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Wombat Stew: Enhancing Self Concept through an Integrated Arts Project

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Abstract

With a growing emphasis in schools on academic achievement, which is strictly limited to the core subjects of English, Maths, and Science, the arts offer a useful and creative system of learning, implicit with their own diverse range of skills that quite readily apply to everyday life and enhance children's self-concept. This paper investigates the development of self-concept of children aged 8 - 12 years from diverse social and cultural backgrounds in a low socio-economic area, as they are involved in a quality Creative Arts program. Using Marsh's self-concept questionnaire (SDQ1) for primary children, the study compares the development of academic and non-academic self-concept in children involved in an integrated arts program with those not involved in the program. Results indicated that overall, the general self-concept of those students involved in the creative arts program increased considerably more than that of the non-creative arts students.

Theoretical / Pedagogical background of the paper

With a growing emphasis in schools on academic achievement in English, Mathematics and Science, the arts offer a useful and creative system of learning, given their own diverse range of skills that quite readily apply to everyday life. According to Hanshumaker (1980), the effects of arts on academic success and achievement are numerous: many studies support the conclusions that the arts have a significant positive effect on basic language development. Research also indicates that involvement in arts activities foster positive attitudes towards school and the general curriculum, and increase productivity that can be generalised to all areas (Fiske, 1999).

Research by the Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER] (2007) found that arts programs enhanced students' potential to engage in learning by helping them feel more confident about themselves, increasing their self esteem. Importantly, the contribution of the arts to students' self esteem was seen to be of particular significance for students from dysfunctional and disadvantaged backgrounds. The study noted the cooperative behaviours students developed as they worked together as a team, learning that each person is an integral member of the team, and learning the various social and communication skills needed to contribute to the team, such as emotional control and behavioural management. These findings were also confirmed in a similar study by Burton, Horowitz and Abeles (1999). They studied 2000 pupils in years 4 – 8 and found significant relationships between rich in-school arts programs and the development of greater self-concept, as well as creative and personal competencies needed for academic success.

In a significant study of the relationship between arts programs and achievement in academic subjects, Catterall, Capleau, and Iwanaga (1999) analysed longitudinal data from over 25,000 students from grades 8-12. They found that 'high arts' students, those involved in arts related courses in or out of school including extracurricular art activities at school, performed better than 'low arts' students on every measure reported, including those for English, reading, and history/geography. They also found that students involved in the arts were less likely to leave school early, and were more likely to have attitudes and behaviours conducive to school achievement, regardless of socio-economic status. These included improved self-concept and motivation, empathy, tolerance, and interest in school.

Self-concept

Self-concept is considered an important construct within education because of its links to students' motivation, achievement, confidence and psychological wellbeing (Hay, 2005). Harter (1999) defines self-concept as the perception that an individual has of themselves regarding the different aspects of their personality and who they are. Self-concept is the cognitive thinking aspect of self (related to one's self-image) and generally refers to a complex and organised system of beliefs and attitudes each child holds about themselves and where they belong in the world (Purkey, 1988).

Self-esteem can also generally refer to how we feel about or how we value ourselves and can refer to particular measures about components of self-concept. Some authors even use the two terms interchangeably (Huitt, 2004).

Measuring self-concept as a multidimensional construct, from physical, social, and academic perspectives, has become possible with the development of multifaceted measures such as the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ1) (Marsh, 1999a). The SDQ1 assesses four areas of Non-Academic Self-Concept, including: physical abilities, physical appearance, peer relations and parent relations, and three areas of Academic Self-Concept including: reading, mathematics, and self-concept towards school in general. These scales provide valuable insights into the way children view themselves and offer a useful means of quantifying self-concept to be used in the identification of relationships with other variables.

The transition from primary school to secondary school is a significant experience in the life of every child. New secondary school students face a multitude of changes, such as the differences in educational demands, teacher attitudes, grading systems and a disruption of social networks (Ellis et al., 2004). Perceiving the transition as a challenge rather than a threat is likely to be associated with lower levels of anxiety, and an increased readiness to face secondary school. Indeed, a greater self-concept and a resultant strong belief in one's ability to cope can help buffer the negative effects of a transition from primary to secondary school (Sirsch, 2003). Many of the children involved in the After School Arts Program were nearing the end of their primary schooling so this may have impacted their self-concept.

Contribution of the Arts to Children's Self-concept

Generally, involvement in the arts has been found to help students feel more confident about themselves, enhance social cooperation and interdependence, boost interest in school, and lead to an overall increase in self-concept (Fiske, 1999). In relation to the individual art forms, children's participation in drama and dance activities has been found to increase a sense of social support, and allow for children to develop their self identity by overcoming self consciousness and becoming more accepting of themselves (Fleming, Merrell and Tymms, 2004; Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Wright, 2006). Engagement in visual arts been shown to be associated with an increased group solidarity and cohesion in class in accordance with a fun, pressure free environment. Children take pride in their artwork, and this pride contributes to the development of self-determining and self-motivating attitudes, which positively affects their self-efficacy. High levels of commitment in art classes are testament to the strength of art in engaging children (Catterall and Peppler, 2007; King, 1995; Thompson, Hall & Russell, 2007). Children's involvement in sustained music programs has been found to increase their spatial skills and increase mathematical ability. Learning to play an instrument can also significantly contribute to a child's self-efficacy and belief in their general ability and the effects of music can impact children of all backgrounds and levels of society

(Burnard, 2004; Costa-Giomi, 2004; Sugie, 2004; Vaughn, 2000). The After School Arts Program on which this paper is based gave children the opportunity to develop their skills within a different art form each term then be involved in an integrated arts experience as a culminating project.

Integration of the Arts

Through integration of the arts, a higher level of learning and critical thinking is encouraged as children apply, compare, analyse, synthesise, and evaluate ideas and concepts across the art forms. Integrating the arts across the curriculum can enhance children's academic achievement, respect for themselves and others, life skills and their self-expression (Russell-Bowie, 2009). Through involvement in authentically integrated subjects across the curriculum children's learning experiences can be meaningful, authentic and effective (Anderson & Lawrence, 2001) with their learning being enhanced across the subjects. The After School Arts Program seeks to investigate if involvement in an integrated arts program has any effect on children's academic and non-academic self-concept.

Aim

The aims of this project are to establish the effect and benefit of an arts program intervention on the self-concept of primary school children in a low-socio-economic Australian school and to examine the development of children's academic and non-academic self-concept over time, with and without an integrated arts program intervention.

Method

Participants

The project was set in a primary school in a low socio-economic area in the Western Sydney area and focussed on Grades 5 and 6 where, at T1, the 153 children were aged from 8 – 12 years (see Table 1). The school did not have a strong arts program, with most generalist teachers doing minimal visual arts, music, dance or drama in their normal classroom curriculum. There were no specialist arts teachers in the school. The students were divided into two groups, the Creative Arts (CA) group who attended the After School Arts Program voluntarily throughout the year and the non-Creative Arts (NCA) group who chose not to attend the After School Arts Program.

Table 1: Creative Arts (CA) and Non-Creative Arts (NCA) groups in relation to gender and age, at T1.

Students	CA	%	NCA	%	Total
	57	37%	96	63%	153
Gender					
Male	28	37%	47	63%	75
Female	29	37%	49	63%	78
Total	57	37%	96	63%	153
Age					
8	3	5%	4	4%	5%
9	7	12%	25	26%	21%
10	22	39%	31	32%	35%
11	24	42%	28	29%	34%
12	1	2%	7	7%	5%
TOTAL	57	100%	95	99%	100%

The 57 (37%) children in the Creative Arts group attended a two-hour, weekly After School Arts Program (ASAP) throughout the year and the 96 (63%) NCA children had little arts education or experience throughout the year. The ASAP, run by university students and their lecturer, was voluntary and provided the children with practical lessons in learning the skills and techniques in one art form, then rotating every few weeks to learn a new art form. All children covered the four art forms of music, dance, drama and visual arts in the first three terms.

In the final term, the children selected to work in one of the art forms and worked together to prepare an integrated arts production based on the children's book, *Wombat Stew* by Marcia Vaughan (1984). This book tells the story of a dingo who caught a wombat and wanted to make a stew from the wombat. One by one, the bush animals came up and suggested items to be put into the stew to make it better. When all these items were in the stew, Dingo tasted it, thought he had been poisoned by the dreadful taste, and ran away never to be seen again. Thus his bush friends saved the wombat.

The music group learned to play the song *Wombat Stew* on xylophones and added voices and untuned percussion to the song. The dance group created a dance to represent the words *Wombat Stew, Wombat Stew, Ooey gooey, Yummy chewy, Wombat stew* which occurred regularly throughout the story as the dingo stirred the stew. They dressed in black with orange, red and yellow ribbons on their arms and legs to represent the flames under the billy and danced around the billy (metal cooking pot) as the song was sung and played by the music group. The visual arts group created the backdrop, the props and the gypsona masks. The drama group acted out the story as it was narrated,

wearing the gypsona masks and speaking their parts as required. These four art forms were integrated together to create a performance of the book, which they performed to the rest of the school and later to a local Infants school.



Figure 1: Musicians and actors wearing masks

Figure 2: Dancers with dingo and backdrop

Procedure

Prior to the children starting the ASAP (T1), and at the end of the year (T2), all Grade 5 and 6 children in the school were asked to complete the Self-Description Questionnaire 1 (SDQ1) instrument. The results, as indicated in the SDQ1 manual (Marsh, 1999b) were analysed in relation to frequencies, means and standard deviations and the mean differences between T1 and T2 in relation to *Non-Academic Self-Concept*, *Academic Self-Concept*, and *Total Self-Concept*. All items make use of a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 *False* to 5 *True*.

The dimensions of *Non-Academic Self-Concept* include physical abilities, physical appearance, peer relations, and parent relations and the dimensions of academic self-concept include reading, mathematics and general-school. All dimensions consist of 8 items. The dimensions of the *Academic Self-Concept* scale measure the child's self-concept regarding his or her ability, enjoyment, and interest in all school subjects, especially reading and mathematics. The *Total Self-Concept* scale is the composite of Non-Academic and Academic Self-Concept (Marsh 1999b).

Results

After the raw scores were analysed, the following results were indicated, see Table 2.

Table 2: T1 and T2 Academic and Non-Academic self-concept of CA and NCA groups

	Time 1		Time 2	
Non-Academic Self-Concept	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Creative Arts Group	125.9	16.6	131	14.5
Non-Creative Arts Group	130.1	21.1	131.6	17.3
Academic Self-Concept	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Creative Arts Group	86.2	17.4	86.1	16
Non-Creative Arts Group	89.1	19.3	87.5	18.9
TOTAL Self-Concept	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Creative Arts Group	212.1	27.2	217.2	25.2
Non-Creative Arts Group	219.2	33	219	31.1

Within the CA group of children, the *Total Non-Academic Self-Concept* dimension (ie. physical abilities, physical appearance, peer relations, parent relations) increased considerably by 5.1 (T1: M = 125.9, SD = 16.6; T2: M = 131, SD = 14.5). However within the NCA group the *Total Non-Academic Self-Concept* dimension increased by only 1.5 (T1: M = 130.1, SD = 21.1; T2: M = 131.6, SD = 17.3). These findings indicate that the children involved in the arts program increased their non-academic self-concept more than those who were not involved in regular creative arts classes.

In relation to the Total Academic Self-Concept dimension (ie. Reading, Mathematics, and General School) the mean of neither groups increased, instead they both decreased. However the mean of the CA group decreased by only 0.1 (T1: M = 86.2, SD = 17.4; T2: M= 86.1, SD = 16) compared with the NCA group, which decreased by 1.6 (T1: M = 89.1, SD = 19.3; T2: M= 87.5, SD = 18.9). Although at T1 the CA group had a mean 2.9 lower than the NCA group, at T2 the difference between the means of the two groups was only 1.4, indicating that there was less decrease in academic self-concept in the students involved in the arts program than in those who were not involved in the creative arts program.

The Total Self-Concept scores indicated that the mean of the CA group increased by 5.1 (T1: M = 212.1, SD = 27.2; T2: M= 217.2, SD = 25.2) compared with the mean of the NCA group, which decreased by 0.2 (T1: M = 219.2, SD = 33; T2: M= 219, SD = 31.1). This confirms the literature that indicates that involvement in an arts program can enhance children's overall self-concept (Fiske, 1999).

Discussion

The assertion that the creative arts foster positive attitudes towards school and the general curriculum (ACER, 2007; Fiske, 1999) is tentatively supported by the results. From Time 1 to Time

2, the mean difference in *Academic Self-Concept* decreased less in the CA group than in the NCA group (-0.1 v -1.6). This scale measures the child's self-concept regarding their ability, enjoyment, and interest in school subjects as well as in relation to themselves. After being involved in the arts program, the CA students' self-concept in relation to academic subjects remained virtually the same, whereas the NCA group's self-concept in this area decreased. The results may indicate that being involved in the arts program helped stabilise the children's academic self-concept at a time of emotional and academic instability as many of the children were facing entering secondary school within a few months of the T2 survey (Sirsch, 2003).

The children who were engaged in the integrated arts activities outperformed the non-creative arts group in the composite measure of *Non-Academic Self-Concept* over time. *Non-Academic Self-Concept* is associated with how people view themselves in regard to their physical self, physical abilities and relationships with friends and family. This finding highlights the importance of the arts in contributing to the positive views children have of themselves in the various social and personal domains of their life. This finding may reflect the inclusive nature of arts tuition, where students are encouraged to work together in their creative pursuits, achieving mutual goals and engaging with practical, kinaesthetic, visual and auditory learning activities.

In addition to *Non-Academic Self-Concept*, children in the arts group outperformed children in the non-creative arts group on the composite measure of *Total Self-Concept* over time. That is, overall, creative arts students' generalised self-concept increased more than non-creative arts students (MD = 5.1 vs. -0.2). The increase in self-concept observed comes at the end of the children's elementary schooling life where it is likely to benefit students who must prepare for the many challenges associated with the impending transition to secondary school (Sirsch, 2003).

The After School Arts program was only offered for two hours once a week throughout one year. If children had been involved in more face-to-face hours with an arts program each week over several years, it is possible that the differences between the NCA and the CA students would have been greater. However, despite the minimal amount of experience in the arts each week, the results of this study do indicate that involvement in the creative arts has some positive, though in this case, small, impact on children's self-concept. Further studies based on similar, but more intensive arts programs could produce more conclusive results.

*NOTE: Flashcards and lesson plans for Wombat Stew may be found on the artsMMADD.com website under *Resources > Integration > Theme Wombat Stew*

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About the Author

Associate Professor Deirdre Russell-Bowie has been lecturing in Creative Arts Education for over thirty years and has authored a prolific number of music and creative arts books and other publications. Her research interests include developing children's self-esteem through the arts and preservice and inservice teachers' attitudes to, and practices in arts education as well as technology mediated arts education. Her PhD thesis investigated the state of music education in NSW and she has also written 32 books and numerous national and internationally published journal articles and conference papers. Her website artsMMADD.com offers teachers free creative arts resources developed from her many resource books. Deirdre has won the prestigious national *Australian Award for University Teaching* as well as several University awards for Teaching, Community Service and Research.

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