Arts Education for Black Male Students in U.S. School and Community-Based Learning Environments: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

In the United States, arts-based learning opportunities are generally included in the curricula of most, if not all, school districts and are available in many community-based settings. Since the inception of the standards-based education movement of the 1980s, scholars, educators, and policy makers have argued over whether the arts have substantial scholastic or experiential benefits for students. A wide body of research has been conducted that indicates arts learning opportunities may carry academic, cognitive, and social emotional benefits for students. Studies have also shown that Black males in U.S. schools have less access to arts learning experiences than their peers. Thus far, much of the research on the impact of arts education has been conducted irrespective of race and gender, but some of the literature does address the potential impact of arts education on the academic performance and school experiences of Black male students in PreK through 12 schools and in non-school community-based environments. This article provides a narrative review of the research on arts education and Black male students in school and community-based learning environments. Findings indicate that arts education has the potential to 1) enhance academic identity development, 2) reduce criminal justice system involvement, 3) strengthen academic engagement, 4) improve reading fluency, 5) provide culturally responsive and relevant learning experiences, and 6) encourage healthy social emotional development for Black male students in U.S. learning contexts.

Keywords: Academic Identity Development, Academic Engagement, Arts Education, Black Males in U.S. School Contexts, Culturally Relevant/Responsive Pedagogy, Social Emotional Development.

Introduction

To address the racial disparities in academic performance between student groups in U.S. schools, researchers and educators are examining practices that improve academic outcomes and enhance school experiences for Black males. Scholars and practitioners are building a body of research that targets approaches that help Black males boost grades, enhance academic skills, strengthen social-emotional skills, graduate from high school and gain admission into post-secondary education programs. The bulk of this research focuses on the traditional content areas of reading, English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (Ellis, 2020; Johnson, 2019; Stinson & Hunter, 2019; Zilanawala, Martin, Noguera, & Mincy, 2018). Other studies and programs emphasize broad-based, holistic efforts that employ culturally relevant alternative

curricular experiences to strengthen relationships between students and educators, improve academic performance and raise students' self-concepts (Chen, 2021; Lee, 2014; King Makers of Oakland, 2021, 2022).

While such studies provide important information, evidence suggests that arts learning experiences may strengthen academic performance and inculcate more fulfilling and enjoyable school experiences for Black males (Hymon, 2020; Siler, 2015; Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015, Walton, 2018; Walton 2020). To this point, few studies have been mounted to analyze this issue, but extant research indicates that school-based arts learning experiences may enhance academic performance for Black males (Jenkins, Jackson, Abdellah & Henderson, 2020; Walton & Wiggan, 2014; Walton, 2018; Walton, 2020). Other studies suggest that arts learning opportunities received in school and community-based settings support improved cultural and racial identity development and enhance school experiences for Black males (Jenkins, 2021; Robinson, 2021; Walton, 2015; Walton, 2020; Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015).

While a few existing studies address connections between arts education and Black males' school outcomes and experiences, there is a much wider body of research that analyzes the effects of arts-based engagement on the general population of students in U.S. schools. A bevy of correlational studies and an increasing number of quasi-experimental and experimental studies provide evidence that learning in and through the arts can improve academic skill development, enhance performance on standardized tests, and strengthen overall school outcomes. (Bégel, Bachrach, Dalla Bella, Laroche, Clement, Riquet, & Dellacherie, 2022; Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Elpus, 2013; Holmes, 2018; Ingram & Reidel, 2003; Jaschke, Honing, & Scherder, 2018; Kisida, Godwin, & Bowen, 2020; Toddhunter-Reid, 2019; Winsler, Gara, Alegrado, Castro, Tavassolie, 2020). School-based music, visual arts, dance, and drama are linked with improved academic, social and cognitive indicators for student within U.S. school contexts (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Elpus, 2014; Farrington, Maurer, McBride, Nagoaka, Puller, Shewfelt, Weiss, & Wright, 2019; Winsler, et al., 2020); A variety of studies demonstrate that learning in and through the arts correlates with improved school performance and may strengthen specific academic skills (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Ludwig, Marklein & Song, 2016; Moore & Linder, 2012; Swaminathan & Schellenberg, 2015). Additionally, focused data analyses indicate that school-based arts participation may strengthen standardized test performance (Americans for the Arts, 2015; College Board, 2014; Gara & Winsler, 2020; Robinson, 2013) and contribute to enhanced cognitive development (Baker, 2013; Childart, 2020; Halverson & Sawyer, 2020; Hetland & Winner, 2004; Kraus & White-Schwoch, 2020). Information gleaned from studies that reveal correlations between arts-based learning, improved student achievement and enhanced cognitive development are critical, because such findings suggest that structured arts learning opportunities could potentially help Black males strengthen academic performance, enjoy more positive school experiences, and garner critical social-emotional skills.

Arts-based learning is an approach that has the potential to improve educational outcomes for Black males, and warrants more attention from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Historically, racial inequities in educational opportunities are contributing factors to the disparities in academic performance that exist between Black males and their counterparts from other racial and ethnic groups (Asari, Mardani, Maleki, Boyce, & Bazargan, 2021; Bushnell, 2021; Hargrave, Tyler, Thompson, & Danner, 2016). Racialized instructional and administrative practices

(Pearman II, Curran, Fisher, & Gardella, 2019; Schott Foundation, 2015), inequitable access to highly qualified teachers (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Clifton, 2023; Mehrotra, Morgan, & Socol, 2021) biased disciplinary approaches (Liu, Hayes, & Gershenson, 2024; Shi & Zhu, 2022), and disproportionately high special education placement patterns (Harry & Klingner, 2022) engender negative school experiences and hamper academic achievement among Black males. It is essential that school-based performing arts teaching and learning experiences be thoroughly vetted as potentially effective strategies for improving academic outcomes and enhancing school experiences for Black males in U.S. PreK-12 schools and community learning environments.

The narrative literature review encapsulated here provides an examination of research that addresses the potential benefits of using arts-based methodologies to teach Black males in U.S. K-12 school settings. By examining whether arts-based instructional approaches improve academic outcomes and school experiences for Black males, this article seeks to provide researchers, practitioners, and policy makers with greater depth of knowledge about arts-based strategies and practices that can be implemented to improve outcomes, enhance learning experiences, and build critical social emotional skills for Black males. Additionally, this article will offer insights that may enable educators to select strategies and practices that are effective for teaching Black males in specific grade ranges and content areas.

Methods

This narrative review of the literature seeks to fill in gaps in the body of literature on the potential impact arts education has on the academic achievement, school experiences and social emotional development of Black male students in schools and community-based learning environments. For our purposes, the term "arts education" refers to the four areas in which students are most likely to experience arts education in school and community contexts: dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts. The question that guides this review is "What does the existing body of scholarship suggest about the academic and social-emotional impact learning in and through the arts may have on Black males?" To conduct this literature review, the researcher scoured scholarly databases for articles, book chapters, doctoral theses and books that identify and analyze arts education experiences designed for or involving Black male students in U.S. school and community-based settings. The data bases accessed include Google Scholar, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database, Discover@GeorgiaSouthernUniversity, the library database at the researcher's home institution, ILLiad (Interlibrary Loan Internet Accessible Database), JSTOR digital library, PubMed.gov and EBSCO Host. Additionally, generalized internet databases were used to obtain material, including Google, Bing, and Yahoo.

Creativity and flexibility in the selection and use of search terms was required. Initially, the researcher used terms that provided for a more generalized search for scholarship on the impact of arts education experiences and academic and social emotional outcomes for Black males. To maximize access to studies that accurately address the research question, the terms "Black" and "African American" were employed during the search process, and the following search terms were used: "arts education and African American males", "arts education and Black males", "African American males and arts education" and "Black males and arts education". Once these terms began producing fewer results, the researcher used search terms that targeted African American male student involvement in specific areas of arts education. Examples include "drama education and African American males", "Black males in theatre education programs", "Black

males and music education", "African American males in dance education initiatives", dance education and Black males", "visual arts education and African American males" and "Black males in visual arts education programs.   This list of terms was used during the search process to help ensure that the author was able to identify as many studies as possible that contain scholarship on arts education and Black males in U.S. schools and community-oriented learning environments. As a result, the researcher accessed an appropriate body of peer reviewed documents that specifically address the effects of arts-based learning experiences on Black males.

As the researcher attained material that matched the aim and scope of the article, he arranged it into a matrix that enabled him to organize and evaluate the materials for information that would be used to report results of the study. In the matrix he identified the title, author, year of publication, type of study, publication type, abstract and summary of the results. Using a matrix proved to be an effective tool for organizing and characterizing material for this study.

Findings

The researcher identified 22 studies that explored the impact of arts learning experiences on Black male students. Overall, there are 13 qualitative studies, three quantitative studies, one mixed methods study, three conceptual explorations, one autoethnography, and one experiential account. In terms of areas of artistic engagement, nine studies dealt specifically with music education, six studies addressed the performing arts in general, four studies targeted theatre-based education initiatives, three explored Black male engagement in the visual arts, and one study examined Black male involvement in dance education programs.

An analysis of the scholarly resources identified in this study reveal six major themes on the impact of arts education on Black males in U.S. school and community learning environments:

- School-based arts education and academic identity and skill development among Black males.
- Arts learning to mitigate the impact of criminal justice system involvement among Black males.
- Arts education and enhanced academic engagement among Black male students.
- Readers' theatre and improved reading fluency skills among Black male students.
- Arts education as culturally relevant and responsive educational experiences for Black male students.
- Arts education and the social-emotional well-being of Black male students

Discussion of Results and Findings

Arts Education and Academic Identity and Skill Development for Black Males

This review of the literature identified several studies that demonstrate positive correlations between arts-based learning experiences and improved academic skill and identity development for Black male students (Hymon, 2020, Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015; Walton, 2018; Walton, 2020). In the studies associated with this theme, students who received standards-based instruction in the performing arts were observed to or reported experiencing improvements in academic performance in at least one academic content or skill area. In a non-experimental quantitative study, Thomas (2011) examined the effects of participating in musical performing arts ensembles

by comparing the grades and standardized assessment scores of Black male 8th grade students. The researcher identified and observed the arts engagement levels of 112 Black male students who participated in school-based band, orchestra and choral ensembles and used t-tests and regression analyses to compare their performance on standardized math and English language arts tests with those of Black male students who had no school-based musical engagement. The researcher discovered that there was a strong correlation between music ensemble participation and academic achievement (Thomas, 2011). Additionally, her study revealed that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who had the experience of participating in a school-based musical ensemble performed better than students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who did not have school-based musical ensemble experiences (Thomas, 2011). Moreover, the results of this study revealed no appreciable differences in standardized test performance between students who participated in choral ensembles and students who participated in the instrumental musical ensembles (Thomas, 2011).

In alignment with this theme, Walton (2015, 2018, 2020) provides evidence from case study research that demonstrates arts-based learning experiences can enhance academic skill development and improve overall school experiences for Black males. Based on his research, Black males who attended a performing arts oriented high school and received training in theatre, dance, and choral music, reported that they believed their involvement in performing arts classes, performances and extracurricular activities induced improvements in reading, writing, and overall academic performance (Walton, 2015; Walton, 2018; Walton, 2020). Additionally, data from these studies indicated that participants experienced positive student-teacher relationships and felt a sense of safety within the school environment (Walton, 2015; Walton, 2018; Walton, 2020). Moreover, most participants in these studies expressed the belief that the instruction and support they received at their arts-based high school provided a pathway for them to attend college and complete their undergraduate degree programs (Walton, 2015; Walton, 2018; Walton, 2020).

Hymon's (2020) qualitative case study reveals positive correlations between school-based arts learning opportunities and school success. An analysis of interview and observational data provided by thirteen Black males in a high school choral music ensemble offers evidence that the academic instruction and social support students received contributed to their academic success in several ways: it created a student community that provided a safe haven for them, which freed them up to be their authentic selves, and, in turn, supported their overall school success (Hymon, 2020). Several participants also reported that this experience encouraged them to pursue post-secondary education and all participants noted that their choral music ensemble teacher created a positive learning environment that contributed to their academic success (Hymon, 2020). Additionally, participating in choral music ensemble helped them develop prosocial behaviors that they applied in their academic classes. Some participants also reported choral music influenced their future aspirations by encouraging them to develop and execute plans to pursue post-secondary education. Moreover, all participants expressed that their choral music instructor contributed to their school success. Engagement in the learning process and a positive relationship with the choral music ensemble teacher enhanced their overall school experiences (Hymon, 2020).

Arts Learning Mitigate the Impact of Criminal Justice System Involvement Among Black Male Students

A second theme that emerged concerns the use of arts-based learning and engagement practices to mitigate factors that contribute to disproportionate Black male involvement in the criminal justice system. Several scholarly works were uncovered that describe studies that use arts-based frameworks as crime prevention initiatives or that support improved academic performance and/or social-emotional development of Black males in criminal justice-based educational settings. Research on this theme is important because it may help scholars and practitioners identify arts-infused strategies that can help Black males develop decision making skills that can prevent them from engaging in activities that lead to arrest and imprisonment, or that can help those who are or have been incarcerated strengthen their academic skills and enhance critical social emotional skills that will help them attain gainful employment, continue their educations and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. It is well known from the existing body of scholarship, that discriminatory disciplinary practices in U.S. schools contribute to higher rates of incarceration for Black males, students of color, and students with disabilities (Jacobs, Brown, Washington, O'Connor, & Lundin, 2022: Welch, Lehmann, Chouhy, & Chiricos, 2022). This is known as the school-to-prison pipeline, a phenomenon in which the disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of Black, Hispanic, and Native American boys and students with disabilities induces negative school outcomes that engender higher juvenile and adult incarcerations rates (Keyes, 2022; Morgan, 2021; Nance & Heise, 2022). Research on arts-based teaching and learning in carceral settings may reveal practices that can improve outcomes for students who attend schools within the criminal justice system, or who's school and community experiences may put them at risk for arrest and incarceration.

In a qualitative case study conducted by Bangayan-Manera (2019), the researchers used an educational resilience framework to examine the ways in which an arts-based program implemented at an alternative school for formerly incarcerated young people encourages academic and social emotional development. Using interview and observation data obtained from school personnel and formerly incarcerated Black male students, results of this study suggest that using arts-based learning experiences encouraged students to build caring relationships with peers and school personnel. Researchers also found that the implementation of instructional practices that integrate music and poetry offer more meaningful opportunities for student participation, and appear to enhance motivation, improve academic self-sufficiency, and serve to decrease psychological and emotional distress. Findings from this study provide insights into how using arts-based practices in a school setting for formerly incarcerated young Black males can encourage healthier development and academic achievement (Lea III, Manorni, & Jones, 2019).

An autoethnographic study exploring a Black male educator's experiences providing culturally responsive music instruction to a group of predominantly Black males in a juvenile detention facility provides more evidence of the potential benefits of arts-based learning for Black male students in carceral educational settings. In this study, Thompson (2015) provided instrumental music instruction for two years at a Chicago-based juvenile detention center and examined how his students learned about diverse music forms. The researcher collected qualitative data that examined students' experiences achieving musical success, validating cultural competence, and developing critical consciousness. Data analyses revealed student growth in all three areas. In terms of academic success, students demonstrated refinement in their ability to distinguish timbres and sounds, and showed growth in arts making, arts literacy and in the employment of interpretive and evaluative skills. Students exhibited cultural competence by expressing a strong preference for hip-hop, by effectively using sampling to create new music, and

by modeling high-level aesthetic appreciation skills. For critical consciousness, consistent exposure to socially conscious hip-hop led students to develop a greater appreciation of socially and politically themed hip-hop music.

Horn (2017) provides an account of her experiences as co-facilitator of a performance project in which Black male youth created an original, interactive applied theatre piece performed for the police, to explore police and civilian dynamics in the U.S. during the Black Lives Matter movement. The author used a critical race feminist theoretical framework to deconstruct the shifting dynamics of power and visibility that transpired between the police and the Black male students. The researcher analyzed the hypervisibility of Black males by law enforcement officers and examined her own hypervisibility as a white female who oversaw a project involving Black male students. Through discussions and workshops with the students and their teacher, she developed a greater appreciation of the complex nature of Black male identity in a white, patriarchal society. Observations from this study reveal that Black males in educational systems face stereotypes that lead them to experience feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility. Academically Black males may feel invisible, often labeled as low achievers and lacking potential. They are overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in AP and gifted classes. In school settings, Black males experience hypervisibility regarding their behavior. Biases towards Black males as behavioral problems often lead them to be suspended and expelled at higher rates than their peers in other groups. High rates of exclusionary discipline led to missed instructional time, which impacts academic performance and leads to a lack of motivation to achieve. Both outcomes are major contributing factors to the school-to-prison pipeline. To young Black males, invisibility and hypervisibility are detrimental and can negatively impact their educational and life outcomes. Participating in this study provided participants with additional insights on how the criminal justice system responds to Black males and gave them tools and ideas for navigating through conflicts in school and community-based situations that may lead them to be targeted for arrest or detainment by the police.

In a fourth study, Watson, Washington, & Steptau-Watson (2015) describe a school-based mentoring initiative that used African drumming as the centerpiece for violence and crime reduction. The authors describe the Umoja project, a program designed to improve participants' conflict resolution skills, encourage pro-social relationships, and build positive self-identities. In this program, the social work programs at several institutions in and around Memphis, Tennessee partnered with a gang activity reduction program, families of incarcerated individuals, community-based mentors, and a griot/master drummer to engage Black male students in musical instruction, African drumming, and reflective discussions. For 6 weeks, fifteen middle schoolers and nineteen students from an alternative high school received instruction in African drumming and participated in conversations in which the youth shared their thoughts and feelings on topics jointly decided upon by the participants and their mentors. All the youth who participated met three criteria: 1) They were at risk for or previously exposed to violence, 2) Had a previous history of incarceration or had contact with the criminal justice system, 3) Experienced educational attainment issues, in-school behavior problems, truancy in school attendance and/or current school dropout (p. 84, Watson et al., 2015).

The researchers used a backyard qualitative research design to explore whether an African drumming-based intervention be implemented to reduce community violence among Black males, and to examine if this intervention could be engaging, therapeutic, and fun for students in this

population. In follow-up focus groups with participants and discussions with teachers, administrators and staff members, participants indicated that the mentor relationships helped them learn how to get along with other people, how to communicate their thoughts and feelings with others. At the end of the project the alternative high school site leaders and participants reported that none of the participants committed any new criminal offenses, and the middle school site reports indicated behavioral improvements in which participants were involved in a few non-violent arguments, which was an improvement on their track record of fights and physical altercations. Additionally, program participants found the program fun and enjoyable, especially the drumming circle and public performances. While the findings from this study were positive and suggest improvements in communication, decision-making and conflict resolution skills, the research design did not allow for a causal relationship between the mentoring/African drumming initiative and the outcomes experiences by the participants.

Impact of Arts Education, Academic Engagement, and Black Males

The third theme is the connection between school-based arts learning experiences and academic engagement among Black male students. Academic engagement refers to "the extent and intensity with which students participate in and apply themselves to learning and other school activities, as well as the supportive relationships and structures that exist to support student engagement, (Andres, 2023). Previous and current research shows positive relationships between learning in and through the arts and increased levels of academic engagement (Bowen & Kisida, 2023; Cassada, 2024). Four of the articles in this review provide outlines of studies which demonstrate that there are relatively solid correlations between the use of arts learning strategies and enhanced engagement among Black male students. Studies of arts education and academic engagement for Black male students are important because student engagement is a critical indicator for understanding academic outcomes for students in this population. Academic engagement, or the lack thereof, can have a significant impact on academic outcomes and school experiences. Increased academic engagement is associated with improved attendance, prosocial behavior, and enhanced academic performance. Conversely, diminished academic engagement correlates with higher dropout rates, decreased school attendance, and lower levels of academic performance (Reckmeyer, 2019; Schnitzler, Holzberger, & Seidel, 2021).

In a qualitative case study, Baker (2012), used an arts-based framework to explore how a 9-week visual arts course would impact Black male students' interest and engagement in the arts. The researcher implemented and facilitated a 9-week visual arts course for six 8th grade students who attended a middle school outside of a major city in the southern United States. To collect data the researcher conducted observations in the neighborhood, in the school and in the classroom, interviewed the students, facilitated focus groups, used member checking, arts analyses, and had discussions with the students and the teacher. Findings from this study reveal that students' opinions were equally divided between those who were enthusiastically engaged during the art classes and those who were bored. Students' responses were mediated by several factors, including culture, curriculum, learning context, parental involvement, and students' interests.

In a second article, Kazembe (2014) offers a theoretical, research-based essay that explores the potential for using a Black arts inquiry approach, based on the Black arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The author argues that this may be a more impactful pedagogical approach for teaching

and engaging Black males in schools and other educational settings. Kazembe uses his experience as a teaching artist and his knowledge of Black arts pedagogy to propose approaches to teaching Black males that a) resist dominant psycho-cultural and ideological models, b) develop approaches that effectively use Black cultural knowledge, c) design curricula to more effectively engage the artistic and intellectual sensibilities of Black males, and d) and to incorporate the use of an apprenticeship tradition to enhance Black males' learning experiences. As a theoretical proposition and not a formal study, this article has no actual findings to report.

A third study used Black male students' experiences in an urban school setting to explore the impact a visual arts course had on their academic engagement. Siler (2015) conducted a case study to examine how art classes influenced academic engagement and impacted the quality of learning experiences for 5 Black male 8th grade students at an urban public middle school in Philadelphia. The researcher used participant interviews and classroom observations as the primary data collection sources and included teacher interviews for additional context. Responses to questions and observational data revealed that participants viewed their art class as a more positive and enjoyable learning environment because they had fewer behavioral and academic restrictions than in their academic classes and they experienced a greater sense of freedom and comradeship in contrast with their academic classes. Additionally, participants reported enjoying the art class more than their academic classes because they had the latitude to choose projects, experiment with various artistic techniques, and explore new ideas. They also shared their appreciation for being able to express themselves through their work in art class, as opposed to just taking in information, as they did in their academic classes. The findings of this study also suggest that the art classroom can be a space in which Black male students can explore their sense of self in ways that are developmentally appropriate. All participants experienced the art classroom as a place where they could "express themselves" or "show who they were". For this study, student engagement was determined through constructivist concepts of cognitive and emotional engagement from the point of view of students in a specific educational environment. Based on this framework, first-person, student reported engagement data was used to inform the study. Data from this study reveals that they attributed their engagement in art class to their ability to express themselves openly with their peers.

In a fourth study, researchers Owens, Bradfield & Frew (2022) examined the used of music technology to engage Black boys. The researchers used constructivist epistemology to design a case study examining students' engagement in the creation of a music playlist as a play therapy activity in a school-based social work setting. To date, most of the research on music-based social work interventions focus on listening to, writing, and performing music. This study used a novel approach by exploring how music-based technologies can be used in play therapy settings to enhance engagement with Black boys. Findings from this study identify five effective strategies for engagement: (a) engaging Black students in youth-led practices, (b) creating playlists, (c) listening to music, (d) building rapport, and (e) expressing emotion. Findings also suggest that using technology to create a music playlist is a practice that can be used to support children in their efforts to cope with past experiences and connect with current emotions. Additionally, the playlists can become resources students use to activate social skills and as referents therapists can use to help students identify and use these social skills in future situations. Moreover, the results of this study indicate that music-based activities should go beyond the more traditional approaches of listening to, writing, and performing music and incorporating the use of music technology, such as streaming services, to engage students.

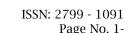**Readers' Theatre and Black Males' Reading Skill Development**

A fourth theme concerns the relationship between theatre-based instructional practices and reading skill development among Black males. Two studies were identified that specifically examine the use of readers' theatre to improve reading skills among Black male students in K-12 school settings. Both address a specific theatre-based instructional practice that has potential benefits for improving reading comprehension and fluency skills for Black male students. Readers' Theatre is described as a style of theatre in which the performers use narrative scripts and vocal inflections to tell and comprehend a story (Willcutt, 2007). Readers' theatre is an important tool for developing reading fluency skills because it allows students to reread scripts until they acquire fluency with words, and this includes words they struggled with previously. With the opportunity to repeatedly read a script, students acquire assurance in their ability to express themselves and gain the determination to read more challenging material.

Walton and Wiggan (2014) propose using readers' theatre to enhance Black male students' reading skills. The authors address data that demonstrates African American males often have reading skills that are below their peers in other groups, due largely to disparities in access to high quality instruction and differences in the way they are treated, academically and administratively, in educational settings. The authors explore the topic by defining and describing Readers' Theatre as an instructional practice and by examining research on the impact Readers' Theatre instruction has on students' reading decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills. Based on their findings they propose using Readers' Theatre as an effective and engaging instructional practice that can be employed to strengthen Black male students' reading skills in K-12 school settings.

In a second study, Jenkins, Jackson, Abdellah and Henderson (2020) conduct a quantitative study examining the impact of a readers' theatre-based intervention on the reading fluency skills of a group of 12 Black male students who have learning and behavioral challenges. Using a one group pretest-posttest design and a frequency count to collect data on reading fluency errors, the researchers used readers' theatre scripts with students as a pre-reading activity to explore this strategy's usefulness in helping participants improve their reading fluency skills. The findings from this study lend credence to the assertions made by Walton and Wiggan in the aforementioned study. Data obtained from a paired sample t-test showed that participants demonstrated a statistically significant decrease in reading fluency errors after the treatment was administered. Additionally, initially reluctant readers became more active in the reading process, and participants offered fewer negative comments about their peers who struggled with reading and were more likely to help them. Also, subjects improved their overall reading comprehension and enhanced their ability to sequence events. Moreover, the researchers found that readers' theatre participation served as a catalyst for building relationships among participants.

The studies that comprise this theme are of particular interest because they offer a potential pathway for improving reading skills among Black male students. According to assessment data obtained from the most recent administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2022), fewer African American 4th and 8th graders are proficient in reading comprehension than their peers in all other racial and ethnic groups, except for Native American students. Additionally, no state recorded more than 19% of Black males performing proficiently in reading in 2018, and the 2019 NAEP revealed that, among 12th grade Black boys, only 6% performed at proficiency and 1% were advanced in reading comprehension. While these statistics are alarming,

it must be acknowledged that Black males come from a literate tradition. Black males have been reading, writing, and using language for their personal and collective advancement for more than four centuries (Tatum, Johnson, & McMillon, 2021). The persistent underperformance of Black males in literacy should be closely examined. Evidence of promising practices for improving Black males reading skills must be highlighted and given attention. Hence, a separate theme for literature on using readers' theatre to enhance Black males' reading skills is established here.

Arts Education and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy for Black Male Students

This review of the literature reveals that arts education can serve as a strong potential conduit for incorporating culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009) and culturally responsive (Gay, 2018) pedagogy for Black male students. Culturally relevant pedagogy challenges teachers to examine student-teacher relationships, the curriculum, schooling, and society in general. The three tenets that support culturally relevant teaching are academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mensah, 2021). Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) offers a wider understanding that emphasizes the multiculturalism found in U.S. schools and maintains that a different model of teaching and learning is necessary to improve the academic achievement of underperforming students from diverse backgrounds. Culturally responsive teaching is described as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 36). When implemented effectively, culturally relevant and responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory.

This review of the literature reveals three studies that explore arts education through the lenses of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. Robinson (2021) conducted a qualitative case study to analyze the impact culturally relevant pedagogy had on the learning experiences and outcomes of five 11th and 12th grade Black male high school choral students who had been in the researcher's class since their freshman and sophomore years. The researcher conducted interviews with all five participants and used qualitative inquiry to analyze their responses. Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as a theoretical framework to guide his examination, the author's analysis indicates that CRP had a significant impact on their desire to continue participating in chorus. Emergent themes from the study reveal that critical aspects of CRP have been instrumental in helping students persist in choral arts and have positive and affirming educational experiences. Excavated themes include identity development, equity, social justice excellence, developmental practices, teaching the whole child, relationship building, and teacher-student relationships.

In a second study, Jenkins (2021) conducted a mixed methods examination of how the use of hip-hop pedagogy, and the number of years of teaching experience had on the relationship between teachers and the Black boys they serve in their classrooms. The researcher administered a Likert scale survey to determine the quality of the relationships between teachers and the Black boys they teach in 8th grade ELA classrooms across four school districts in the southeast U.S. Teachers who used Flocabulary, a prepackaged curriculum that uses hip-hop music/rapping to teach all four major subjects (language arts, math, social studies and science) and life skills, vocabulary and current events. The teachers in the study who used Flocabulary had more positive and impactful relationships with their Black male students than those who did not. This is critical information, as Black boys are cited in the literature as the most underserved, suspended and

expelled subgroup in U.S. public schools. Research indicates that positive teacher-student relationships promote improved academic and behavioral outcomes. The author uses his findings to argue that hip-hop pedagogy should be used by teachers because it can have a positive impact on teacher relationships with Black boys. Building positive and culturally relevant connections with students is a major tenet of Culturally Relevant and Responsive pedagogy.

In keeping with this theme, Bright (2018) conducts an arts-based qualitative analysis of how Black male students in schools and Black males in the music industry navigate the tendencies of both systems to restrain their creative voices. This research project compares the similarities and differences in how Black males in school and music industry settings seek to authentically express their voice and apply creative agency in commodifying their talents and navigating their educational experiences. This study is unique in that it examines the Black male experience and resistance in schools and the music industry, to determine whether there are similarities in how they navigate efforts to marginalize them in both spaces. The researcher interviewed six Black males: three students and three professional recording artists and employed a Critical Race Theory framework targeting two of its primary components, "whiteness as property" and "interest convergence", in conjunction with an arts-based methodology that utilized a fugue of elements that allowed for more creative collection and analysis of data. Findings revealed that Black males in both spaces addressed and worked through their experiences with racism along four themes. This study is particularly culturally relevant in its exploration of Black male sociopolitical and cultural consciousness in school and music industry settings.

In a fourth study, Walton & Wiggan (2010), explore using arts education as a culturally relevant approach to reversing the disproportionate placement of Black males into special education programs. The authors address the historic denial of access to high quality education Black males have experienced throughout U.S. history and examine several specific structural conditions that have contributed to the disparities in educational attainment they demonstrate, in comparison with Asian American and white counterparts.

As a prescription, the researchers argue that the full implementation of arts education programs into the curriculum serves as a promising part of the solution. They maintain that arts education programs have potential to improve academic engagement and educational outcomes for Black males because arts-based practices effectively address their learning styles, multiple intelligences, and cognitive needs. To support their argument, they cite multiple studies which suggest that school-based arts learning experiences, particularly in music and dance, can enhance students' overall cognitive development, skills in mathematics, and early literacy (Harris, 1998; Posner & Patoine, 2009; Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, & Kieras, 2008; Spelke & Kinsler, 2007). Additionally, the authors argue that integrating the arts into instruction will help make the curriculum more relevant to the learning preferences and unique cognitive styles of Black male students. This study fills a gap in the literature by proposing the use of arts-based instruction as a culturally relevant approach to mollifying the overrepresentation of Black students into special education programs.

Arts Education and the Social Emotional Well-Being of Black Male Students

A sixth theme that has emerged from this review of the literature involves research that explores the impact of arts education on the social-emotional well-being of Black male students. The two studies that represent this theme examine the impact arts learning opportunities have on

critical non-academic skills that help mediate academic achievement and positive school experiences for students. A study by Michel & Farell (1973) is noteworthy for several reasons. Based on this review, it is the first and oldest study to examine the impact of arts education on Black boys in a public-school setting. It is also unique in that it was published about four decades before any other study in this literature review. The title of this study indicates that the researchers harbored a deficit-oriented bias about Black boys in school settings. With that, it must be noted that much of the research produced about Black children in the U.S. prior to the year 2000 was written from deficit-based perspectives. This study occupies a unique space in the research on arts education and Black male students in that it explores potential connections between school-based arts engagement and self-esteem, an area of analysis not addressed in any other scholarship covered here.

In this study, Michel & Farrell (1973) evaluated whether short-term instruction on a musical instrument would affect the self-esteem of fourteen Black boys in grades 4-6 who had been identified with academic and behavioral problems. All the student participants had experienced academic failure and were referred for psychological services for "slow learning", "daydreaming", "bothering other children", and/or "dullness". The specific purpose of this study was to examine whether learning to play the ukelele would strengthen their self-esteem and improve other areas, like attention span.

This experimental study was conducted in two phases. During phase 1 the researchers administered an index to establish self-esteem levels among subjects in experimental and control groups, and their teachers used a ratings scale to evaluate classroom behavior. Experimental group participants were given 15 ukelele lessons for 20-30 minutes and awarded points and candy for good behavior. In phase 2, experimental group subjects were given 5 additional ukelele lessons in combination with extra performing arts instruction, including singing, music listening, and dancing. Sessions were scheduled between two 2-week long recorded behavioral observations during pre-and-post-observation periods.

After phase 1, no significant differences in self-esteem were identified, but behavioral improvements were noted for students in the experimental group. Additionally, most experimental group members kept playing their ukeleles, and four continued their musical engagement by joining junior high school band programs. After phase 2 there was no significant difference in time on task for experimental group members, but time on task during the 5 ukelele lessons increased by 10%.

The results of this study do not indicate a connection between music and arts training and self-esteem development, but they do infer a potential relationship between learning to play an instrument, improved behavior and increased time on task. The findings show that more research is warranted, particularly on correlations between arts learning experiences and improved time on task for Black male students.

In a second study, Partridge-Butler (2021) explored the impact of performing arts education on the social-emotional well-being of Black male students. The researcher used Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985) as a framework for examining the impact that theatre and dance arts experiences have on the social and emotional skill development of four Black males. Additionally, this study explored how the participants grappled with oppression and trauma. Theatre of the Oppressed is a framework for using theatre to liberate people from oppressive beliefs and social

conditions and is used to confront racism, economic inequality, crime, and violence. Theatre of the Oppressed is heavily influenced by the emancipatory work of theorist and activist Paulo Freire (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1968). Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to use drama as a source for helping people understand social and personal problems and take action against systems that marginalize them (Boal, 1995).

Partridge-Butler (2021) conducted a narrative inquiry of the experiences of four Black males with prior school and community-based experiences in theatre and dance and who agreed to participate in Theatre of the Oppressed training. Data collection strategies included interviews, storytelling, and photo elicitation to gather insights, information and perspectives from the subjects regarding their experiences with Theatre of the Oppressed methodologies. Interviews and stories were collected virtually, and photos were attained electronically. Narrative and thematic analyses practices were used to analyze the data. All participants stated that the arts helped them develop critical social emotional skills that they would not have acquired in any other setting, and each subject shared the belief that his participation in the arts saved his life. Respondents reported that their participation in the performing arts helped them develop self-esteem and self-confidence, strengthened their ability to cope with trauma and oppression, enhanced their personal and professional communication skills, and made them more resilient. Additionally, participants indicated that Theatre of the Oppressed's emphasis on making emotional connections with the characters they portrayed had a residual benefit in that it helped them make better emotional connections with people in non-artistic, professional and personal life situations. Moreover, all four respondents believed that their Theatre of the Oppressed training and experiences helped them improvise, or create a response, on the spot with little or no preparation, in dramatic and comedic situations. They all gave examples of how they used improvisation skills almost daily to work through difficult situations at home, at work, and in their communities.

Stand-Alone Study on Arts Education and Black Male Students

There is one study in this review that does not align with the six identified themes, but it is included because it is critical to our understanding of the history of the research on arts education and Black male students. Additionally, it explores contours of the relationship between school-based visual arts learning experiences, academic outcomes and school experiences of Black males that are often ignored.

In this study, Balliro (2016) conducted a qualitative exploration of the educational experiences of six Black male artists in the eastern United States. The researcher employed an antideficit approach to directly challenge the legacy of deficit-oriented social science research, which has been weaponized to create an image of Black males as an academically deficient and scholastically underachieving subgroup of the population of students in U.S. public schools. To conduct this study the researcher used field reflections, visual images, and transcribed interviews to create narrative retellings of the educational and artistic experiences of her subjects. The narratives culled from this study illuminate the academic accomplishments of the participating artists and addresses a gap in the literature highlighting the experiences of Black male visual artists. Findings from this study uncover six themes: the uniqueness of the meaning of schooling, Black male identity formation, lack of access to satisfactory public schooling, differences in access to high quality, specialized arts instruction, the need for more programs that support the artistic talents and aspirations of Black males, and anti-deficit narratives for Black male artists.

Discussion and Conclusion

This review demonstrates the dearth of scholarship on the connections between arts education and school outcomes for Black male students. In just over five decades, 22 studies have been done on this topic. This finding alone demonstrates that more research on the effects of arts learning on Black males should be conducted. The studies explored here indicate that arts education has the potential to strengthen school performance, enhance academic engagement, improve school experiences and enhance social emotional outcomes for Black males in U.S. public school settings and community learning spaces. Thus, arts education initiatives should be seriously considered as an essential part of efforts to create more productive, meaningful, and relevant learning experiences for Black male students in U.S. schools and community-based settings.

Several studies included in this review reveal that arts learning may be a potent factor in strengthening academic engagement for Black males in educational settings (Hymon, 2020; Lea III, Mahlorni, & Jones, 2019; Michel & Farrell, 1973; Owens, Bradfield, & Frew, 2022; Siler, 2015; Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015, 2018, 2020). Strategies and practices that improve engagement for Black male students warrant our attention because higher levels of academic engagement are associated with increased attendance, improved academic performance, and higher rates of high school completion/graduation. If scholarship reveals that arts education can enhance Black male student engagement, then it would be well worth it for teachers, administrators, counselors, and practitioners to implement arts education programs as a means for improving outcomes for Black male students. An area for further research would be studies that explore whether enhanced engagement achieved in arts learning experiences carry over to students' academic classes. If enhanced engagement achieved in arts-based classes helps students improve motivation and engagement in the primary academic content areas of mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies, then greater interest in and support for arts-based teaching and learning would make sense.

This review also provides anecdotal proof that structured and relevant arts learning experiences can enhance Black male students' relationships with their teachers. Over half of the studies included in this review indicated that opportunities to learn in and through the arts helped forge stronger connections between Black male students and their teachers. Evidence of such relationships were presented in various ways. Findings from several studies suggest that Black male students developed improved relationships with their teachers because their teachers provided them with the individualized support necessary for them to grow artistically, academically, and socially (Hyman, 2020; Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015; Walton, 2018; Walton, 2020). In carceral educational settings, arts learning experiences contribute to an environment in which caring relationships between students, teachers, and school personnel developed over time (Lea III, Mahlorni & Jones, 2019). Additionally, individualizing instruction and meeting students where they are serves as an effective way to foster connections with and empower students Owens, Bradfield, & Frew, 2022), and taking time to show students different approaches in arts-based learning situations is appreciated and serves as a catalyst for developing positive teacher-student relationships (Siler, 2015). Moreover, using hiphop pedagogy as an instructional tool for imparting academic skills to Black boys can positively affect their relationships with their teachers (Jenkins, 2021).

This research review shows real promise for understanding how the arts may play a role in boosting academic performance for Black males. Several studies included here reveal findings that indicate arts learning experiences may enhance school performance for Black males. Feedback from interview data indicates that relevant and well-organized arts learning experiences are perceived by participants as having positive effects on their academic achievement (Hymon, 2020; Thomas, 2011; Walton, 2015; Walton, 2018; Walton, 2020). Study respondents attribute this effect to individual support received from teachers, opportunities to engage in meaningful and relevant collaborative learning experiences and applying habits of mind acquired in arts learning settings to succeed in traditional academic classes. Additionally, this review reveals research that indicates specific arts learning strategies, like readers theatre, may help Black males improve their reading skills. Such findings support the relevance of arts education as a means for improving outcomes for Black male students in U.S. schools.

While the kinds of information generated by these studies is important, the types of studies and the methods used are critical for understanding the state of the literature on arts education and Black male students. Over two thirds of the studies documented here are qualitative in nature, and over half of the studies included are doctoral dissertations. The fact that half of the studies cited are dissertations written by doctoral students indicates that there is a need for established scholars with strong research track records to conduct more studies on this topic. More experienced researchers can contribute to the scholarship on the impact of arts education on Black male students by designing studies that explore this issue from a wider variety of perspectives. This will be a necessary step for creating a more thorough and robust body of knowledge on arts learning and Black male students. Additionally, more experienced scholars can enhance our understanding by designing quantitative and mixed methods studies that may help establish causal factors that identify why certain arts education practices affect the academic performance, school experiences and social-emotional development of Black male students.

Based on the existing research, arts education may serve as a potent force for enhancing academic performance and encouraging more positive school and community-based learning experiences for Black male students. More research must be conducted to strengthen arguments for enhancing arts-based learning for Black male students. The information, findings, and conclusions addressed here are designed to serve as a resource for helping scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to become grounded in the research that has been conducted and to develop directions for future research.

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