Enhancing School Connectedness in Vulnerable Youth Through Arts Education:
Considerations for Education Systems in St. Lucia
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The Impact of Arts Education on Vulnerable Youth

There is growing evidence to suggest the positive impact of arts education on vulnerable youth. Research suggests that arts education provides an outlet for vulnerable youth to develop their self-expression and improve their proficiency in communicating their dreams and fears. Art activities promote self-esteem, self-confidence, and feelings of acceptance and success (King & Schwabenlender, 1994, p. 8). Arts education also has the potential to meet a variety of developmental needs for vulnerable youth. These developmental needs include intellectual needs, physical needs, social needs, and emotional needs.

Arts education such as dance, music, drama, and visual arts have rigorous and thought-provoking content that stimulate the intellectual needs of vulnerable youth. Arts education challenges the brightest of young minds and has a unique capacity to develop and strengthen higher-level thinking skills such as analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and problem-solving skills. The experience of making decisions and choices in the course of creating art carries over into other aspects of school and everyday life experiences. Arts education meets the cognitive needs of vulnerable youth as it fosters exploring, thinking, experimenting, and trying new ideas, thus enabling creativity. Arts education involves cueing systems, recitation, expression, and rhythmic singing at a prescribed tempo that requires fluency and building expressive characteristics around text that requires a profound level of comprehension. Rabkin and Redmond (2006) share that there is evidence to show that arts education can have powerful effects on student achievement, especially for struggling students because arts education caters to a variety of learning styles. They also found examples of schools that prioritized the arts, helping to raise low-income and other struggling students' performance. These schools "began to practice arts integration, an instructional strategy that brings the arts into the core of the school day and connects the arts across the curriculum" (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006, p. 60). The low performing students in these schools experienced success in the arts, with many being previously withdrawn or disruptive, now becoming active and productive members in class (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006, p. 61).

There are also several physical health benefits for vulnerable youth associated with dance in arts education. Dance is a great form of exercise for young people as it promotes several health benefits such as muscle and bone strengthening, muscle memory, increased flexibility, stamina, improvements in balance, spatial awareness and coordination. Dance also provides an opportunity to develop social relationships as it fosters connectedness by making new friendships that contribute to developing mental and emotional wellbeing.

Arts education also promotes social relationships that are extremely important for the social developmental needs of vulnerable youth, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The very nature of arts education involves the forming of peer relationships and casual

friendships. Arts education presents an opportunity for youth with ASD to develop their social and communication skills. It is a field that uses the power of games in education by animating an experience, event, idea, role-playing, trust exercises, and mime. Youth with ASD or other vulnerabilities may also struggle with acceptance and a general sense of belonging. The link between belonging and positive academic and social outcomes is recognized (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Osterman, 2000), leading Brendtro and Larson (2006) to emphasize that every person, no matter what age, possesses a fundamental need to belong and that the positive feelings that come from belonging contribute substantially to healthy self-esteem. In a qualitative study conducted in Australia, several participants expressed the profound sense of belonging they found in their drama class. "Even though school was a very lonely place for me, I loved my drama classes. Drama provided a place to belong within a school that didn't want me. Drama was a class that I was passionate about and loved doing. The best aspect was being able to explore different elements of myself and theatre" (Simone, 2018). Drama enabled students like Simone to build their self-confidence, create support networks, and ultimately experience success.

Meeting the emotional needs of vulnerable youth is challenging yet possible through arts education. Vulnerable youth desire emotional fulfillment that includes feelings of security, attention, connection, and a sense of autonomy. Involvement in arts creates opportunities to meet those emotional needs through experiencing, expressing, and managing emotions leading to self-acceptance. Arts education helps vulnerable youth to know, understand, and manage their emotions through reflecting on them and linking them consciously and rationally to their actions. It may also provide a platform for youth with ASD to acknowledge and recognize feelings that have been lurking in their subconscious. It improves their self-esteem by providing a feeling of self-accomplishment which is valuable to improve one's self-appreciation and confidence. One of the greatest benefits of arts education is emotional release or what artists call *catharsis*. Catharsis is a Greek term which means "purification, cleansing or clarification". It refers to the purification and purgation of emotions, particularly pity and fear through art (Thomas 2009). The greatest benefit of arts education is providing a healthy outlet to express feelings of anxiety and stress. Arts education acts as a stress reliever by fighting anxiety, depression, or emotional trauma through art expressions that relaxes the mind and body.

Arts education gives vulnerable youth the capacity to repair their current or future deficits in their wellbeing by improving their self-efficacy, confidence, communication, and self-worth. It is extremely beneficial to youth with ASD because it stimulates unique ways of knowing, doing, living, and belonging in the global community. It plays a key role in the development of creativity and imagination. Through arts education, vulnerable youth come to understand the values and attitudes held by individuals and communities. Young people experience significant physical, mental, and emotional developmental changes during the ages of 12 to 18. These changes affect their social life, emotional wellbeing, and academic performance. Without intervention and support from the school, family, and other community groups, a young person can face significant life-altering challenges. Though most young people successfully manage this transition, a minority do not. This research attempts to analyze how arts education can enhance school

connectedness for youth with ASD and other social vulnerabilities, referring to this cohort generally as *vulnerable youth*.

Key Definitions

The following definitions will be utilized for this research report:

Arts Education: Arts education includes performing arts like drama, music, theatre, dance, and visual arts like drawing, painting, and sculpture.

School Connectedness: School connectedness is the extent that students feel that staff and peers in their academic environment care about them as individuals, their academic success, and their overall wellbeing (Blum, 2005; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009).

Vulnerable youth: Vulnerable youth may be described as young people between the ages of 12 and 18 who live with autism spectrum disorder or other social challenges, and who are at risk of unsuccessfully transitioning to adulthood because of these challenges and/or lack of supports.

Characteristics of vulnerable youth include truancy, lack of interest in academics, and disconnection from the family, home, and school environment. Some examples of vulnerable youth groups include:

- Youth diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (specifically those with high-functioning autism)

- Minority groups such as First Nations and new immigrants

- Minority groups who are the object of ridicule or bullying such as those with diverse sexual orientations

- Youth with physical, emotional and/or intellectual disabilities

- Youth involved in gangs and/or those dealing with addictions

- Youth who have experienced abuse, neglect and other forms of trauma

- Youth from broken homes (single parents), with a history of family violence, drug, alcohol, and sexual abuse

- Teenage parents/pregnant youth

- Youth with emerging mental health challenges

- Youth in foster care or homeless youth

Statement of Concern

What are the promising practices for applying arts education for enhancing school connectedness for vulnerable youth?

Methodology

This research project is comprised of four specific phases that were undertaken between January 2020 and March 2020. The project is organized into four main sections:

- Introduction: The background, review of research processes, the consultation process
- Literature Review: A critical analysis of approximately 25 resources from within the past 10 years related to school connectedness, arts education, and vulnerable youth
- Professional Conversations: Interview consultations, discussions, key perspectives of professionals and experts from various backgrounds related to school connectedness, arts education, and vulnerable youth
- Better Practices: A compilation of better practice statements gleaned from the synthesis of the literature review and professional conversations.

Professional Conversations
The purpose of the interview process was to investigate the perspectives of teachers and professors who are directly involved in arts education programs with vulnerable youth groups. The interview questions were formulated to gather their insights and experience related to the impact of arts education on enhancing school connectedness for vulnerable youth.

Selection of Key Experts
A small group of four key experts was identified from the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, Canada, and Florida. These experts have experience teaching a variety of arts education programs among vulnerable youth groups. All four participants consented to complete the interview process. Table 1. provides a summary of the professional roles and agencies of the participants.

Table 1. Participants' Professional Roles

Agency Type	Professional Summary
Secondary School	Theatre Arts, English Literature and English Language teacher, Director of Theatre Arts Schools' Association. (T.A.S.A)
Various Government Departments	Chairperson of the Education and Programs Committee, Folk Research Center, Curriculum Officer for Theatre Arts, CAMDU, Part-time Lecturer
High School, University, Theatre Arts Department, Characters Incorporated	Career educator, Curriculum Design, Director of Characters Incorporated

Elementary, High School, University	Curriculum and Instruction at the University of New Brunswick and McGill University

The diversity of participants' background and experience is presented in Table 2. Participants had between 10 to 25 years of working experience with arts education and vulnerable youth with an average of 15 years.

Table 2. Participants Training and Experience

Training and Experience	No. of Participants
Teaching	4
Lecturing	3
Arts program Facilitator	4
Director for Drama production	4
Drama and Dance	3
Music	2
Integrating Arts into core subjects	4

Conversation Process
Once participants granted consent, individual interview times were scheduled. Participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions before conducting the actual interview. Two of the interviews were conducted via typed email responses. One interview was conducted over the phone while the fourth interview was taken in person. The length of the interviews ranged from 30-50 minutes. Each participant was allowed to provide detailed responses to each question. All the interview questions were open-ended to facilitate the development of key perspectives. The main areas of inquiry from the interview process were as follows:

- Vulnerable Youth Groups
- Factors influencing School Connectedness
- Personal Experience in Arts programs
- Arts Education Fostering Positive Development
- Types of Arts Education Programs
- Implementing Arts Programs
- Relationship Skills

Better Practice Statements

This section of the document presents better practice statements associated with applying arts education for enhancing school connectedness for vulnerable youth. The better practice statements reflect the merging of perspectives from the research and key informant interviews with arts education professors and practitioners. Better practice statements are organized according to the following categories:

- Arts Education and Vulnerable Youth
- Arts Education and Dropout Prevention
- Arts Education meeting Developmental Needs
- Considerations for Implementing Arts programs

Arts Education and Vulnerable Youth

"…the arts open up the spectrum of intelligence…kinesthetic learners, visual learners, spatial learners, rhythmic learners, musical learners, verbal learners, linguistic learners - we need to provide multiple opportunities for children to express and demonstrate their learning."

- Provide vulnerable youth with the opportunity to engage in arts education or art programs to meet their developmental needs which will enhance their connection to the school, family, and community.

- Adopt arts education programs, arts-infused activities, and strategies since arts education caters to a variety of learning styles. This will increase the chances of academic achievement and the discovery of untapped talents and strengths in vulnerable youth.

- Utilize arts education programs as an outlet to empower vulnerable youth to express themselves, build meaningful connections, and improve their self- awareness and overall emotional well-being.

- Arrange professional development for teachers to be educated on the effects of violence and trauma and how to use drama-based strategies such as Drama therapy, improvisation, and playback theatre as a tool to cope with the specific needs of vulnerable youth.

- Encourage vulnerable youth to participate in socially driven performing arts such as dance and drama to develop their social skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving, cooperation, and empathy.

Arts Education and Dropout Prevention

"Children need to believe that they 'can do' it!"

- Utilize arts-infused education with vulnerable youth as a strategy to reduce their disengagement and attrition from school. This will improve their school attendance by establishing roles and responsibilities which results in a feeling of ownership and school connectedness.

- Create a safe, supportive, and positive classroom environment for vulnerable youth to lower their chances of suspension and dropping out of school. Teachers who promote positive spaces for vulnerable youth tend to gain respect in the classroom and foster a sense of safety, trust, and school connectedness.

- Motivate vulnerable youth by engagement in arts education programs. Arts education creates opportunities for vulnerable youth to feel connected to an activity that challenges them and rewards them on their talents and abilities.

Arts Education Meeting Developmental Needs

"…because of the nature of the Arts, any program in any of the art forms will naturally cater to all developmental needs…"

- Utilize arts-based programs to meet the intellectual and cognitive needs of vulnerable youth. This will expose them to dance, music, drama, and visual arts; which has thought-provoking and rigorous content that will enhance their analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating skills.

- Implement dance as an after-school enrichment activity to boost the physical health of vulnerable youth. Dance provides health benefits such as, increased stamina, bone strengthening, blood flow, muscle memory, and coordination.

- Establish art therapy as a mental health treatment approach for vulnerable youth. This will allow vulnerable youth to experience a catharsis which is a process of releasing emotions, and thereby providing relief from, strong or suppressed emotions.

- Create opportunities for vulnerable youth to be part of musicals, drama, or dance productions to meet their social needs. This will assist vulnerable youth to create bonds with their peers, teachers, mentors, and other professional artists. This will boost their confidence in social gatherings, making friends, and improved communication skills.

Considerations for Implementing Arts Programs

"Inspire future dancers, painters, writers, actors, and more. Empower the dreamers."

- Implement an interdisciplinary approach for professional development that will train teachers in arts-infused education, as a teaching strategy for all subject areas. Subjects like English, Mathematics, and Science can be taught using a variety of arts-based strategies such as poetry, skits, drama, music and arts, and craft.

- Publicize successful school arts programs which will create an opportunity to network with Art studios, agencies and to access trained and professional artists or tutors to revitalize the school's entire arts program.

- Advocate for arts education by making it an integral part of the core curriculum. Principals can do this by empowering visionary teachers who desire to take learning out of the

classroom doors and to recognize the tremendous potential of their future dancers, painters, writers, actors, and more.

- Hire quality art teachers who will mandate access to print, technology, and other resources that can further enrich current arts programs to meet the needs of vulnerable youth and by extension nurture the talents of students who are natural artists.

Discussion

This project aimed to develop better practice guidelines for applying arts education to enhance school connectedness among vulnerable youth. A comprehensive analysis of the link between arts education and school connectedness was conducted along with a thorough examination of its influence on vulnerable youth, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Both the literature and the information gathered from professional conversations show similarities between the overall need to enhance arts education programs to meet the developmental needs of vulnerable youth.

As a researcher and educator from the island of St. Lucia, it is hoped that the information gathered from this project can be applied to meet the needs of vulnerable youth within St. Lucia's education system. One of the shortcomings of the education system in St. Lucia is the heavy emphasis on academic subjects such as Math, English, and Science. Schools traditionally value only certain types of learning and as a result, school is an unpleasant experience for many vulnerable children. Often vulnerable youth do no reach their full potential because of these traditional modes of assessment. Vulnerable youth whose skill set falls outside of such traditionally valued areas of numeracy or literacy often end up feeling insecure, unintelligent, frustrated, and bored. As a result of our narrow focus on instruction and assessment, schools can inadvertently alienate children from the whole construct of 'education', thus contributing to school detachment. In doing so, the school does a tremendous disservice to the gifted, imaginative, and creative child.

Arts education opens the spectrum of intelligence as it provides kinesthetic learners, visual learners, spatial learners, rhythmic learners, musical learners, verbal learners, and linguistic learners an opportunity to discover their strengths. The implementation of arts education programs also promotes creativity for the vulnerable child which is one of the greatest untapped resources. The Ministry of Education in St. Lucia must re-evaluate their approaches to meeting the developmental needs of vulnerable youth through the school system. Consideration must be given to provide multiple opportunities for vulnerable youth to express and demonstrate their learning. Tests and exams such as the common entrance exam, minimum standard tests, and Caribbean Examination Council, leave out such demonstrations for most children, particularly the vulnerable ones. The following is a breakdown of some key considerations for implementing Arts programs in schools:

- Arts programs must be purposeful and not simply one-off intervention. They should be geared to the longitudinal nurturing and development of the child.
- Human resources and physical resources must be made available for Arts programs. Several Arts programs suffer from a lack of resources from materials, equipment, theatre space/ art studio, and access to trained and professional tutors.
- Teachers must be trained and educated with how to use Art as a tool to cope with the specific needs of vulnerable youth, and as a means of engaging and connecting with students on the Autism Spectrum.
- Arts programs need to reflect not just a global definition of the arts but a local one by relating programs to artists in the immediate community. Find community mentors who are willing to connect with children and enrich the learning experience beyond the classroom.
- Empower those teachers who have a vision. Administrators can be the change by helping those visionary teachers reach beyond their classroom doors – and inspire future dancers, painters, writers, actors, and more. Empower the dreamers.
- Encourage arts-infused education in all subject areas because arts-infused education is a teaching strategy that seamlessly combines arts and core curricula to provide an engaging learning environment.
- Arts-integration is a teaching strategy that demands that teachers understand and feel confident in both core curricula and arts standards. To implement arts-based education in schools, teachers need access to professional development so they will learn and understand the fundamentals of the art they are going to implement. In each lesson plan, the objectives for the art form and the core curricula are outlined and taught simultaneously.

Arts Education has a profound impact on the developmental needs of youth with ASD and other vulnerabilities. It is a powerful tool that can be utilized to enhance school connectedness while at the same time developing students' hidden talents and strengths. Engagement in the arts creates an opportunity for vulnerable youth to develop the skills required for conflict resolution, cooperation/teamwork, mentorship, and family and peer relationships. Research in this area shows that youth at risk who have been involved in arts-based activities in high school are more likely to be academically successful and undertake post-secondary education. The relevance of art programs in schools should be encouraged through professional development. Although schools are challenged by tight budgets, there must be some leverage to support the unique potential of arts education for vulnerable youth. It is hoped that the outcome of this project will encourage the primary and secondary school service, as well as the department of education in St. Lucia and other Caribbean territories, in reviewing their educational policies and practices to formulate new directions for the current educational system.

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