



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Early Childhood Research Quarterly



Cultivating interest in art: Causal effects of arts exposure during early childhood

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 March 2017
Received in revised form
30 November 2017
Accepted 12 December 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Arts education
Experimental design
Attitude development
Museum education
Education policy

ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of literature examining the effects of arts exposure and participation for youth, little is known about the development of attitudes toward art in early childhood. In this study, we used an experimental research design to investigate the effect of arts exposure on the development of children's attitudes toward art. Applicant groups ($n = 26$) with students in kindergarten through 2nd grade ($n = 2,253$) were randomly assigned to participate in an art museum's educational program, which included pre-curricular materials, a visit to an art museum with a guided tour and arts-based activities, and post-curricular classroom materials. We collected original data from students in their classrooms that measured their attitudes toward art museums and art generally, as well as art knowledge. We found that exposure to the arts at an early age produced significant positive effects on the development of students' attitudes toward the arts. Our findings demonstrate that arts-based exposure facilitated by schools can be an effective strategy for developing positive orientations toward art in young children.

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1. Introduction

The study of arts exposure and participation in early childhood typically focuses on examining relationships between the arts and other positive outcomes, such as the relationship between arts participation and academic skills, neurocognitive outcomes, and social-emotional development. In other words, researchers tend to focus on the benefits of arts education, taking for granted the availability of the arts and students' interest in the arts. In some ways this approach makes sense, given the apparent pervasiveness of art in children's lives. Most children are encouraged to create art from the age they can grasp crayons, and many parents enrich their children's artistic experiences through more formal mechanisms, such as music lessons, dance lessons, children's theater, and other organized arts activities.

At the same time, however, only some parents choose or are able to provide enriching arts experiences for their children. Sociologists have referred to parental efforts to organize culturally enriching activities for their children as "concerted cultivation," and the amount that parents are able to engage in this form of

cultivation is often differentiated along social class lines. Parents lacking in resources, including social and cultural capital, are less able to provide these experiences for their children (Lareau, 2002; Roksa & Potter, 2011). If parents are not able to provide access to the arts for their children, the next line of defense is the schooling system, which has long facilitated valuable arts experiences for students. Yet the amount that schools provide arts instruction in early grades has declined in recent years as accountability pressures have caused schools to increase focus on preparation for standardized assessments in early grades (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; U.S. Government Accounting Office, 2009). This development is problematic for the future of arts participation in adulthood, as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) found that the most significant predictor of adult arts participation is exposure during childhood (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). It is also concerning that noted declines in arts education are concentrated among historically underserved groups. In 2008, African American children were 49% less likely to receive arts education than they were in 1982, whereas Hispanic children were 40% less likely to receive arts education. Moreover, children whose parents have less than a high school education were nearly 77% less likely to have received arts education in 2008 than they were in 1982 (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). If the many benefits of arts exposure are to be realized and experienced, especially by underserved

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students, then it is imperative that strategies are identified that inculcate children with positive attitudes toward arts experiences that will orient them to engage with the arts throughout their lives.

1.1. Arts participation and early childhood development

Early childhood arts participation includes a broad array of activities, including music, dance, theater, and the visual arts (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004; Menzer, 2015). Existing empirical research on the effects of these activities has largely focused on two broad areas: the relationship between arts participation and academic skills and neurocognitive outcomes, and the relationship between arts participation and social-emotional development (Menzer, 2015). A third pathway of research has examined relationships between the arts and physiological outcomes (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004).

In terms of academic skills, researchers have found positive relationships between musical skills and literacy (Anvari, Trainor, Woodside, & Levy, 2002). Related research has found that arts enrichment in preschool activities is related to school readiness skills, higher achievement, and improved vocabulary (Brown, Benedett, & Armistead, 2010). Younger children, however, are not often assessed using standardized testing methods and such tests are typically not developmentally appropriate. As a result, research on the arts and early childhood tends to focus on academic outcomes other than test-based student achievement.

In the area of the arts and social-emotional development, a systematic review of studies published between 2000 and 2015 found 18 studies that identified significant relationships (Menzer, 2015). Several studies identified relationships between social skills and participation in music-based activities. These include a study that found children whose parents sing to them have more developed social skills (Muñiz et al., 2014), and research showing that students participating in a music-based education program demonstrated improved social cooperation and interaction (Ritblatt, Longstreth, Hokoda, Cannon, & Weston, 2013). Related research has found that participation in dance activities generates stronger pro-social behaviors (Lobo & Winsler, 2006). Additionally, some research has found that drama-based activities are positively associated with the development of social skills (Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sa, Ilgaz, & Brockmeyer, 2009; Schellenberg, 2004). Notably, many of the arts-based activities examined in this area included a social component as a part of the arts activity (Menzer, 2015).

Other studies have examined relationships between the arts and emotional regulation. For example, toddlers in an arts integration program with multiple art forms were observed to have improvements in teacher-rated emotional regulation (Brown & Sax, 2013). Music participation studies have also found relationships between better emotional regulation (Gerry, Unrau, & Trainor, 2012) and improved expressive emotions (Muallem & Klein, 2013). Studies incorporating visual art therapy have found similar results (Drake & Winner, 2013). There is also some evidence that art therapy in early childhood may be particularly effective for students dealing with emotional stress (Drake & Winner, 2013) and for students with autism (Kim, Wigram, & Gold, 2008).

Empirical studies have also extensively documented the chronic gaps in childhood social and emotional outcomes by gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. However, while researchers have consistently found that engagement in the arts is positively correlated with social and emotional development, these studies have not investigated the extent to which the arts can reduce these persistent gaps (Menzer, 2015). Prior studies have also noted significant arts participation gaps along gender lines that emerge as early as age three, with girls much more likely to participate in the arts (Smyth, 2016). While gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have long been found to have strong

connections to childhood outcomes, most existing arts education studies do not examine these potential moderator effects and this is a major need for the field (Menzer, 2015).

Considering the research on early childhood arts activities as a whole, it is apparent that there is no single definition of what constitutes arts participation. Most existing studies involve interventions focused on producing or performing, such as singing, playing an instrument, dancing, or acting. Studies that examine exposure to visual art are uncommon, and the interventions associated with them often incorporate very specific techniques, such as art therapy interventions (Drake & Winner, 2013). Summarizing the effects of arts education in early childhood requires a nuanced consideration of interventions that vary in the types of art, program goals, duration of exposure, and the ways that students participate.

1.2. Arts participation and later outcomes

There is also a growing body of research that has found that arts participation has important benefits for older students, which is particularly relevant if early childhood exposure is a precursor to arts engagement in later years. Two studies that examine the relationship between arts education and traditional student outcomes are particularly worth highlighting. First, Catterall, Dumais, and Hampden-Thompson (2012) found a relationship between high levels of arts-rich school experiences and higher writing and science scores, higher grade point averages, and higher levels of college attendance and graduation. Similarly, Thomas, Singh, and Klopfenstein (2015) found that cumulative credits in the arts are associated with lower instances of dropout. Causal studies along these lines, however, have been nearly nonexistent.

One notable exception was an experimental study of a school-facilitated art museum partnership program, where researchers found that arts exposure increased students' tolerance levels, historical empathy (Greene, Kisida, & Bowen, 2014), and their ability to think critically about works of art (Bowen, Greene, & Kisida, 2014; Kisida, Bowen, & Greene, 2016). Additional studies involving museum programs are rare and tend to be correlational. For example, a quasi-experimental evaluation of the Solomon R. Guggenheim's *Literacy Through Art* program found correlations between fifth grade students' participation and literacy skills (Korn & Associates, Inc., 2007). A similar evaluation conducted at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston found that arts participation increased 8th grade students' critical thinking skills (Desantis, 2009). To our knowledge, however, no causal studies have examined the effects of an art museum's educational program on younger children.

1.3. Arts education and cultural capital

Finally, prior research has shown that exposure to an art museum's educational program has the effect of creating cultural consumers with an increased desire to engage with cultural institutions and the arts generally (Kisida, Greene, & Bowen, 2014). Importantly, this research found that disadvantaged students had the least amount of previous arts exposure, and they experienced the greatest benefits from the program. Related research has confirmed a strong relationship between socioeconomic status and children's museum attendance (Dumais, 2006). Under the sociological framework of cultural capital, arts exposure can be a valuable resource that acts as a gateway to children's future academic, social, and economic success (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). A growing body of research has found a positive relationship between measures of cultural capital and academic achievement (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; DiMaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002; Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). To date, however, interventions that lead to the development of positive attitudes toward the arts have

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