Artistic Learning and Its Impact on Students' Wellbeing and Social-Emotional Learning Development in Kampala and Arua Districts-Uganda

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Abstract: This study investigated how artistic learning influences students' wellbeing and social-emotional development in schools in Kampala and Arua, Uganda. Using the 4W LIFT model within a wellbeing curriculum, researchers applied qualitative participatory methods with 65 students. Findings showed that activities like drawing, dancing, shading, and painting enhanced communication, confidence, relationships, teamwork, and leadership. Art sessions promoted healing, resilience, inclusion, and growth. Students expressed themselves visually, improving their understanding of new concepts and social connection. The study recommends integrating artistic learning into Uganda's primary and secondary curricula to support students' holistic development.

Keywords*: Artistic learning, Wellbeing, Trauma, Resilience, Social and emotional learning*
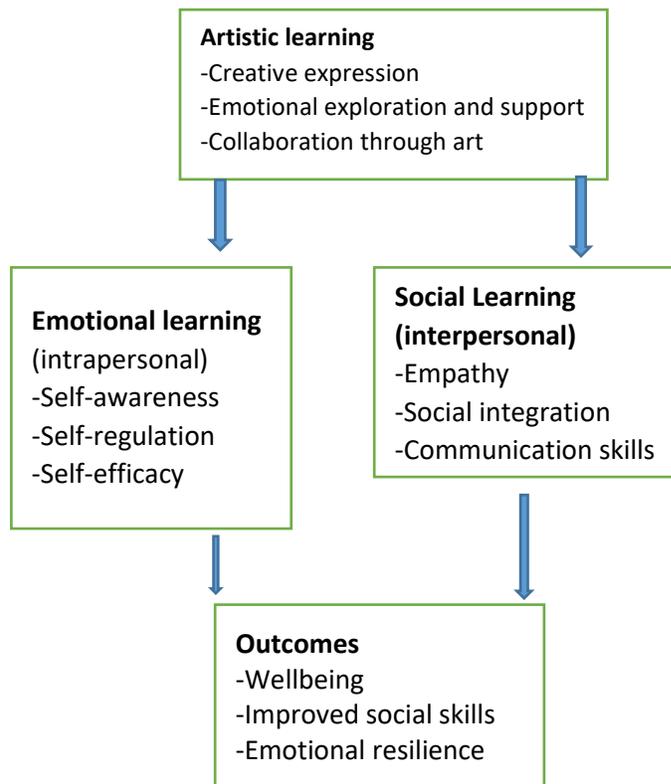
1. Introduction

The global refugee crisis has displaced millions of people, many of whom face significant challenges in accessing quality education and achieving emotional stability. Uganda, which hosts one of the largest refugee populations in Africa, is particularly affected by these issues (Bohnet, & Schmitz-Pranghe, 2019). Students, frequently carrying the psychological wounds from trauma, abuse, and uprooting, need educational interventions that can meet their social-emotional requirements and advance their well-being in addition to traditional academic instruction (Bintliff et al., 2024). Integrating creative disciplines like music, dance, theater, and visual arts into the curriculum is known as artistic learning, and it has proven to be a potent tool for fostering students' social and emotional growth. This article explores the influence of artistic learning on students' wellbeing and social-emotional learning (SEL) in Kampala and Arua districts in Uganda.

Artistic learning is a powerful tool for promoting social-emotional learning as it allows learners to explore and express their emotions, understand and appreciate the perspectives of others and learn how to work together and solve problems collaboratively (Lashley & Halverson, 2021; Wu, 2023). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as "the process through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions". Art has been found to positively impact students' social and emotional learning (SEL), supporting their emotional wellbeing and fostering social integration (Karkou & Glasman, 2004; Russell & Hutzel, 2007). Within the affective domain, engagement in artistic activities enables students to visually express their thoughts and emotions, thereby promoting increased self-confidence, self-awareness and sense of self-efficacy (Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007; Tabor et al. 2023). Art can be therapeutic and healing, something which has been documented for centuries as "Early Greek physicians believed in a close relationship between art, healing and well-being" (Dyra, 2019). Art teachers are not therapists, "however, they can be role models who help learners cope, gain mastery over some life experiences, and make sense of their world" (Ziegler, 2018). Art teachers can assist learners in trying times by understanding how they can react to traumatic events in their lives. Adding art to an SEL program is said to be beneficial because the creative arts offer a great resource for serving as a gateway for students into the learning materials (Dyra, 2019). Dyra indicates that the concept of art breaks down communication barriers, empowers teachers to reach all students regardless of age, sex, race or cultural background. Art can help learners develop a better understanding of who they are as individuals and assist in creating positive relationships. In addition to this, Beinomugisha et al. (2024) notes that when youth are socially disconnected, they are stressed, depressed, or experiencing challenging situations that are related to several issues, such as bullying at school and bad relationships, art can provide a comfortable way for youth to express their feelings to peers and facilitators

There is growing evidence that active participation in the arts can enhance social connectedness, confidence, self-esteem, and improve concentration, emotional development and mental health and wellbeing (Smith, & Jones, 2019; Barron, 2019). Merrell and Gueldner (2010) define emotional learning as intrapersonal, and social learning as interpersonal. Emotional learning includes a concern for fostering self-awareness or self-knowledge, especially regarding one's own emotions and reflective thoughts on those emotions. This notion looks at emotional learning as intrapersonal, and social learning as interpersonal. The writers argue that fostering both emotional (intrapersonal) and social (interpersonal) learning is essential for well-rounded personal development. The idea is that understanding one's own emotions allows for better interactions with others, leading to more successful functioning and personal wellbeing. This framework is particularly useful in education and trauma recovery, where promoting self-awareness and emotional intelligence is critical for students 'overall growth and their ability to connect with others.

Artistic learning
-Creative expression
-Emotional exploration and support
-Collaboration through art

Emotional learning
(intrapersonal)
-Self-awareness
-Self-regulation
-Self-efficacy

Social Learning (interpersonal)
-Empathy
-Social integration
-Communication skills

Outcomes
-Wellbeing
-Improved social skills
-Emotional resilience

Art integration and art therapy help develop social emotional skills in students and promote positive culture in which students can learn (Ziegler, 2018). Art is a well-established medium to address the social and emotional needs of students; however, it is not being utilized in schools at the level that would make the kind of difference schools are seeking (Regev et al., 2015). Art allows for more areas of the brain to be developed, as there are certain regions that only respond to music and art, which cultivates imagination, creativity, increased social skills and lower dropouts (Melnick et al., 2011). Different cultures have different views on social emotional learning, and art can lead to more open communication and the breaking down of cultural stigma (Melnick et al., 2011). Art therapy has been shown to address trauma in ways that are culturally relevant and socially inclusive. Many art-based curriculum programs such as those demonstrated by Regev et al. (2015) have served as an introductory platform to address trauma, culture and learning disability challenges.

Further, Kremer argues that artistic learning can be a vital contribution to increase social emotional development in learners. Engaging in art allows students to express their feelings and emotions (Kremer, 2020), and art may play a vital role in emotional expression and self-development. Art is the driving force in helping learners develop and maintain love for learning, while increasing their cognition, empathy, creativity and academic skills (Barron, 2019). Both Kremer (2020) and Barron (2019) assert that, with art, students learn to interact with others in ways that are beneficial and to improve participation in their academic development. Art plays a crucial role in the development of youth, as it has been shown to improve math and reading scores, and to elevate verbal, cognitive and spatial reasoning (Hauser, 2018). Art supports the entire school curriculum and helps students to improve in their academic and social emotional development (Melnick et al., 2011).

Social emotional learning is key to students being successful in their academic careers and in their lives (Zins & Elias, 2007). SEL has five social emotional competencies that include i) *self-awareness, ii) social-awareness, iii) responsible decision making iv) self-management and v) relationship skills.* These competences are best taught in a caring, supporting and well managed learning environment (Zins & Elias, 2007). Self-awareness is described as the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts and values and to understand how they influence one's behaviors (Borowski, 2019). Social awareness encompasses empathy, the ability to appreciate diversity and having respect for others. Further, self-

management is the ability to successfully regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. The skills needed for self-management include impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal setting, and organization skills which are key to personal wellbeing (Borowski, 2019). Relationship skills are described as the ability to establish and maintain relationships with diverse individuals and groups. Communication, social engagement, relationship building and teamwork are key to wellbeing and have a positive impact on academic learning. Relationship skills include the ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, negotiate conflict constructively, resist inappropriate social pressure, and seek help when needed (Borowski, 2019). Together, these skills and attitudes can give students motivation to succeed, believe in themselves and their success, communicate well with teachers and peers, and overcome obstacles, while promoting a greater attachment to school and academics (Zins et al., 2004).

1.1 Problem statement

This topic reveals a paucity of evidence within the area of the integration of art education on improved learners' wellbeing. In Uganda, like other developing countries, many students face emotional and social challenges that affect their overall well-being and learning experiences. Traditional educational approaches often overlook the importance of addressing these emotional and social needs. Even though there is growing evidence that artistic learning can play a critical role in fostering social and emotional development, the impact on students' wellbeing remains underexplored in East African literature. This study seeks to investigate how artistic learning influences students' wellbeing, social and emotional learning in Kampala and Arua Districts.

1.2 Objective of the study

The objective of this study was to examine the impact of artistic learning on students' wellbeing and social and emotional learning in Kampala and Arua Districts-Uganda.

2.Literature Review

Barron (2019), emphasizes the role of art in supporting learners' emotional expression and overall wellbeing, noting that learners' personal reflections on their feelings are crucial indicators of their mental health and ability to learn and socialize. Art learning fosters emotional intelligence, classroom autonomy, compassion and stronger teacher-student-peer relationships. Ziegler (2018) also describes expressive arts as therapeutic, highlighting their impact on social-emotional learning.

Barron (2019) further notes that since 2003, there have been calls to incorporate teaching methods that enhance social and emotional learning (SEL) into everyday school practice. The United Kingdom's Department of Education and Skills (DfES) report 'Every Child Matters' (2003), recommended strengthening emotional and social competences alongside academic development. It emphasized early SEL education, warm student-teacher relationships, and a whole-school approach that includes supporting teachers and learners' emotional wellbeing. In the U.S., Mackin, & Shifre (2023) report that 93% of Americans valued art as essential in education, though funding cuts have led to decreased test scores and increased behavioral issues (Melnick et al., 2011).

Studies conducted among university students in China have shown that participation in artistic activities enhances self-efficacy, and psychological wellbeing by fostering positive psychological capital, including resilience and self-confidence (Guo, 2024; Zhao et al., 2020). Moreover, the study showed that positive psychological capital played a mediating role, emphasizing how the cultivation of self-confidence and resilience through artistic engagement channels the positive influence on self-efficacy, underscoring the holistic impact on psychological wellbeing. Jin & Ye (2022) assert that art education aids socialization, critical thinking, value formation and appreciation of diverse cultures. Guo (2024) adds that art helps students develop moral values and broader perspectives, contributing to emotional and psychological growth.

Guo (2024) and Maithreyi (2023) argue that arts education, once seen as extracurricular, is now considered vital for holistic development, with aesthetic experiences positively influencing wellbeing. Wu et al. (2020) affirm that artistic pursuits improve mental health and academic performance. Creative activities can influence positive psychological capital that is needed to improve mental health, which in turn contributes to their improved academic performance

A study conducted by Jin & Ye (2022) asserts that for students who are marginalized, visual arts activities like painting and sculpting enhance creativity, thinking and emotional growth. They cite King and Pope, who link creativity with psychological traits such as autonomy and openness, though some creative individuals may experience anxiety or depression. As a result, recent Chinese education reforms promote balanced education through art and whole-person development.

Finally, Bux (2022), Todd et al. (2017), and Thomson et al. (2018) confirm the therapeutic benefits of art across age

groups and vulnerable populations. Kuttner (2020) underscores the interdisciplinary nature of art and its roles in preparing learners for democratic participation, asserting that art education positively influences students' psychological wellbeing.

3.Methodology

Participants were recruited from a youth club called *The Wellbeing Club,* a 40-hour arts and mindfulness curriculum developed and initially researched in the U.S. to support adolescent wellbeing (Bintliff, 2019). The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Africa Education and Leadership Initiative (Africa ELI) partnered with the University of California San Diego to facilitate two clubs, one in Kampala supporting low-income urban learners and one school in Arua supporting refugee learners. Research methods were qualitative and participatory in nature. Participatory research methods were selected as the primary methods because engaging with adolescents and students' experiences and perspectives is beneficial from an analytical as well as ethical perspective, as children are usually the best source of information on their daily activities (Salekin et al., 2018). They can provide reliable information on other aspects of their lives. Research with children in developing countries using participatory approaches has been promoted for more than decade as a powerful tool for exploring children's diverse perspectives on specific issues that reflect their particular social position. These studies are frequently planned to give voice to vulnerable and otherwise invisible groups (Camfield et al., 2009). Participatory methods included interviews, field notes, engagements with art, photographs of artistic works, as well as the completion of open-ended survey questions.

Every module of the 11 modules in the wellbeing curriculum had a section of artistic learning. Participants were guided to demonstrate, draw or act out module content covered/taught in every module. Students were provided with newspapers, magazines, cutouts, pens, pencils, colored pencils, paint and colored papers for drawing whatever resonates with them or what they understood most in each particular module. The most exciting moments for students were the artistic learning sessions which always took more time than anticipated as youth enjoyed the experience and took great care with their work. It was in these sessions that participants demonstrated their understanding, feelings, and emotions.

In addition, the curriculum has a separate module on self-portrait and identity. In this module/chapter/topic participants were guided by an artist-mentor in the local community, who led them through lessons on how to hold a pencil, mix colors, and determine which color blends with what for the color needed to match each participant's preference. By the end of the sessions, students had magnificent drawings of their faces, identifying and portraying their facial features, values, and hobbies.

The first set of twenty-five youth were from Kamwokya in Kampala, the second set of forty youth were from Arua district, Uganda. They were affiliated with the Africa Education & Leadership Initiative, a non-governmental organization serving youth in Uganda. Each of the youth had accepted an invitation to participate in a club called "The Wellbeing Club".

Informational meetings were held with parents and guardians. Parents and guardians were assured that participation in The Wellbeing Club was open to all children regardless of research involvement. Information was provided in both local languages and English, and all parents gave consent for their children's participation. Youth participants received study details and provided assent, while those aged 18 years and above gave written assent. Each participant received compensation of household goods and supplies valued approximately USD 25. The program involved six full-day workshops with youth aged 11-26 years, 80% of whom were girls, and 20% were boys, 98% were secondary school students, and 2% attended primary school. Most participants in Kampala lived in Kamwokya slums or nearby areas, while in Arua, 96% were refugees and 4% from host communities. Additionally, 90% were boarders and 10% were day scholars. Most participants came from families facing economic hardship, particularly in terms of food insecurity and access to affordable education.

Participants gathered and engaged with their peers for eight to ten days while at the same time being introduced to the wellbeing curriculum. The Uganda and UCSD team met via Zoom Pro for six months prior to the start of The Wellbeing Club, Kampala, to discuss facilitation of the curriculum in a Ugandan context and to share tips on trauma-informed care, as we all understood that discussing wellbeing may cause heightened emotions among youth. The curriculum is composed of 11 modules or topics based on the 4W LIFT wellbeing model (DiPrete Brown & Dahlquist, 2019; Vatne Bintliff et al. 2018). The Wellbeing model illustrates (i) the four components of wellbeing, which are lifelong health, human connection, freedom and safety, and thriving and (ii) the dimensions of wellbeing including: free from harm, personal safely, care for the earth, basic needs, fair and just community, engagement, belonging, mutual care, purpose, voice, and expression, and growth and flourishing, (iii) the spheres of influence, including family, peers, relationships, community, environment, state and global; (iv) the influences of self, i.e., identity, time, space and culture.

Ethical review was conducted through the University of California, San Diego, IRB project number 210931. The

Kamwokya study was done during Covid-19, February 11-13th, 2021 and September 6th-14th, 2021 and it was an out of school club approved by the local government amidst COVID-19 lockdowns. Follow-up interviews were conducted eight months after the club on February 2nd, 2022.

The Arua club was conducted with participants during school time, May 30th- June 7th 2022. Students participating in the Club were met at school as arranged by the school administration. Follow up interviews and interaction were done after five months in Arua as this fit within the travel schedule of the research team and Africa ELI which is housed in Kampala.

During the Wellbeing Club, participants' communication, behaviors, experiences, and body language were observed by one researcher/facilitator and recorded as field notes. We collected over 40 hours of field notes per Wellbeing Club. The notes were compiled and shared as minute-by-minute reports for the research team to review. As part of the study design, artistic products such as drawings, painted self-portraits, and dramas were photographed and/or recorded. We were able to observe student's drawings, sketches, and self-portraits. In module one, participants created a graffiti wall describing their prior knowledge of wellbeing. In module two they created community agreements based on the components of wellbeing and created posters about the dimensions of wellbeing. In module three, artistic learning included drawings on things in their lives that influenced their wellbeing, while in module four, participants painted on the canvas about their feelings, made a web demonstrating human connections. Musical instruments were also created as a way of managing emotions. In module five, participants created posters revealing the positive aspects of their own self-image and created collages with positive messages. In module six, each participant created quilts of self-care ideas. In module seven, participants created self-portraits using paints. In modules 8-10, students wrote and performed dramas to share with others.

We deductively coded field notes to themes of artistic learning, art lab, positive self-image, self-portraits and identity. The international team, together with the local team, met virtually to discuss themes and to identify artistic learning that participants enjoyed most throughout the wellbeing curriculum training and research. Codes that were presented at post-interview were able to be used and followed up with during the 6-month interviews (Maxwell, 2013). The U.S team initially coded the post-Club interview, the 6-month follow-up interview, and the field notes and we met together to discuss and finalize the themes. Validity was enhanced through intensive long-term involvement of five 8-hour full-days with the youth engaged in deep discussions and art activities, followed by post-interview and 6-months interviews (Becker and Geer, 1957) and rich data that was detailed and varied. Regarding the arts specifically, we asked participants questions about their artistic process during the Club such as, "What were you thinking when you selected this color? Can you tell me what this object means to you?" and "How did you collaborate when you wrote this drama script? How did you feel when you performed?" We paid special attention to this process to capture the voice and ideas of the youth. We also triangulated the data by using a variety of methods such as both qualitative and participatory (Fielding & Fielding, 1986).

4.Results and Discussion

While engaging participants in research, it was observed that most of them preferred and enjoyed the artistic learning sessions, the session had two options of giving their responses/understanding by either writing or drawing.

We first learned how youth defined wellbeing at the start of the Club. Participants were asked to either write or draw and paint words, images from magazines or newspaper cutouts that answers the question, "What does the word "wellbeing" mean to you?". From several graffiti created, we learned that wellbeing included images of joyful persons, those dancing, smiling, such as an image of a bride and groom at a wedding reception; some drew players on the pitch while one of the participants drew a handshake which signifies thirst for peace in their communities.

4.1 The role of artistic learning in fostering teamwork, social inclusion, and relationship

Artistic learning serves as a dynamic and inclusive medium for enhancing social-emotional learning while simultaneously fostering teamwork and social inclusion among adolescents. Engaging in artistic learning activities allowed participants to release pent-up emotions and youth reported feeling reduced stress. The act of creating art required focus and patience, which helped students practice emotional regulation and encouraged self-soothing and calmness as they worked on several projects.

Both groups of the participants in Arua and Kampala created the wellbeing club song/anthem that was done in groups of 5-8, the last day of our meetings in each phase was colorful because participants and researchers/facilitators not only sang and danced the usual songs, but they listened and practiced the new wellbeing anthem created by students. Orchid expressed in an interview that *"...writing dramas/song together and performing them with colleagues is good, I always feel connected as I sing along with others..."*.

Since the curriculum included mindfulness exercises along with the artistic learning, students reported an improved ability to name and describe their feelings with their peers. Through artistic activities like creating self-portraits, adolescents learned to explore and reflect on their identity, experiences and emotions. This process fosters greater self-awareness, which is a core competency of social emotional learning and social inclusion. Students were able to confront and visualize emotions they might have not been able to acknowledge or articulate, including understanding of past experiences.

It's through artistic learning that participants demonstrated high levels of cooperation, a participant said …. *"I have*

made friends in the Wellbeing Club that were not friends before, they are now my friends and discussion mates. They are helping me in class, and I am now catching up and enjoying subjects like biology, chemistry and physics because of the friends that I have met here. The way we work together is so interesting, I have acquired advice to use during normal classes with my peers". Another participant in Kampala said, "*The training has a positive impact on my academic performance. After our first training, I was able to reach school and teach my peers how to mix colors, draw, behave, and act on their emotions, and use art in managing emotions. When you cannot speak it, draw it, paint it, shade it…. That way one feels encouraged and uplifted".*

Figure 1   *Figure 2*

From our training as presented on the figure 1 and 2 above, one student drew a heart with an arrow, symbolizing love, and wrote, "*I love myself, love yourself before anyone loves."* Another illustrated a tray with a cup, fork, and bread, captioned, *"My purpose is my future, food is my best friend."* A third drew a happy face and described using self-care strategies to maintain peace of mind, expressing that love brings her happiness. She appreciated learning about life's purpose and building peer relationships through the club. Other drawings included a handshake and a smiley face, representing unity and happiness through social interaction. These artistic expressions suggest that artistic learning promotes self-awareness, cooperation, and stronger peer relationships.

4.2 Artistic learning and students' self-confidence

Art-based education programs allow artistic expression and emphasize the personal, emotional, human and spiritual aspects of learning, which can build academic skills. Artistic learning harnesses confidence among participants.

For example, one participant revealed that *"I have learned to appreciate myself, I am confident, and I can get up and speak in front of others."* Several students reported self-confidence because of their active participation in drama performances, singing before their peers, and presenting traditional dances to the visiting U.S. team. One student expressed this growth by stating, *"We are able to talk in front of people with confidence"* (this was noted in an interview). Artistic learning can also create important connections between students and caring adults within their schools. We observed that pride in art related to higher engagement with teachers at the partner school in Arua. After painting self-portraits below (fig 3), facilitators were surprised to see one of the schoolteachers in Arua coming to inquire how learners were able to come up with such good portraits in a few days of our engagements.

Art based education is the heart of education, participants expressed their love for art, *"I have a passion for art and enjoy participating in school events that necessitates drawing and painting,… "* (one respondent noted in an interview), she is now sharing art lessons with others

Figure 3, Research notes, 2023

As facilitators/researchers were winding up research and training in Arua, they asked learners to volunteer and draw the wellbeing model on one of the school buildings. To our amazement, a beautiful art piece was drawn and painted on the school building as shown below (fig 4). Participants came back joyous, with many stories and experiences to share with the entire team on how they executed their assignment. Each one of them wanted to go first, "…. thank *you for teaching us and lighting our candles, I still cannot believe that I was able to draw and paint the wellbeing model".*

Another one said, "*Working together was such a powerful tool, the wellbeing model is so beautiful. We have left a footprint that the school will remember us about, …I felt happy and proud when teachers passed by and congratulated us…. Thank you for this training…".* This is a clear indication that artistic learning enhances self-confidence as shown in fig 4. Completing an art project provides students with a tangible sense of accomplishment. This boost in self-esteem is essential for building resilience, as it reinforces student's belief in their ability to succeed despite challenges.

Figure 4, research notes, 2023

4.3 Artistic learning and students' healing and resilience

Through creative expression, students can explore, process, and navigate complex emotions while building coping strategies that promote resilience. One of the primary ways artistic learning contributed to healing is by offering students non-verbal forms of emotional expression. Many students, especially those growing with trauma, may struggle to articulate their emotions through words; art allows them to externalize their feelings in a way that feels safe and non-confrontational. During our first days of training and research, participants used to draw and paint sad faces and emotional drawings, but as time went by, during the second phase of the Club, the pictures, drawings, and paintings shifted to more positive images. Participants felt calmer and this was mentioned in some interviews; *"If something is just hurting you, we learned about mindfulness. Where you are supposed to breathe in and breathe out and relax. Mindfulness activities are key*

to everyone, I taught my friends and we practice every time we are anxious and tense." This reveals that this participant and her peers learned how to manage emotions which fosters resilience.

Artistic learning helped participants to regulate their emotions, one participant said that … *"we are able to talk in front of people with confidence, and we are even able to express ourselves and even control our feelings. If I am angry…, I can easily control my feelings, because being angry does not mean that you should do anything you wish. You need to control yourself, so I have learned a lot from here. I have learned how to control my feelings, I normally sing, or walk away from the place where I got annoyed".*

Through artistic learning participants were able to imagine new possibilities for their future, one of the wellbeing dimensions is "purpose". Students who could envisage a brighter future are more likely to persist through challenges. Participants created broad visions and or

symbolic pieces of artwork that represented their goals and aspirations. This act of envisioning a positive future encourages resilience in the face of current hardships.

4.4 Discussion

Art based teaching enables children to develop social and emotional competencies within an environment that promotes equal learning opportunities for all (Saif, 2024), and these methods serve as a protective skill for children who have a difficult family background and intergenerational trauma. However, the benefits of art are not limited to those who are at-risk; art is an important element in the role of education for all students (Dyra, 2019). The art making process is spontaneous, self-motivated, self-sustained (Zins, & Elias, 2007). It also engages competencies, such as relationships skills, social awareness, and responsible decision making, which have an impact on students' relationships with peers, teachers and parents and boosts students' confidence (Smith, & Jones, L. 2019).

While artistic learning has been widely celebrated for its potential to enhance social-emotional learning, and foster inclusion, some recent studies suggest limitations and challenges to these claims. The argument against artistic learning as an inclusive and effective medium for promoting emotional and social development among adolescents revolves around issues such as accessibility, the variability of outcomes, and the potential for unequal participation in collaborative projects (Jermyn, 2001). One of the main criticisms against learning in promoting SEL is the issue of unequal access. Not all students have the same access to art materials, spaces, or instruction, particularly in underfunded or underserved schools. According to recent studies, schools in low-income areas/developing countries are often forced to cut or reduce arts programs due to budget constraints, which limits opportunities for students to engage in artistic learning (McCarthhy et al., 2022).

Music has the power to evoke and process emotions, helping students affected by trauma release pent-up feelings like sadness, fear or anger. Songs with calming rhythms or uplifting melodies can aid in regulating emotions, reducing anxiety, and fostering a sense of safety (Melnick et al., 2011). Songs can instill a sense of safety and routine, because familiar songs can create a sense of routine and predictability which is crucial for students with trauma as they often crave stability. Melnick notes that certain songs, especially those with empowering or hopeful lyrics, can help students build resilience. The messages within songs can offer encouragement and develop positive coping strategies (Pulimeno, 2020). Pulimeno believes that singing songs that reflect personal experiences can

help students feel less alone and promote emotional healing and a sense of community, helping students build connections with their peers and feel understood. Trauma often isolates individuals, and music provides a nonverbal way to connect, share emotional experiences and bridge gaps in communication. They argue that music helps students build and strengthen social connections.

The emotional and social benefits of artistic learning are not uniform across all students, students have shown that the impact of art on emotional growth and SEL can vary depending on individual differences such as temperament, prior experiences with art, and cultural background. As Jones et al., (2023) and Morison, et al., (2022) point out, while some students may find artistic activities therapeutic, others may experience frustration, anxiety, or disagreement if they lack confidence in their artistic abilities. This variability in response suggests that art may not be a one size-fits-all solution for emotional regulation or trauma recovery. Furthermore, students who are less inclined towards artistic expression may feel alienated or pressured in art-based SEL programs, leading to negative experiences rather than the intended emotional and social growth.

In some cases, artistic learning may shift from a focus on emotional exploration to one of performance and evaluation, particularly in formal educational settings. As Cahill (2023) points out, when students 'artistic work is evaluated or put on display, the focus may shift from personal expression to external validation. This can create pressure and anxiety, particularly for students who may not excel in art, thereby undermining the intended emotional benefits of artistic learning. Instead of feeling calm and mindful, students may become preoccupied with meeting expectations or being judged by peers or teachers which can hinder their ability to process emotions effectively. The act of creating art- whether through repetitive patterns, coloring, or even collage-can reduce stress, lover cortisol levels and offer a calming, grounding activity. Fine art education is extremely useful in terms of the expected impact on the individual personality and self-confidence because it allows the individual to realize his/her own abilities, and gain and develop a sense of self-confidence between the individual and social goals.

Connor & Davidson, (2003) states that artistic learning encourages participants to take control of their narratives, artistic learning encourages participants to take control of their narratives which potentially helps individuals feel powerful, strong and resilient. Art offers a medium through which students can reframe their experiences. By creating visual representations of their story, they shift from being passive recipients of pain to active creators of meaning. Some students shared experiences of being bullied but they depicted themselves as strong and empowered, symbolically rewriting their narrative. Connor &

Davidson, goes on to note that reframing is an essential part of healing, participants saw themselves as resilient and capable of overcoming challenges this conquers with (Tabor et al, 2023). In the same way, art serves as a tool for symbolic processing, allowing students to confront traumatic experiences indirectly. Instead of revisiting the trauma in detail, students used metaphor and symbolism to work through their emotional responses in a safer, more manageable way.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Artistic learning has a powerful impact on students' social and emotional wellbeing. Moreover, educators can support the development of these skills within their classrooms, regardless of the subject they teach. In today's world, many students experience anxiety, depression, feelings of isolation and intense emotions, all of which can significantly impact their personal wellbeing and academic life. Many students struggle to concentrate in their work and fully participate in classroom activities. What if we harnessed the unique potential of the arts to support their development? By integrating the arts into education, teachers could be better equipped to enhance learners' overall well-being, fostering greater engagement and helping them grow into more balanced and well-rounded individuals.

This study promotes a holistic approach in educational institutions, highlighting the importance of integrating artistic engagement into wellbeing initiatives. This underscores the transformative role of art education, particularly in the context of rapid technological advancement such as artificial intelligence and the shifting dynamics of education. While artistic learning holds significant promise of enhancing social emotional learning (SEL) and fostering inclusion, its impact is not uniformly experienced. Outcomes may vary based on factors such as access to resources, individual learner differences, and the nature of collaborative or dynamic projects. Without intentional design and a focus on equity, art-based learning can support meaningful emotional development for all students.

5.2 Recommendations

This study offers evidence that integrating artistic learning into Uganda's education system can play a transformative role in improving students' wellbeing, social-emotional development, and engagement in learning. The findings reveal that activities such as drawing, music, drama, dance, and painting do more than promote creativity, they enhanced our participants' confidence, emotional expression, communication, teamwork, empathy, and resilience.

1. This research underscores the urgent need to formally recognize and incorporate artistic learning within the competence-based curriculum in both primary and secondary school levels. The Ministry of Education and Sports could develop a policy shift that values arts education as a core component of holistic learning-not just an extracurricular option but used throughout the curriculum to support the development of emotionally intelligent, socially connected, and academically resilient learners.

2. There is a need to invest in training teachers in trauma-informed and arts-integrated pedagogies, and to ensure that all students, regardless of social-economic background, have equitable access to art material and expressive opportunities. The success of the Wellbeing Club demonstrates that even minimal investment in structured arts-based programs can yield meaningful improvements in student wellbeing and classroom climate.

3. This study reinforces the importance of fostering safe, inclusive, and expressive classroom environments. Teachers across all subjects, not only those in the arts, can leverage simple artistic activities to check in with students, reduce anxiety, and improve engagement. Building capacity in social-emotional learning strategies through creative expression can transform how students interact, learn and thrive.

In conclusion, artistic learning plays a valuable role in fostering self-confidence and resilience among students by promoting self-expression and personal growth. Engaging in art-based activities allow learners to develop and experience a sense of accomplishment, which fosters confidence and equips them to navigate challenges both within the classroom and in their community. This holistic approach not only promotes social–emotional learning but also empowers learners to overcome adversity, thereby enhancing their academic and personal growth within both Uganda's and global educational contexts.

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