it’s got an emotional connection in a way that is harder to get to in math or science.... When you ask students to participate in an art-making activity, you are asking them to participate in creating something, and their voice gets to be a part of that.... Even if I were to have a class of 15 students here and they were all to be doing a still life drawing.... None of them are going to be the same. Ever. And that is a beautiful thing! Whereas, you give 15 people a math exercise, you want them all to be the same.... But with art ... that is what we get [with] every art experience. Everybody is doing something completely different.

—arts program administrator on the opportunities for self-expression in arts education

arts education and social-emotional learning from focused, qualitative case studies as well as more limited evidence from experimental or randomized control trials. Our report highlights three takeaways for state and district education policymakers from this research.

Standards-based instruction in SEL alone won’t do it. An articulated set of standards provides educators with clear, student-centered goals as to the intended outcomes of instruction, illuminating the developmental arc of student learning. This holds true whether we are talking about content standards (what students should learn) or performance standards (how well students should apply that knowledge) in traditional academic subjects (mathematics, English language arts, science, social studies), in arts education, or in the realm of social-emotional learning. As of 2019, all 50 states had adopted K-12 arts standards or competencies,³ and all 50 states had articulated SEL standards for pre-K, with 16 states extending SEL standards through the 12th grade.⁴

While transparent content and performance standards provide necessary direction for adults as they make decisions about curriculum and instruction for arts or SEL, that is only one step in supporting students’ holistic cognitive, social, and emotional development. The burgeoning science of learning and development makes clear that experiences and relationships play

central roles in human growth, development, and well-being. Our theory of action about the role of arts education in social-emotional learning is informed by an earlier Consortium review of this science that emphasizes the importance of developmental experiences.

Developmental experiences are opportunities for young people to gain exposure to and act in the world and reflect on the meaning of their experiences. Social-emotional competencies, like virtually all aspects of human development, depend upon experiential opportunities to bring them forth. As young people observe their environments, interact with others, and make sense of their experiences, they build not only their knowledge and skills, but an understanding of themselves, other people, and the wider world. Further, they develop habitual patterns of behavior, thought, and feeling in response to their perceptions and interpretations. This is the natural process of learning and development, both in and out of school. Close relationships with important adults and peers are also critical to help youth make meaning out of developmental experiences “in ways that expand their sense of themselves and their horizons.”⁵

Consortium researchers identified 10 developmental experiences that are particularly powerful contributors to youth learning and development. These include five action experiences—encountering, tinkering, choosing, practicing, and contributing—and five reflection experiences—describing, evaluating, connecting, envisioning, and integrating (figure 1). Evidence from a range of disciplines suggests that these combined action and reflection experiences build and strengthen neural pathways in the brain as they also support young people’s ability to make meaning and to recognize their own learning.

Without positive developmental experiences and the relationships that help a young person take advantage of them—the kinds of experiences and relationships that are prevalent in arts education—students’ potential competencies, abilities, and ways of being can lie dormant, unexpressed and undiscovered. The competencies that may be delineated in a set of SEL standards (e.g., perseverance, a good work ethic, or a collaborative stance) are not necessarily things students either have or don’t have, nor are they things students are likely to acquire

solely through classroom instruction. Rather, these competencies are potentialities that can be brought forth in response to an environment.

How a student perceives any particular learning environment and learning task (e.g., how supportive the classroom feels, how attuned the teacher is to the student’s particular needs, how relevant the task is) influences the way the student chooses to engage in learning activities and the extent to which the student puts forth effort or takes risks. Student effort and engagement, in turn, influence the extent to which students reap the developmental benefits of any given experience. A student who feels their teacher truly cares about them and is engaged in a subject that truly captivates them might feel what it is like to be inspired to persevere through difficult work, where another student with the same potential may not be so fortunate to experience relationships or conditions that inspire their best effort.

Note that this concept of dormant potential suggested by a growing body of research literature is very different from a pervasive view of students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge and skills.⁷ Rather than young people needing to be “taught” perseverance or empathy, we would

instead ask what opportunities a given setting or activity provides to draw forth these social-emotional competencies waiting in potentia.

Educators are powerfully positioned to influence the kinds of experiences and relationships that young people have within a learning setting, as well as how they make sense of those experiences. State and district policy can guide and support educator efforts in this regard and can support providing feedback to educators on their progress by making data available (e.g., student experience surveys and school climate surveys).⁸

Ensure students have access to arts programs. The benefits of developmental experiences only emerge when students have access to a rich and varied collection of such experiences, and our research further highlights the importance and value of ensuring that students have ample access to arts education opportunities in particular. To be clear, this is a position we would likely take regardless of what our research suggested about the relationship between arts education and social-emotional learning. We believe that art—and consequently an education in the arts—matters for its own sake.

Figure 1. Action and Reflection Experiences



But the value of an arts education goes beyond its artistic purpose. Our research highlighted the distinctive opportunities that arts education affords for arts educators to promote social-emotional growth. Arts education does not magically confer social-emotional competencies, but in the hands of a skilled arts educator who pays close attention to how students are engaging socially and emotionally in the art practices in which they take part, these experiences—even when they are more negative than positive (e.g., not getting a desired role in the play or singing poorly in a public performance)—can lead to social-emotional growth.

What makes arts educators particularly well suited to promoting social-emotional growth through their instruction? In part, the answer is that parents, students, educators, and others expect the arts to play a special role in social-emotional development and believe that it can. One of the most consistent elements of effective arts instruction that emerged in our research is the practice of teachers creating a “safe space” in which students can participate in the arts. Many arts educators operate on the premise that participation requires an environment in which students feel comfortable taking productive risks, being challenged, feeling discomfort, and growing emotionally. While there may be no single answer or “key” to how this is done, safe spaces are rooted in consciously and intentionally created environments of trust and tend to play

prominently in how arts teachers view their role.

Other cultural beliefs about the arts that arose in our research—the Romantic notion that the arts are about “the beautiful and the sublime,” that art is about emotions, that art is about exploring the cultures and beliefs of oneself and others, and that movement and embodiment are important in the arts—can all confer benefits to arts educators in advancing social-emotional learning.

As a consequence, young people and parents often view their arts education experiences as a critical, unique way for them to grow socially and emotionally. This perception holds regardless of whether a student is passionate about a particular art form or is more focused on traditional academic subjects, sports, or some other extracurricular activity. Exposure to arts education opportunities can still provide distinctive benefits for social-emotional learning.

Realizing these benefits requires opportunity; young people need access (geographic, financial, and culturally inclusive) to a wide range of high-quality activities—arts and nonarts, in school and outside of school—so that they can find the ones that best suit them and ignite their passions.

Teachers in all academic content areas can learn from arts educators. Arts education offers particular advantages when it comes to advancing social-emotional learning in part because arts educators frequently and intentionally make connections between art practices and social-emotional components. Because of this, arts educators may be a valuable resource for schools and districts focused on promoting social-emotional learning. Arts integration programs, cross-curricular professional development, and exposure to arts education as part of teacher training programs may provide teachers in all curricular areas with new ways of thinking about how to connect their own instruction to social-emotional learning.

Making connections between art practices—or educational practices in any curricular area—can be quite difficult at times and is not necessarily a skill that is taught in teacher-training programs. At the same time, our theory and our descriptions of how arts educators can take advantage of the opportunities their work affords to advance social-emotional growth should not be foreign to most educators. Many existing instructional frameworks emphasize the

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I like painting, I like bringing the artwork to my house, like showing it off...you can show your emotions through it. So you go there, you paint what you want to paint.... It changes the way I think, because I used to think, ‘Oh, if I could get this done really quickly and find the shortest solution.’ I think it has changed my brain, like ‘Take your time on it, and do it correct, and figure it out instead of just going through it quickly.’

—Sam, a middle school student, reflecting on how painting class in school required him to focus in a new way

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important role teachers play in creating an environment that is psychologically safe and engaging for learners and in providing opportunities for students to practice self-management, build strong interpersonal and relationship skills, and engage in healthy self-expression. The definition of distinguished teaching in the classroom environment domain of the Chicago Public Schools' Framework for Teaching, for example, includes language like, "students initiate respectful interactions with peers and teacher," and "students take an active role in promoting respect and showing care about individual classmates' interests and personalities."

Students and parents in our research tended to value the arts in large part because of the opportunities they presented for social-emotional growth and because of how different their arts experiences were from their experiences in conventional academic classrooms. But these differences between arts education and other educational contexts need not be as pronounced as they seem to be in most places today. The developmental experiences we discuss (and shown in figure 1) are at the core of social-emotional development, and there is nothing magical about the arts when it comes to providing these opportunities for young people. Educators at large could explore ways to translate some arts educators' strategies to their own classrooms and could approach this translation creatively and without rigid preconceptions about which strategies can or cannot work for a given academic field or discipline.

For example, there does not appear to be anything inherent in or distinctive about the arts that makes it more essential for arts educators (as compared with educators in other subject areas) to create emotionally safe spaces for learning. The idea that social, emotional, and academic growth is best facilitated when the classroom is a safe space—when students experience a sense of belonging and feel like they can trust others in the room—is being more widely recognized in contexts outside the arts. While arts teachers by no means have a monopoly on the right strategies for achieving this kind of safe environment, the fact that this is such a common theme in arts education suggests that educators at large can and should draw inspiration from the pedagogical and relational strategies that arts educators routinely use.

Beyond creating safe spaces, educators outside the arts may be able to leverage other opportunities that currently tend to be concentrated in the arts. Arts integration may be the most common way of bringing arts education practices into other curricular areas, but who is to say that science or math could not be taught in highly differentiated, relationship-driven ways that recognize the social aspects of teamwork or the emotional aspects of public performance? The distinctiveness of arts classrooms may reflect generalizable pedagogical practices that could be used more often in other educational contexts (e.g., math or science classes), and educators in these other contexts could use these practices to more effectively achieve both academic and social-emotional learning. School and district leaders can help with this by providing more opportunities for arts educators to share their best practices with teachers in all curricular areas. ■

¹Mira-Lisa Katz, "Growth in Motion: Supporting Young Women's Embodied Identity and Cognitive Development through Dance after School," *Afterschool Matters* 7 (2008): 12–22.

²Camille A. Farrington et al., "Arts Education and Social-Emotional Learning Outcomes among K-12 Students: Developing a Theory of Action" (Chicago: Ingenuity and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2019).

³National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, "The Status of Arts Standards Revisions in the United States Since 2014" (March 2018), <http://www.nationalartsstandards.org/sites/default/files/NCCAS-State-Reports-Since-2014.pdf>

⁴Linda Dusenbury et al., "State Scorecard Scan," web page (Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, September 2018), <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/csi-scorecard-sept2018.pdf>.

⁵Jenny Nagaoka et al., "Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework" report (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium, 2015), 5.

⁶Camille A. Farrington et al., "Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review" (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2012); Camille A. Farrington, Shanette Porter, and Joshua Klugman, "Do Classroom Environments Matter for Noncognitive Aspects of Student Performance and Students' Course Grades?" (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, forthcoming).

⁷Pamela Cantor et al., "Malleability, Plasticity, and Individuality: How Children Learn and Develop in Context," *Applied Developmental Science* 22, no. 2 (2018), doi:10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649; Ken Richardson, *Genes, Brains, and Human Potential: The Science and Ideology of Intelligence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

⁸Elaine M. Allensworth et al., "Supporting Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: Research Implications for Educators" research synthesis (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, October 2018).

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Camille Farrington is managing director and senior research associate at the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, and Steve Shewfelt is director of data and research at Ingenuity, a Chicago-based nonprofit that advocates for arts education.