

## **Arts Voices: Middle School Students and the Relationships of the Arts to their Motivation and Self-Efficacy**

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*This study explores the question “Does arts education have a relationship to eighth-grade rural middle school students’ motivation and self-efficacy?” Student questionnaires, focus-group interviews, and follow-up interviews were data collection methods used with 92 eighth-grade middle school students. Strong emphasis was placed on gathering personal narratives, comments, and opinions directly from the students. Content analysis was used to analyze the student interviews. Middle school students felt that there were both positive and negative relationships between their arts education classes and their motivation and self-efficacy. The students in this study had much to share on the arts courses offered in their school. Personal motivation, belief in self, creative thinking, and peer relationships are only some of the topics addressed in this article. Key Words: Arts Education, Student Motivation, Student Self-Efficacy, Content Analysis, Focus Group Interviews, and Open-Ended Questionnaires*

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### **Introduction and Background**

I taught theater for eleven years part time and five years full time. My part time experience was predominantly with weekend and summer theater programs. My full time teaching took place in both urban and rural middle schools. The locations were different but the students really weren't that dissimilar. Both schools had a comparable racial and socio-economic ratio. Each school offered a strong selection of arts courses for the students. The arts affected students in the same way no matter where I went to teach. While teaching theater I saw the impact that drama could have on a student's behaviors, attitudes, motivation, and belief in self. Students were provided an outlet of expression, ideas, and interpretation. They had a chance to shine in class and on stage. Theater class was a place where they could succeed while they may have failed in other subjects. I had parents thanking me for involving their child in theater productions because they were awed at the difference that it had made in their son's or daughter's self-esteem, motivation, creativity, and confidence. As I progressed in my teaching career, I became increasingly aware that the arts had the potential to make a difference. I began to pay closer attention to the other arts-based courses offered at the school and noticed similar impacts being made in young people's lives in those classes as well.

The research on arts education is ever growing. A review of the literature over the past ten to fifteen years reveals that there are gaps in the research. This study seeks to fill some of those spaces. There is a lack of research on arts education and older students (Catterall, 2002). Elementary schools, rather than high schools, are commonly the focus of studies and there is wide gap in the literature pertaining to arts in the middle schools. Another hole in the research relates to the arts in rural schools. Catterall, Chapleau, and

Iwanaga (1999) as well as Horowitz and Webb-Dempsey (2002) advise researchers to pursue in-depth qualitative studies that take the student's participation and experiences into account. Only a small fraction of arts education literature includes the voices of the students (see Baum, Owen, & Oreck, 1997; Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Wolf, 1994). The data collection methods used for this study included questionnaires, focus-group interviews, and follow-up one-on-one and focus-group interviews to gain the opinions, narratives, and voices of the students. The young people that I taught in the past always had opinions about their arts-based classes and this has led me to the challenge of sharing other young people's perspectives on the arts courses in their schools.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationships of arts education to personal motivation and self-efficacy in middle school students in rural schools. Understanding personal academic motivation was approached through gaining the perspectives of the participants in the study and ascertaining how they feel about what individually motivates them in school as well as in their learning in arts-based discipline courses. Self-efficacy is also known as confidence. The study looked at whether arts courses can have any impact on students' confidence in their own abilities and talents.

As a former theater teacher I had witnessed the difference that theater had made for my middle school students. I had personally experienced the increase in motivation, self-efficacy, as well as self-esteem and creativity in my drama students. When I decided to pursue my doctorate I knew that I wanted to focus my attentions in research to arts education. As a researcher I knew that I wanted to look at the intrinsic values of the arts to young people. I also knew that I desired to hear the voices of the students. It was always clear to me that the young people in my classes had opinions and when prompted would happily share them. We could talk about theater and how much they learned in the class. Years after they had left my class students would call or visit and again relay how important drama class had been to them. It was through those experiences with my students that led me to my current research but there was a deficit in my teaching experience. I had only worked in one discipline in the arts, theater. I was biased and heavily one-sided in that particular field. I wanted to create a study that would offer the opportunity to look at more than one area of the arts to see if the phenomenon that I had witnessed was present in other arts-based disciplines. Working on my doctoral research allowed me to go after the information that I had always wanted to seek: to investigate the potential relationships that might exist between arts education and student motivation and self-efficacy specifically from the students' perspective.

This research study focuses on first-person narratives gained through questionnaires and focus groups as well as follow-up one-on-one and focus-group interviews (see Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Creswell, 1998, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The current research in arts education offers few examples of the student voices. It is my belief that dance, drama, music, art, and other arts-based courses can reach many students and make use of their various learning styles (Gardner, 1983).

## **Method**

### **The Students**

Approximately 200 eighth grade students enrolled in two separate rural middle schools had the opportunity to participate in this study. After all parent consent and student assent forms were returned 92 students in all chose to participate. The names created for the schools in this study were West Middle School and North Middle School. Both schools are located in the Southeast portion of the United States. At the beginning of the study I contacted, by e-mail, principals of middle schools across the state that had at least four of the five most common arts-based disciplines (drama, dance, chorus, band, or art) without being magnet, private, or specialized schools. Once I received permission from the principals to bring my research into their schools, I compared school demographics and size so that I would have two similar schools participating in the study. The students and I had not met before this research study began. Eighth grade students were involved because they had the most experience with the arts-based classes offered in the middle schools where the research study was conducted. One half of the eighth grade students, approximately 100 students per middle school, had to obtain parental consent in order to participate in this study. By the conclusion of the study, 92 students—34 males and 58 females—had chosen to participate. I pursued a high number of students to take part in the initial questionnaire portion of the study so that I could have wide selection of young people to choose from for the interview segment of the research. More students' opinions and comments in the open-ended part of the questionnaire offered additional insight into the eighth graders' thoughts on arts education. Students who obtained permission were given the questionnaire to complete. At West Middle School 38 questionnaires were completed, while North Middle School students filled out 54 questionnaires. From their responses, 40 students overall—20 from each school—were chosen for focus-group interviews. The students chosen for the focus-group interviews were picked in reaction to their responses. Some students had positive comments to share and others negative. Some students gave very non-specific answers that had nothing to do with the arts. Other students talked about their favorite sports, friends in school, and what they were going to do over the weekend. These responses were not useful for data collection. Students who spoke about their arts classes, either in a positive or negative light, were the ones who were asked to speak further about those disciplines in the focus-group interview process. Each focus group consisted of four students and there were five focus groups at each school.

This research was part of a larger dissertation study and Internal Review Board (IRB) approval had to be met at the School of Education as well as the university level. Internal Review Board approval is necessary for all research pursued at a university level, particularly in the disciplines where human participants will take part in the research. Since this particular study worked not only with humans but more specifically with minors, IRB approval took two months to be granted. Students under the age of 18 must always be protected in any type of research and for that reason many levels of consent and assent were required. For this investigation permission had to be gained from many different parties. The school system superintendents, principals, and parents all had to give consent before the study could continue. Once those levels of permission were

gained, student assent also had to be requested and obtained. Only after those four groups gave full permission for cooperation did the investigation begin.

### **Data Collection**

Questionnaires were the first step in the data-collection process (see Appendix). Once the questionnaires had been collected, they were reviewed to ascertain which students would participate in the second step of the data-collection process, the focus-group interview.

In the interview I introduced the topic that I was studying as well as myself. I told the students that their perspectives and narratives were important to me and their honesty was crucial. They knew that they were free to agree or disagree with any questions or statements made in the interview process. It was also very important for the students to know that there were no wrong answers (Creswell, 1998).

In a qualitative study such as this one, it is important to represent the voices of the eighth graders who participated in the questionnaire and interview portions. Great attention was given to the presentation of the words of the students. The students' responses for this study were unscripted and delivered in a free flow, conversational manner. As the researcher I feel that it is my absolute and direct responsibility to present their voices in their true delivery. Very little editing has been done to the words of the students. Some grammatical editing has been done and repetitions, large pauses, and miscellaneous vocal noises or sounds (e.g., um, uh, ah, well, like) have been removed from the data for narrative clarity. For confidentiality purposes pseudonyms were used instead of the students' real names. The students were given the opportunity to choose their own aliases. Many took great delight in this activity and some of the names chosen by the students are from favorite television shows and cartoon characters.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis as well as data collection should be happening at the same time (Merrick, 1999). The four-point scale questionnaire responses were combined and investigated through the practice of content analysis. This particular form of analysis can be used in a qualitative context when investigating the words of the students. This type of data analysis allowed me to further investigate what the students had to say in their questionnaire responses in comparison to their peers that participated in the research. Content analysis let me see how often the same terms, words, and ideas occurred amongst all of the students, letting me see the students not only as individuals but as part of a whole. Examination of the focus-group interviews and open-ended questionnaire comments took on the structure of methodically grouping and summarizing the descriptions given by the participants (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). While collecting and transcribing the data from the focus-group interviews I was also coding and designating the information for various topics in the study. I came into the research with terms for coding in mind so that I would have direction in my data analysis. Pre-determined terms gave me ideas and perspectives to seek out. When starting the analysis process, as a new researcher, I personally needed phrases to consider as I waded through the pages of data that the focus-group interviews created. Some of the terms that I started with were self-

efficacy, motivation, imagination, and creativity. These terms were chosen early in the data analysis process because they were part of the research questions for this study. As the analysis process progressed, more terms, codes and themes became apparent. The final research was crafted out of the recognition of the ideas, perspectives, and topics provided by the students.

## **Findings**

### **Motivation and Arts Education**

The first research question for this study was: What are the perspectives of rural eighth grade middle school students about the potential relationship that arts education can have with their personal motivation in school? For this research 20 students were chosen for focus-group interviews at each school. The following student statements are from questionnaire and focus-group interviews. One student who called herself Anna had this to say about her motivation and the arts-based courses at her middle school:

My arts classes drive me to do better in all of my classes because the people in them push me to keep going and study. We have fun in them and that shows me that just maybe learning and succeeding could pay off in the near future.

Along that same line of thought, Chance stated: “The arts help me know that I can learn new things and that helps my motivation. It helps in learning and opening my mind” when he spoke on how arts-based classes can potentially affect motivation and learning. Brooke and Isabel had the following to add about arts and their motivation:

Brooke: When I take arts classes it makes me want to do well in school. Also I have learned a lot more from these classes, than other classes, because to me they are more interesting.

Isabel: Doing chorus helps me to look forward to something in school. I love to sing and also to act. It helps to broaden my horizons and to be a better-rounded student.

It is believed that arts programs in schools can create commitment to assignments and tasks in class and that they can also create considerable gains in personal discipline, collaboration, and work ethic (Jensen, 2001; Kinder & Harland, 2004). One student who named herself Melanie illustrated the points of these theorists when she said:

Arts classes, you have a choice to do them. Of course you have to go to classes in school, but you have a choice to participate, you have a choice to do a good job and to study and stuff. Math and science that goes in through the rest of your life, you don't have a choice whether to do that or not, but in the arts classes you push yourself to do better and you push yourself to do a good job and push yourself to succeed and stuff.

There was dialogue among all of the focus-group participants stating that the peer interaction that existed in their arts-based courses was a strong foundation for motivation. When students are in a class that they enjoy with other students whom they like, there is a strong possibility that the students are going to be more motivated to be in that class, do well on their assignments, and attend school as a whole. Positive peer interaction, and the enjoyment that comes with it, can occur in core academic classes, teachers can also create environments that foster student relations. While this can occur in non-arts courses, arts-based classes bring students together from across the school. Students may be on a particular “team” at their grade level where they rarely get to see other students in additional eighth grade teams or groups. Arts classes are designed to involve students across the entire grade level, sometimes even blending grades. Students find themselves with peers that they rarely get to see. This peer interaction in arts-based classes can be very appealing to students at the middle school level. One student who named herself Alex spoke about her friends and looking forward to her arts-based classes and assignments:

I guess you have fun in those classes, so you want to come back every day because you look forward to seeing people. You make new friends in different classes; you start out having friends and then you make friends. So if that’s the only class you have with them then you look forward to going back and talking to them. Also if you are having fun in that class, if you are enjoying what you are doing then you will want to go back and continue your assignment.

Caliey continued on with this line of discussion with the following comment:

In the afternoons I look forward to going back to chorus class because we only have one eighth grade chorus class and it’s made up of 60 students and it’s just like people that you only see once a day and that’s in that class and the people that I sit beside are my best friends and I don’t have any classes any with them except for chorus, so I look forward to seeing them.

Two students named Seth and Kyleigh talked about how they were motivated to be in their arts classes because they could meet different people and learn from those new acquaintances. They stated:

Seth: What makes me want to be there is being able to meet different people and see how well they work in things. They’re teaching you in a way like cultural things, how to paint a certain way, how to make pottery a certain way. Just how to make things look much better than what you used to do.

Kyleigh: In electives like band there are people you aren't close to, you know their name but you don't really know them and that's a time you can talk to them and introduce yourself to them.

In middle school, peers and friends commonly replace parents and teachers as a main source of motivation. In addition, students will pursue success and accomplishments in classes such as art and music not only for their parents and peer groups, but they will also begin to desire that success to please themselves (Woody, 2005). They will seek their own outlets for intrinsic motivation. Students in arts-based classes will not only look to create something that can be shared with others but they will also participate in music, art, dance, or theater to engage themselves (Anderson, 2004). The following students spoke about their personal motivation in arts classes:

Pepper: I love learning music, singing, and acting. It gives me inspiration. Singing, and acting and drawing, you can't help but have a great time. It's so much fun to do what you love.

Eric: Art motivates you to do the best that you can in your creativity. It is so stress-free that you can do whatever you want and you don't have to be worried about anything. It does boost your confidence. You think, "I can do what I want to and can't be embarrassed by it as much in here so I want to do something in here."

Encouraging a personal connection in students is the key to their motivation. Arts-based as well as core curricula teachers can build classrooms that enhance student motivation, creating an environment where students aren't afraid to experiment, create new plans and ideas, and explore new avenues in their learning. Teachers who push student personal motivation will find young people in their classrooms who will take risks, and pursue tasks of their own choosing as opposed to always being told what to do and how to think (Starko, 2005).

Students expressed how their arts electives motivated them to want to do better in school, in their specific arts class, or in life in general. One student who named herself Angel stated:

My teacher likes my work and tells me to draw more. My band teacher gives helpful criticism so I do better. Since I love my art class I'm usually in a better mood than usual so I pay more attention in class, urging myself to do better.

Other students were motivated to be in their arts-based classes and find success simply because they enjoyed the class and were inspired to be there and participate. Scott and Josh said the following about their drama and band classes:

Scott: My second class is drama because it's the end of the day so it makes me want to strive to get there. That is what I love to do. I love to be onstage and I love to talk because I want to be a broadcaster when I grow

up, and being in different situations like that can also help you in having different facial expressions. Drama can help you later on in life.

Josh: I look forward to band because it helps me relax after I just got out of algebra, which is not very good for me, and like everyone else said there are a lot of people in there and you get to see your friends.

Arts-based courses are important motivators to students at all levels of learning. These are the classes that commonly allow students to learn in different, more creative ways.. Young people are often motivated to be in their arts courses, involved and successful. Students who are given the opportunity to participate in the arts are able to explore the subject matter in a more open environment. They are provided chances to uncover the world around them and discover new worlds, talents, and modes of thought (Goldberg, 1997). It is no wonder that students come to school each day looking forward to being in these classes and succeeding on assignments.

### **Student Self-Efficacy**

The second research question in this study is: What are the perspectives of rural eighth grade middle school students about the potential relationships that arts education can have on their self-efficacy in school as well as on school assignments? Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one's ability to achieve a goal or task (Ramey, 2005). Self-efficacy can also be called confidence and in this section will sometimes be referred to as talent or the students' belief in their talent in a subject or skill. In general, students are going to be more willing to take part in activities where they will find success. Young people will work harder, longer, and will commit more willingly to tasks where accomplishment is more certain to be an outcome (Barry, 2007). Anna and Tweetie stated the following when asked about their arts classes and self-efficacy:

Anna: The arts affect my confidence because if I can have fun and succeed in those classes, then that gives me the extra boost to do well in my other classes. These classes make me believe that I can do something.

Tweetie: Choir affects my confidence because I want to learn more because music isn't just about singing; it can be about instruments. Drama has affected my confidence because when I was little I wanted to be an actor and I might try and strive for that goal, or not, it depends.

Alex talked about the confidence that she found in her band class and how that feeling could carry over into her other courses in school:

You learn how to stand up and talk in front of people and when you stand up and show people your work or you play an instrument and how well you can do that, it actually helped me do presentations in front class in my regular [core] classes. Because if you have the confidence to show



someone what you have made then you should have confidence to tell people about something that you have learned.

Two students who chose the names Ellen and Melanie spoke on the confidence that they felt after completing their performances in the school Christmas play:

Ellen: Playing a lead role in the drama Christmas play helped boost my confidence. Also being in the play and band performances makes me want to do well in other things as well. Also I want to prove that I can do lots of things and do well in all of them.

Melanie: Drama is my favorite because it gives you just a sense of relief after you have memorized a monologue or something you have that sense of relief that you did it and you accomplished that, I was recently in the Christmas play and we rehearsed it for a long time and after we did that you just got this really great feeling that you did something in front of the whole school and it gives you a confidence boost after you have done it for a long time.

Mary spoke about how chorus helped her to be less shy and afraid, when she said, “We have to sing in chorus and when we sing alone I think that I am scared at first but when I’m done I’m thinking wow did I really do that and I’m proud of myself.” Annalesh made the following statement about her self-belief and the arts, “Before I was in band and drama I felt like I could do nothing. Now I think I can do more. I now love to perform in front of people and I used to dread it.” Students are more willing to choose a task and to continue taking part in challenging situations when they believe that they will be able to accomplish the undertaking. Belief in self commonly decreases while students are in middle school. If arts-based classes can aid young people in their self-efficacy then the arts existence at the middle school level is incredibly important (Cox, 2005; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; O’Hara & Lanoux, 1999).

A common theme that began to emerge through the focus-group interviews was the fact that these middle school students felt that peers and friends in their arts-based classes also had a great deal to do with their self-efficacy. Belief in self was important but fellow students’ approval was significant as well. Competition between classmates was also very prevalent in arts-based classes. Some examples of student comments on this topic were:

Elmo: In choir my friends, if we’re having tryouts for a solo all of my friends are like, “Do it, you can do it” and it makes me want to. Even if I don’t get the solo I still feel better about myself that I went after it.

Brett: Band gave me confidence for all of the band concerts that we had. Chorus was great on confidence. Art and drama gave me a chance to lead and express how I wanted things to go. Overall they didn’t just give me confidence. They gave me the confidence to give others confidence.

Student work in classes like band, art, chorus, and drama is influenced by many factors. Sometimes it can be the media, classroom teachers, or parents, but commonly the ideas can come from peers in the classroom (Cox, 2005). Young people witness fellow students' work, and if it is good, creative, funny, or interesting they may, in their own manner, try to repeat what they have observed. If they feel that they can perform better, then there is a chance some competition will occur. In a society that can be competitively based, it is no wonder that some rivalry transpires. Most students through the course of the focus-group interviews expressed simply how much being with supportive friends in their arts courses truly helped their self-efficacy. Chace talked about how showing others his art increased his confidence when he received positive feedback:

All the people who have taken art I think it gives them more confidence to show people what they've drawn, free hand or pencil or something. They get a confidence to show people and if you don't take art then you're uptight and you don't want to show anybody because you don't think they will like it.

One student who named herself Caliey expressed how in chorus one person being talented or confident didn't matter. This is very different from other arts and academic classes where confidence is commonly found through individual efforts. In a choral ensemble everyone, including the teacher, had to work together to bring in talent and self-efficacy:

In chorus, I don't think it's about talent. I think it's more about the whole class and if it's going the whole class way then yes the whole class is talented but not just one person. You can't be talented without a whole choir in chorus, so I think it's more of a group effort to be talented, not just a single effort.

I've been in chorus since the third grade and in the third grade my chorus teacher told me and most of the people in our chorus class that our voices were squeaky and if we wanted to keep this up that we would need to stay in chorus for as long as possible. It's my fifth year in chorus and in seventh grade our teacher said that most of our voices have changed a lot from sixth grade to seventh grade and that our voices have gone from squeaky to one of the most amazing set of voices that she's heard and that's not just me; it's basically everybody in our chorus class.

The arts can provide many chances for students to feel engaged and successful. The arts can bring about opportunities for collaboration and success. For some students, arts-based classes are the place where they can find a chance to express themselves and gain self-confidence. The arts require a lot of work, but there is a great deal of fun and collaboration that goes into creating the art that comes out of classes such as drama, band, and chorus. Students might look to others for support, such as their peers or teachers, but the chance to explore and create in arts electives is a strong personal enticement for young people (Smith, 2001).

The arts can create a foundation for higher self-esteem. Students can share their work and skills, and the learning that takes place in those classes can become truly worthwhile and enjoyable to young people. The arts can give power to students (Goldberg, 1997). They can share their work, create, express, and find that their ideas hold merit and worth. The arts give students a chance to release their creativity and share what they have to give. When allowed to be expressive, students will commonly find a positive connection to their self-esteem and self-belief (Boyes & Reid, 2005). Zac and Mikey expressed their feelings of confidence and joy while talking about their band class:

Zac: In band we go in there and we don't know what pieces we are going to play, so he will give us a variety of music and we will try to play them and it might not all be as good as he wants but we keep on practicing and keep getting better and then we perform it in front of people and that just makes me want to be in band because I love performing.

Mikey: During a concert that we had on Parent Teacher Night [we played] a song called *Dorian Rhapsody* and I played the timpani in it and I had a fifteen measure solo and it was actually a really fast piece in the music so I was really proud and people would come up and pat me on the back and tell me what a good job I did, and that is just a really good feeling.

Some students in the focus-group expressed their love for their arts electives and the happiness that they found while taking part in those classes. The arts gave many students in this study joy when they went to school. All the young people had their own personal stories about how the arts had affected their self-efficacy. Eric spoke on how the arts helped him to find out who he truly was when he stated, "The arts helped spike my interest in music and helped mold me into who I am and so I have a lot more confidence that I am completely being myself now." Gummdrop talked about how art class made her stop worrying about making mistakes when she said, "I think that I am pretty good in art because no matter whether you mess it up you can always change it or fix it somehow." Chuck commented on not having to be the smartest person in class and how that increased his confidence when he stated, "I think that drama is one of those classes that you know that you don't have to be the smartest person; it's being creative and runs into all of that stuff. It helps your confidence."

Some students simply wanted to share the love that they felt for their arts courses in middle school. John, Emily, and Kimm shared the following statements in their focus-group interviews:

John: The arts opened me up to the more delicate things in life that I could create with my hands. This made me love the arts and made me confident that I will be the best.

Emily: Chorus affected my confidence because singing in chorus is something I know I do well and the knowledge of having another talent makes me feel better about myself.

Kimm: In art I was pretty talented. I liked it. I think that I'm really good at art. I guess I have an imagination that I don't have in writing stuff like in papers but when I can draw I can really show what I have, my talent or what I think is my talent.

Many students shared that their arts courses had a positive relationship to their self-efficacy. Though this was the experience of many there were some students who did not feel that the arts were helpful to their confidence. Grace felt that she was talented at art but sometimes felt a decrease in her self-efficacy when she observed other artists in class:

In art I felt that I was talented. There were some things that I was really good at and some things I just couldn't draw sometimes. It depends on the assignment. I was good at some things but when we had to use our imaginations, I have an imagination but not as wild as some other people had, so my drawings would be bland and their drawings would be like WOW.

Jackie felt that the arts had the potential to increase student self-efficacy but she had witnessed instances in her classroom where this was not always the case:

The arts make you feel good as far as knowing you can do what you want and see what your progress is, but I know kids who aren't good at arts and it can make them feel bad unless they discover themselves in it.

Commonly students are congratulated and their talent is lauded in their arts-based classes. Because some students are praised others left out, young people can discover a decrease in their self-efficacy. One young lady who named herself Aimie explains:

The arts make me see other peoples' work and I hear the teachers bragging on them about how well they do. It makes me feel like I'm not good. I think about it and the way that other kids present their art may be different from the way I do because I am expressing myself.

Arts classes offer opportunities for young people to express their creativity. These are courses where students share ideas and feelings that are close to their hearts and in their personal imaginations. Teachers, whether they are in academic or arts classes, must try to celebrate all students and their work. In all things there will be students who are more talented than others, but schools need to applaud the effort and the risk that many students take by stepping out and showing their talent and skill in any discipline of the arts.

## **Discussion**

As a researcher, I expected that arts-based courses in rural middle schools would have a relationship to student motivation and self-efficacy. As a former theater teacher I had seen some of these relationships first hand. I knew that students could find

motivation and confidence in academic and non-arts based electives as well. Educators across many different curricula can create an environment that fosters students learning, motivation, and self-efficacy. A teacher in math can foster student drive and determination. An educator in computer skills can create an atmosphere that aims at increasing student confidence. To me though, it has always been the arts-based courses that helped students truly find a home, a place where they could express and share and have confidence and drive in their work.

Though I personally had experienced student success in my theater classes, I wanted to pursue a study that would allow me to see student perspectives and opinions of their arts-based classes. This research used the data collection methods of questionnaires and focus-group interviews. Through the course of this study the students' voices and opinions were pursued. Their honesty was of great importance to this research and I diligently went after student opinions without bringing in my own. Some students agreed with my personal thoughts on the positive outcomes of the arts. Other students disagreed but all of their perspectives, narratives, and opinions were shared. The purpose of this study was to observe a relationship between arts education and student motivation and self-efficacy. Relationships were found amongst every student focus-group. Some relationships were positive and others negative but relationships did exist for all research participants.

There were outcomes and perspectives in this research that I expected from the interview questions on student motivation and self-efficacy. There are other themes that emerged through the course of this study that were surprising. One new theme that surfaced through the focus-group interviews was the degree of importance of peer relations to personal student confidence. In the area of student self-efficacy many students gauged their confidence on how well they performed in a class in relation to other students. Students like Kirsten and Kitty who made the following statements:

Kirsten: I took voice last year and it gave me confidence when I would do a good job and all the girls would say I was good and it also raised my confidence knowing I could sing better than some of the other girls.

Kitty: I thought I was confident in drama, I was just going up on stage thinking that I was doing a good job but then yesterday the other students were like, oh yours was really good and that was the first time that they said that, so I guess I wasn't doing a good job before. I thought it was funny.

These young people were moving away from parent and teacher approval to a level of peer and self endorsement. Many young people in this study spoke on being a better artist, or a superior actor and how that gave them confidence. Students also spoke on being good enough to help or aid fellow students who might not know what to do in an art, band, chorus, or drama class. This also increased self-efficacy. Comparison of skill among eighth grade students not only exists in the classes that are tested at the state level but in arts-based courses as well. Competition is a common situation in school, society, and life in general. It is no wonder that it appears in middle school arts classes as well.

There were limitations to this study. Researcher bias was a constant consideration. It can be easy for an interviewer with insider connections to let his or her bias sway research findings. Having an inside understanding in the arts and education could also lead to a deeper insight to the students perceptions and ideas (Chavez, 2008) Regardless, I diligently pursued a research piece that was absent of my personal bias. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss that there are four areas or aspects of validity in the field of qualitative research, specifically known as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Each is an aspect that researchers must be always striving for in their qualitative work. The research is only going to be as good as the work of the investigator. It is up the researcher to evaluate, respond, reflect, and think on the research and investigative process (Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). I constantly reminded myself during interviews to not discuss my personal beliefs with the students. I wanted to hear their words and perspectives with as little input from me as possible. Time was also a limitation.

This study took place over a few months. I would like to pursue this study over a longer period of time, to see if student beliefs remain the same from middle to high school and on to college. I would also like to see the career choices of the participating students. The question can be asked whether the arts and arts education add to the field of educational research. Research can commonly be seen as cold, methodical, and concise while the arts are considered creative, free, and personal (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2002). Can the two fields work together? I feel that the answer is yes. Research can seek answers and explanations and present them to the public. Educational research can allow teachers, administrators, and students to have their say. Their voices can be shared and hopefully they will be heard.

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**Appendix: Student Questionnaire**

*The explanation below will be read to all participating students.*

I need to ask your permission to take part in this study. I want to make sure that this is something that you want to participate in. Your parents have already given permission but if you don't want to participate you don't have to. If you decide that you don't want to take part in this research study all you have to do is tell me. I am going to pass out an assent/permission form for you to sign agreeing to take part in the study. By signing this you agree to take part in the questionnaire as well as the interview portions of the research. The interviews will be videotaped but only for note taking purposes. The videos will be destroyed once the research is complete.

(Holding up the questionnaire) The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain information about the different arts-based classes that you have taken during your time in middle school. When I say arts-based classes I am talking about courses such as drama, chorus, band, art, or dance. Please answer the questions given and feel free to give as much detail as you like in the open-ended question sections.

I thank you for being willing to aid me in this research study. This questionnaire will take about 5-10 minutes.

*Student Questionnaire*

Please answer each question and give as much information as you can.

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_
2. Put a check in the boxes beside each of the electives listed below that you have taken at each grade level.

	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Chorus			
Drama			
Art			



