

Selection Into, and Academic Benefits From, Arts-Related Courses in Middle School for Low-Income, Ethnically Diverse Youth

Adam Winsler et al, "Selection Into, and Academic Benefits From, Arts-Related Courses in Middle School for Low-Income, Ethnically Diverse Youth," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, (2019).

Abstract:

This research on the effects of arts engagement identifies and carefully controls for preexisting selection factors that differentiate those who do and do not get exposure to the arts. Researchers prospectively followed a large and diverse sample of preschool children (n = 31,332) who identified as Latino (61%) and Black (32%), with 55% of students who were English language learners and 81% who were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The study followed the participants until they completed sixth, seventh and/or eighth grade. School readiness was assessed during pre-K, and archival public school data were collected in middle school. Overall, 40% of students took a form of an arts elective course (music, dance, drama, visual art) during middle school. Results show that black students, male students, students with disabilities, those previously retained, and those not proficient in English had reduced odds of taking an arts class. Children with stronger school readiness skills at four-years old and stronger academic skills in fifth grade were more likely to enroll in arts-related courses. Controlling for prior variables associated with selection into the arts, including prior academic performance, showed that students with exposure to an arts elective in middle school subsequently had significantly higher GPAs and math and reading scores, and showed decreased odds of school suspension, compared to students not exposed to the arts.

Key Findings:

- Black students, students from low income families, students with disabilities and English language learners were less likely to be exposed to arts courses in middle school than their peers identifying as white or Asian, and who had access to more economic resources.
- Students who ultimately enrolled in arts classes in middle school had higher academic achievement in elementary years and showed stronger school readiness skills at kindergarten entry than their peers not enrolling in arts classes in middle school.
- By controlling for selection effects of arts takers and non-arts takers, researchers found that taking arts courses in middle school resulted in increased academic performance later in school (GPA and test scores) and decreased the likelihood that a student would get suspended from school.

Significance of the Findings:

- Controlling for demographics that contribute to a student's opportunities to access and engage in arts education can provide a comprehensive look at the impacts of arts education on academic performance and trajectory.
- This quasi-experimental evidence builds on existing research that highlights the positive effects that engaging in arts education can have on academic outcomes for students.
- Results suggest that arts education can increase students' academic performance and engagement, and Black and Latino students from low-income households may experience significant gains.

Methodology:

More than 31,000 students who identified as Latino (61%) and Black (32%), with 55% of students who were English language learners and 81% who were eligible for free or reduced lunch, were prospectively tracked from preschool through middle school. Course enrollment and school performance data was obtained from the public school system. Multivariate logistic regression analyses were conducted, controlling for all selection factors observed to see if taking arts courses (Yes/No) was associated with better concurrent and later academic performance, as measured by GPA and standardized math and reading test scores.

Limitations of the Research:

- Only one (expansive) school system/community was examined.
- Students who identified as white and from high-income households were generally not well represented due to original sample recruitment procedures. (Specific types of pre-

K programs attended by children experiencing poverty).

- An overall varied art form composite was used that did not look at differences in terms of whether the art form involved was music, dance, drama or visual art.

Questions to Guide New Research:

- How do differences in both selection and later outcomes relate to specific art forms (music, dance, drama and/or visual art)?

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