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# Culturally-Responsive Dance: Building Community One Step at a Time

Jeanette Jackson  
*Cleveland State University*

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CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE DANCE:  
BUILDING COMMUNITY ONE STEP AT A TIME

JEANETTE JACKSON

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The office of Curriculum and Foundations  
College of Education and Human Services  
And the College of Graduate Studies by

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Committee Chair, Dr. Anne Galletta

Educational Policy, December 2011

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Committee Member, Joshua Bagakas

Curriculum and Foundations, December 2011

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Committee Member, Debbie Jackson

Science Education, December 2011

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CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE DANCE:  
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**ABSTRACT**

James Catterall's, (1997) report, "Involvement in the Arts and Success in Secondary School", espoused the need for Arts Education. Finding that students who were involved in the arts had increased motivation, school attendance, and positive attitudes, this longitudinal study became a national model of Arts Education advocacy.

Landson Billings (1995) assertion that culturally-relevant pedagogy is a pillar for student success is but a further expansion of Ogbu (1987) which stated that "A culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural identity while succeeding academically" (p. 155). Although the academic world has reflected and responded to the concept of culturally-relevant, culturally-responsive, culturally-congruent and culturally-compatible curriculum through the development of research and a plethora of sensitivity building activities for aspiring and practicing teachers, the arts and arts education world have not gotten as far. The purpose of this research is to look at students who have been exposed to arts intensive education from a culturally-relevant perspective.

I stand with the great philosopher John Dewey, in his assertion that the arts should have a central role in general education, and I am interested in identifying ways in which that role is increased in the lives of the often marginalized students of our society: low SES, African-American, urban students in particular.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore the influence of participation in the cultural arts and activities emphasizing cultural identity on African-American youth. The participants of the research are youth who have been enrolled in cultural arts programming for a substantial period of their lives. The research intends to investigate ways in which the students perceive that this experience has changed or affected them and their outlook on life, academia, and community. The research will identify ways that this may have built resiliency in these youth and address the issue of preserving cultural identity and cultural arts within a context of globalization while exploring the tension that arises between demands for economic mobility through globalized practices and norms and the preservation of cultural identity and arts.

## Research question

The research question is as follows: “What impact does cultural arts activities have on the life experience, cultural identities and overall sense of community in African-American youth?”

In this work I intend to connect data with the literature to build the argument for more culturally-relevant arts education activities, programs and services for African-American students. The research will explore how African-American students’ involvement in arts education may improve their intellectual development, social awareness and build their cultural capacity. In particular, I will be highlighting and exploring a genre of the arts, West African Dance, that I believe is a dynamic, substantive art form that can not only positively impact the cultural identity of students, but increase their commitment to community and positive citizenship. I stand with the great philosopher John Dewey, in his assertion that the arts should have a central role in general education, and I am interested in identifying ways in which that role is increased in the lives of the often marginalized students of our society: low SES, African-American, urban students in particular.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### The Case for Arts Education

James Catterall's, (1997) report, "Involvement in the Arts and Success in Secondary School" was published in the *Americans for the Arts* monograph series. This analysis, sponsored by the United States Department of Education was based on a multiyear survey of more than 25,000 students, a sample created to be representative of the nation's population of secondary students. The groundbreaking work offered the first reported analysis of information in the NELS:88<sup>1</sup> survey about student participation in the arts. The term "involvement in the arts" included arts-related classes in or out of school as well as involvement and leadership in school activities, i.e. theater, band chorus, visual arts, orchestra and dance.

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<sup>1</sup>NELS:88-The National Educational Longitudinal Study, managed by the National Center for Education Statistics at the Office for Educational Research and Improvement, United States Department of Education. This panel study followed students for 10 years and addresses developments for children and adolescents over a period spent between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades- late middle through high school.

The reason this work was considered groundbreaking was that the analyses found significant and substantial differences in achievement and important attitudes and behaviors (such as increased motivation and engagement) between youth that are highly involved in the arts and those with little to no engagement in the arts. Even more significant from a policy standpoint, the achievement differences between high- and low-arts youth were also significant for children of lower SES<sup>2</sup>. Catterall(1997) findings are described:

Twenty<sup>3</sup> of the differences we found favoring arts-involved students were significant at the  $p < .001$  level.” (p. 3) (This means that the odds of the differences being caused by pure chance were smaller than one in one thousand.) Four differences were significant at the  $p < .01$  level. The only difference not significant was performance on the history geography tests for low SES children. (p. 3)

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<sup>2</sup>SES-Socioeconomic status, a measure of family education level, income and type of job(s) held by parents

<sup>3</sup> These included:

8<sup>th</sup> Grade Academic Performance- Earning mostly As and Bs in English, Scoring in top 2 quartiles on std. tests, dropping out by grade 10, bored in school half or most of the time

10<sup>th</sup> Grade Academic Performance- Scoring in top 2 quartiles, Grade 10 Std. Test Composite, Scoring in top 2 quartiles in Reading, Scoring in top 2 quartiles in History, Citizenship, Geography

10<sup>th</sup> Grade Attitudes and Behaviors- consider community service important or very important, television watching(weekdays), percentage watching 1 hour or less, percentage watching 3 hours or more

The findings themselves were quite remarkable. They consistently showed higher achievement, longer stay in school, and better attitudes (see list below) about school and community by students who were involved in the arts. Because this particular study included such a large body of participants, which prohibits our ability to unequivocally attribute these successes to the arts, there is a plethora of further substantiation needed of the positive impact of the arts on students.

Darby and Catterall's (1994) research theorized rationales for the impact of the arts by exploring the roles that the arts play in cognitive development. The work found that the arts serve to expand and broaden access to meaning through a diversification of ways of thinking and ways of representation. The link between the arts and student engagement and motivation is evident, demonstrating an increase in the attitudes that lead to higher academic achievement. This includes the ability of the arts to promote community, team spirit, increased inclusion and more of a shared sense of being and belonging. Students learn better problem solving, leadership, and artistic skills- as well as and tools for positive self-expression through opportunities to work in groups in artistic projects such as mural, theater productions, and dance ensembles. Increasing student social skills, empathy and interaction helps with the development of good citizenship, as well as a better sense of inclusion which contributes to the likelihood of community service and general attachment to the larger values of the school and the adult society which students will soon join.

The case for the arts as a motivational tool is being explored further as researchers continue to investigate effective means of student engagement. Several promising studies have shown that the arts provide engagement opportunities that can lead to extraordinary results in students. Fiske (2000) outlined key findings in the research identifying the value of arts education. Statements were related to the work of the researchers who have looked at the arts and education and have concluded the arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached.

Fiske's Executive Summary said it best:

Young people who are disengaged from schools and other community institutions are at the greatest risk of failure or harm. The researchers found that the arts provided a reason, and sometimes the only reason, for being engaged with school or other organizations. These young people would otherwise be left without access to any community of learners. Some students only come to school because of their after-school or artistic opportunities and rewards (p. IX)

Summarily, when we find ways to motivate students to come to school, we increase their likelihood of academic success. The arts can motivate and inspire student participation and with the number of students who struggle to experience academic success, the arts may serve to encourage them to continue the daily task of returning to the classroom. For these students, the arts, just as sports for some students, could be considered critical. The

arts provide the basis for these students to become engaged in the learning process, either through offering them the ability to have an opportunity for self-expression that is not available in the “normal” classroom setting, or by offering them a reward for their participation and achievement.

Furthermore, utilizing the arts to teach core academic subjects expands the ways in which we are engaging students in the learning process. Gardner (1983) identified the Multiple Intelligences Theory as a way for us to better understand the multiple ways students learn. The theory suggests that there are nine types of learners: spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, body-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic and existential. Gardner viewed intelligence as “the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural setting” (Gardner & Hatch, 1989, p. 41-43). Through the arts, particularly dance, students who solve problems physically are able to become further engaged and the research suggests that they can become more successful academically.

Once familiar with the Multiple Intelligences Theory, educators can clearly see how many academic settings lose the interest and engagement of kinesthetic and tactical learners. Wiggins & McTighe (2005) underscore the significance of holding a student’s interest in their *Backward Design* Model. The “WHERE TO” design model assists the planning process by reminding us that a well-planned unit has to be engaging to be effective. The model works under that premise that to be engaging and efficient, a unit must provide students with the following opportunities: Know where we are heading, and

why we have come here-W, Hook and hold the students-H, Explore, Experience, Enable and Equip-E, Reflect, Rethink, Revise-R, Evaluate work and progress-E, Tailor and personalize the work-T, Organize for optimal effectiveness-O. Offering young people the opportunity to move, touch, feel and experience through various senses deepens the learning experience, and for students who are body-kinesthetic learners, it is their primary means of doing so. This usage of instruction involving multiple senses, as the arts does, further increases the ways that students engage and connect to the learning process. Therefore, the arts can help transform the environment for learning.

The Arts connect students to themselves and each other. James Cattarral's (2000) research uncovers a shift in attitudes of young people toward one another through artistic learning experiences. Steve Siedel's work as the principal investigator for the work of the Shakespeare Theater's Education program, *Stand up and Unfold Yourself*(p. 80) speaks to the ability that the arts have to help participants in "opening oneself-to the highest level of literacy, to Shakespeare's language, to the ideas and meanings contained in his words, to other people. At the same time, it is about standing and embodying the work. It is about revealing oneself—taking risks, and accepting and embracing the vulnerability inherent in those risks. It is about moving away from a sleepy, protective posture of being folded up, or folded into oneself, and moving toward a tall, open, awake, and graceful stance."

Dennie Palmer Wolf's research (2000) explores a program that was successful in identifying how the arts benefited students socially and cognitively. Through the



development process of creating an opera, students learned how to flesh out ideas, constructively critique themselves and others, problem-solve and brain storm. The students' number of turns to speak that included revisions to their own ideas, outweighed the control group 3:1 as did their ability to tie their new ideas back to a long term theme or issue for the group.

Wolf's work demonstrates one way that artistic experiences can help students to stay connected to their cognitive, emotional and social selves. Francis Parker (1894) stated that for learning to be deep, it must be "expressive" and that it must combine "the manifestation of thought and emotion" (p.1). The arts can serve as a vehicle for expression, exploration and self-learning, while developing the potential to help foster healthy interactions with others. Fiske (2000) refers to this as "self-directed learning" when he states: "Students learning in and through the arts become their own toughest critics. The students are motivated to learn not just for test results or other performance outcomes, but for the learning experience itself."(p. IX)

The arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful. Because the arts offer opportunities for self-expression, they expand the opportunity for both successful and non-successful students, increasing the breadth and depth of learning. The research of Oreck, et al's (2008) on the Young Talent program affirms that the arts can offer success to students whose background, support systems and/or environment may not statistically point to their future success.

For the past 20 years, the Young Talent program, developed and implemented by the non-profit ArtConnections' program in Manhattan, has offered the opportunity for elementary students of New York City to learn the arts, particularly music and dance. This diverse body of students, of which a high percentage was low SES participated in research from the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. This longitudinal, multiple-case study followed 23 youth and young adults (aged 10-26), through three pivotal stages of music and dance development: elementary school; intermediate school; and high school, high school, college, professional or semi-professional careers. Not only were there a high percentage of these students who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, many of them also “attend or attended schools with no arts specialists. Over half of them had, at one time, been labeled as at-risk for school failure due to poor grades, absences, behavioral or family issues. The effect of sustained study in an art form on these talented young people provides powerful evidence for the crucial role of arts education in helping students achieve their educational and personal potential.” (p. 65). Thirteen of the 23 were from single-parent homes and most were eligible for free lunch programs.

The research affirmed that students, while possessing few of the resources, parental or community support mechanisms as their more affluent and successful peers, had developed the capacity to experience qualities that are usually associated with personal success, such as self-regulation, identity and resilience. The researchers (ArtsConnection) discovered that the large majority of students in the study had achieved

a high level of success in the arts, in school and in their career choices. Researchers defined success in three dimensions: 1) the degree to which they were able to develop their talent, 2) their academic progress and aspirations, and 3) evidence of personal development that helped them in other areas of their lives. Success in talent development was measured by continued involvement in training both in and outside of school, instructor evaluations, awards, scholarships, and performing experience.

Academic progress was defined as good grades in school, or completion of high school and engagement in post-secondary education. Personal development involved the application of individual talent in career or personal life and the discipline and motivation in pursuing interests and responsibilities.

One reason the ArtsConnection, Youth Arts program has been so successful is that it has a feeder system into the professional world of the arts. Students who have met certain requirements artistically are then offered the opportunity to study with professional organizations such as the Alvin Ailey School of Dance (for which subsequently one member of the study is now a principal dancer) or The Martha Graham School of Dance. As noted by the success of the aforementioned study, having access to professionals in the arts can connect learning experiences to the world of real work.

Lastly, the arts involve an ever changing exchange of ideas. In today's complex, fast paced society, the ability to problem solve, exchange ideas and remain flexible are critical to a successful career. A successful artistic production involves a symphony of players, various roles from producer to actor, stagehand to usher. Just as in the real world,

everyone has a part to play that is special and unique, utilizing individual talents and gifts. Education very often takes a linear approach to roles, you are either a teacher or a student, and grades are determined based upon a rubric of defined objectives with little to no variance or flexibility for nonlinear learners. In contrast, while the arts have criteria and roles, they tend to be more demonstrative and allow for personal interpretation, within reason. Through the artistic process, students are able to explore and develop through the mode of interest for a kinesthetic learner, performance. In fact one member of the ArtsConnection study was given the opportunity to perform for the inauguration of President Bill Clinton; undoubtedly a testament to the myriad of learning and performance opportunities to develop and refine a talent that otherwise may not have blossomed.

## The Case for African Dance and Music in Arts Education

### Culturally-relevant pedagogy

Upon looking at the amalgam of data suggesting the positive effects of arts education in youth, as a researcher I began to wonder if these results would be greater, and even more substantive if subjects were exposed to “culturally-relevant pedagogy”, within the arts. The Landson Billings (1995) assertion that culturally-relevant pedagogy is a pillar for student success is but a further expansion of Ogbu (1987) which stated that “A culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural identity while succeeding academically” (p. 155). Although the academic world has reflected and

responded to the concept of culturally-relevant, culturally-responsive, culturally-congruent and culturally-compatible curriculum through the development of research and a plethora of sensitivity building activities for aspiring and practicing teachers, the arts and arts education world have not gotten as far. The Oreck (2008) research of the ArtsConnect project demonstrated the program's utilization of such notable professional community resources as the Alvin Ailey School of Dance. However, this speaks to but one facet of dances of the black experience, and even that from a Euro-centric lens.

### Post-colonial theory

My further inquiry is informed by post-colonial theory, which Hastie (2006) defines as an attempt to “reform the intellectual and epistemological exclusions of the Western academy” (p. 293). In the Gandhi (1948) work on post-colonial theory he sees the issue as a ‘theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past.’(4). Bearing this concept in mind, I considered the success of utilizing Shakespearean theater in suburban settings and wondered if African-American youth would have been as engaged. From the post-colonial point of view, even the inclusion of the Alvin Ailey School of Dance, furthers the assumption that in order to be considered as a professional dancer, one must dance the dances of the western hegemony. Adam and Tiffin's (1991) description of a Euro-American western hegemony is one that “proscribes certain cultures (particularly those that have been colonized) as backward and marginal”, (p. 294). Would an African Dance and/or Drum program be considered as a viable alternative activity? Are traditional

dance styles, art forms and cultures given a perfunctory role in the development of appropriate activities for African-American youth? Upon examining the success of the Shakespearean, and opera projects, would a more appropriate source of developing language arts skills be Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters? How could this acclaimed, award-winning African tale that teaches positive character development traits, while vividly and positively describing African people, landscapes, cultural traditions and values, not be considered? Would such a project, which reinforces the academic standards of retelling a story, be effective as a means of not only developing vocabulary, understanding plot, developing a script, creating and replicating characters and developing presentation skills, but also, developing deeper cultural identity and pride? Could each study have furthered debunked the stereotypes of "Other" and presented a deeper level of commonality of all by including culturally-relevant artistic experiences?

The famous choreographer Martha Graham is credited with the quote, "Dance is the hidden language of the soul". If this is true, then African Dance is the expression of a community's soul. It is the kinesthetic expression of a community's educational, social, cultural and political views and values. It is because we see full dance rituals, intricate and independent rhythms, specific costuming/clothing, and personalized songs, celebrating the five primary rites-of-passage points (birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood and death), that we begin to ascertain the value that the community places on them. African Dance is a broad term, encompassing, arguably, tens to hundreds of thousands of dances, rituals and traditional movements that represent the expressions of the 2,500 ethnic groups from the 50+ countries of continental Africa. But the reality of what dance

in Africa means is universal to most African cultures, because of the historical memories that they represent.

The research will explore the need to reintroduce these rituals, dances, rhythms, songs, traditions and stories, to the African-American community, as a means of reclaiming history, empowering community, and building citizenship. Dance is a creative method of integrating kinesthetic learning into daily life, including basic proponents of education, social, and ethical lessons. Through extensive study of West African dance, I have seen its ability to inspire youth in various aspects of their educational endeavors. With the infusion of West African dance and culture, built upon principles of respect and cooperation, the community initiative in urban America can be reinforced and strengthened.

In *Hands, Eyes, Butts and Thighs*, Gittens (2008) remarks on the first time the researcher saw Senegalese women dancing and how she, “was thrilled to know that there were women *Black like me* who graced the stage as hired professional dancers and formed the majority of dancers in (Ballet National du Senegal)”(p. viii). This was especially profound in juxtaposition to the pain, frustration and anguish of being “poked and prodded by the dance master’s stick” (p. vii), while being singled out and corrected as a child in ballet class for the differences that her skin and body created in the quest to be a “perfect” dancer. The research goes on to state that the Ballet National du Senegal<sup>4</sup> did

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<sup>4</sup>Ballets National du Senegal- The National Dance Company of Senegal, comprised of dancers, drummers,

for her, “personally what I suppose Senghor<sup>5</sup> would have wanted: it exposed me to a stage full of African women who represented the cultures of West African societies as they performed and toured internationally while teaching the world about the existence of Sabar<sup>6</sup> among other styles of Senegalese dance.” (p. viii). Gittens is referring to Negritude, a concept and vocabulary that Senghor and two friends, one who subsequently became the President of France developed. Negritude is defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as “the self-affirmation of black peoples, or the affirmation of the values of civilization of something defined as ‘the black world’ as an answer to the question ‘what are we in this white world?’”(Césaire 2005, 23). Negritude, is a volatile word in some circles, and is argued by Castaldi (2000) to make race, “assume the concept of ethnicity...nevertheless race is conceived as a sort of meta-ethnicity, indexing a

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musicians, singers and oral historians from various major ethnic groups of Senegal so that it can be representative of the fullest spectrum of Senegalese cultures

<sup>5</sup>Leopold Sedar Senghor- A poet, politician, and the first president after Senegal’s independence from France.

<sup>6</sup>Sabar- a family of traditional drums and their corresponding dances. Sabar was originally created by the Serere, but was made famous by the Wolof and is considered the Senegalese national dance. The family of dances insabar include ritual dances for naming ceremonies (naming ceremonies are called bukata or nginte, and the dance Bara Mbaye is dedicated to them), dances named after one of the most proficient and amazing areas of sabar, a fishing town called Kaolack, and dances named after the Senegalese National dish, Thiebujen (pronounced Chebugen). These are only a few of the dances of the sabar, but all the Sabar dances are now done throughout the country of Senegal, and are taught internationally as a part of the sabar dance craze.



cultural and biological unity that supersedes the cultural diversity of African ethnicities.” (p. 7). Castaldi does not take into account the reality that race was the deciding factor and the only variable by which African people were taken from their homes and forced into unpaid manual labor on a global scale. Therefore, race was also a shared reality, and in order for a shared healing, it had to be a catalyst and a common denominator. This does not absolve the reality that there are a multitude of over 2,000 African cultures, each with their own languages, cultures and customs. This should all be considered as we look to integrate African dance into a more culturally-responsive curriculum for African-American students.

Through integrationist movements such as Negritude, the world has been blessed to have inherited both Ballet National du Senegal and Ballets Africains, a company based in Conakry, Guinea which was developed and supported by President Sekou Toure’ as a way for Africa to show the world, “that before you came to civilize us, we already had civilization”, a popular Guinean statement. Toure’s Ballets Africains, and Senghor’s Ballet National du Senegal continue to tour internationally, bringing joy and intrigue as well as culture and history to its audiences. Given the success and strength of West African dance, how can we draw on this success and integrate African Arts and Culture into the Arts Education movement?

Gondo (1999) looks at the ways in which the Kankouran West African Dance Company of Washington, D.C has been able to influence community through a West African Dance curriculum. Kankouran, currently celebrating thirty years of impact in the Washington,

D.C. area prides itself on not only being the recipient of several National Endowment of the Arts grants, being invited to perform at the White House, hosting an annual conference that hosts up to 300 dance professionals from throughout the United States and touring nationally and internationally. Kankouran also prides itself on the regular community classes that it offers four days per week to a cross-section of inner-city, suburban and college students. The company is led by Assane Konte, whom Gondo refers to as a “cultural transmitter” (p.3): “The transmission and transformation are assumed goals for dance in African culture. In the dominant culture of the United States this is not taken for granted. Konte’s work represents an international negotiation of African and African-American realities.” (p. 3).

In the dissertation Gondo refers to the initial jolt of taking her first class and the feeling of being overwhelmed. “I felt that I had been pulled backwards through time and landed in a traditional village. That sense of déjà vu was exciting but a bit frightening. I felt that I belonged there and was out of place at the same time. I found a part of myself which I thought had been lost. I found my connection to Africa” (p.1).

Gondo went on to say while she was taking classes from Kankouran, she was also conducting dance therapy sessions with African-Americans. She began to see similar dance movement styles and qualities in both arenas, and although the research doesn’t explore the possible implications of African Dance and dance therapy, it does mention that while many of the patient’s mental disabilities were severe, they created improvisations using multiple rhythms within the context of a given rhythm. In doing so,

Gondo suggests that there “was a path open to health available through African derived dance” (p. 2). This, of course, is a further discussion which would add to the body of research in the various implications and opportunities of African dance in community.

Gondo addresses this:

“The Kankouran dance class became a place where I could explore my own questions regarding my African heritage... the link between dance as performance and as a healing tool in the African-American communities I observed that were deteriorating socially and spiritually. Within the Kankouran community the African-American members were more than just dancers taking a class. They had relationships that showed support for each other. Many of the community members were family members. Children were taken care of by the community and the elders were praised through clapping whenever they danced. It was clear to me that the dance class was a prime source for social and community connection and empowerment, where African-Americans experienced their culture at the primal level of the body” (p.2).

Welshe-Asante (1985) defined the dance of Africa as generational, passed on from one generation to the next, within an ethnic group for religious, social, or ceremonial purposes. There are several ways in which the Negritude movement and its subsequent development of national dance companies have permanently altered this perspective. In its original setting, dances of the over 2,500 African ethnic groups were performed within their cultural context, i.e. Yankadi, is done at the time of the full moon by the Susu of Guinea, or Ekonkon, which is done at the time of a naming ceremony, eight days after

the birth of a child. When these and other dances are done in their cultural context, there is a limited amount of movements, each clearly connected to the original purpose and context of the dance. An entire night could consist of just 2-3 movements, being repeated by different members of the society, or by various groups based on family, friends, neighbors or other commonalities.

When these dance began to be ‘staged’ for western audiences, there was a need for expansion of the dance vocabulary, the development of choreographic rules, and the streamlining of the original instruments, songs and other cultural nuances. For example, if a company is to perform dances from 5 different ethnic groups, it would be cumbersome to travel with five sets of drums, or a kora player who can only accompany two of the dances, so eventually, things mainstreamed into the djembe<sup>7</sup> drum orchestra being played for most traditional dances.

Interestingly enough, the dances have still maintained its authenticity to building and maintaining community. For instance, in Davis-Craig (2009) community is described through the lens of a new participant. From the initial entrance into the dance space, there was an observance of the exchanging of hugs, children playing and a feeling of being welcomed. By the second visit, people recognized her and greeted her the same way. She felt that she had been accepted in a community. This is one vital aspect of the beauty of

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<sup>7</sup>Dembe drum orchestra- the djembe is a very popular instrument of World music that originated in Guinea but has now become the standard for international percussion. The djembe orchestra consists of the djembe, lead and accompanying drum, the djundjuns, a 3-part family of instruments which play the baseline of the music, the kora, a 21-stringed instrument that is known to be the predecessor of the banjo, and the balafone- a wooden melodic instrument from which the xylophone and piano were derived.

African dance, its ability to welcome and embrace everyone. She then goes on to share her experiences in a second dance company. She dreaded classes because she knew that she would be working on a dance called Lamba<sup>7</sup>.

Although Lamba<sup>8</sup> wasn't preferred by Davis-Craig, it was the primary African dance of this university based, contemporary ensemble. The research states that it took the researcher about two years to feel comfortable in the dance, but within that time, she was never made to feel unaccepted or as if she wasn't welcomed on someone else's line<sup>9</sup>. This ability to offer inclusion and acceptance would be beneficially to the western community as a whole, especially a population of youth who are at-risk. I believe that this story personifies the power of the connection with African Dance that is inherent to many people, not exclusively African-Americans.

African Dance has become a craze internationally, with daily videos being produced of European, American and Asian groups, who are learning African dance. There is even a Japanese Sabar dance company, Fatima, recently shooting several popular Senegalese singers' videos as background dancers, and their lead dancer gracing the stage at the Daniel

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<sup>8</sup>Lamba (Lambang) is a Jali-dong- a dance of the Jali's. The Jali's are the oral historians of the Mandinke (Mande) culture and their dance (dong), is one that can go from being performed for the King to being performed for the common people. The dance has an extensive use of the neck, and arms and the syncopation of the dance is generally difficult to grasp by new dancers.

<sup>9</sup> In West African dance classes, the students cross the floor in lines, it is very important to maintain the lines, as the momentum of the class is stifled when they are not maintained in an orderly flow.

Sorano Theater with Ballet National du Senegal's Director, Bouly Sonko's son, Pape Moussa.

I am not abdicating the rights of everyone to learn, know and possibly perform African Dances. The researcher is simply highlighting various examples to demonstrate why at-risk youth, particularly African-American youth can benefit from studying their traditional arts and cultures. Of particular interest is how this art can impact their cultural identity, self-concept and self-esteem. Based upon the research and the extensive study of the impact of the arts on the lives of young people, its ability to help them academically, socially and personally, this research will particularly be focused on exploring the impact of African dance in African-American youth. Further implications may indicate a need for African dance to be a regular part of the educational process for African-American children, impacting their cultural identity at an early age and teaching positive values and beliefs that would help build character, strength and resiliency. The research will allow for a more full exploration of the impact of African dance for African-American youth.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore the influence of participation in the cultural arts and activities emphasizing cultural identity on African-American youth. The participants of the research are youth who have been enrolled in cultural arts programming for a substantial period of their lives. The research intends to investigate ways in which the students perceive that this experience has changed or affected them and their outlook on life, academia, and community. The research will identify ways that this may have built resiliency in these youth and address the issue of preserving cultural identity and cultural arts within a context of globalization while exploring the tension that arises between demands for economic mobility through globalized practices and norms and the preservation of cultural identity and arts.

## Research question

The research question is as follows: “What impact does cultural arts activities have on the life experience, cultural identities and overall sense of community in African-American youth?”

## Data Acquisition

### Defining Terms

Cultural arts- Cultural arts are defined as music, dance, drama and visual arts activities that not only engage the depth of the arts, and the honing of basic, agreed upon skills in the craft, but also are reflective of the participant’s cultural heritage.

Cultural identity-The self-image that a person has in regards to their natural born cultural heritage, what it means to them and how it affects the way that they see themselves.

Overall sense of community- How a person views the macro and micro world in which they are currently situated, including the cultural community that they are born into.

## Participants

Three participants were chosen through a convenience sampling of students who have participated in a culturally-responsive African Dance program for a minimum of two years. Participants were between the ages of 8-24 years old and participated in inquiry-based interviews. These three student participants of the Cultural Arts program volunteered to be interviewed at Cleveland State University. They were informed that the purpose of the interview was to explore the impact of this program in various areas of



their lives. The students: ages 17, 18 and 22 have all been a part of the program for at least eight years and have matriculated through the youth and young adult sections of the program. Each of these students not only studied in the program, but have each gone through the program's leadership training, sharing their knowledge with new students, both youth and adult.

The first participant is a 17 year old female, who lives in the Glenville area of Cleveland. She attends, on scholarship, an all-girls private school in Shaker and is the daughter of the researcher. She has studied, performed and participated in programming with this organization both nationally and internationally. She is a high-achieving young lady, preparing to move to Los Angeles to attend a top-ten academic school, Claremont McKenna, as a first-year student. She is very articulate and takes much time to expound upon her answers to each question. She is Participant A and will be referred to as Susan.

The second participant is 18 years old, and the sister of the first, also the daughter of the researcher. She currently lives in Los Angeles as a sophomore student at Occidental College. She graduated from the same private high school as her sister and has traveled extensively with the program as well. She currently returns to Cleveland in the summer to visit and assist with the program. Both young ladies have been with the program since its inception in 1998, 13 years ago. This young lady showed an upbeat temperament, brief but concise answers and an overall optimism about the program. She is Participant B, and will be referred to as Angela.

The third participant is 22 and started participating with the program at the age of 14, as a freshman in a Cleveland Metropolitan high school. He was introduced to the program through a teacher and has become a full member: performing, studying and now teaching new students as an ongoing commitment. He is currently attending Cuyahoga Community College and is majoring in music education. He grew up in the Kinsman area, and now lives in Garfield Hts. He is an active and enthusiastic participant in both the program and the interview. He is Participant C and will be referred to as William.

### Setting

In order to offer a professional atmosphere for students to seriously reflect upon their experiences, the setting for the research will be at Cleveland State University, in a classroom. Consideration was given to conducting the interviews at the home of a community elder, but because of the convenience to Cleveland State University from many of our inner-city youth's home, CSU was chosen as our interview location.

### Qualitative Method

To best explore all possible impacts of the program on the participants, I have chosen to take a grounded theory, inquiry-based approach to the data collection process. Through guided, as well as open ended questions, students will be able to share their experiences and to reflect on how they feel those experiences affected them at the time or continue to this day. This qualitative method was chosen because the researcher wanted to allow the

participants to tell their story, without having to fit their experiences within the limited context of predetermined questions. The literature previously reviewed demonstrated that the quantitative impact is apparent; it is the aim of this research to allow the data to speak to ‘why’ the arts are making a difference in the lives of youth and to let that inform the theories created from its collection.

### Data Analysis

Throughout the interviews, I noticed several distinct patterns in the stories. I continued to hear the world community and each conversation further explained what community meant to these youth. After the interviews with the participants, I began to work with my advisor, Dr. Galletta, formalize how I would structure the presentation of this data and how these recurring themes could be best organized for coherent communication. The data was analyzed according to the following questions, which were applied to each individual interview, then to the data as a whole:

1. Within this single interview, what is the experience this participant narrates? What is the meaning this participant gives to his or her experience? How is that meaning conveyed through the semi-structured interview?
2. What other significant meanings are evident in the data from this interview?
3. What points from the interview stand out in particular? What questions remain as it relates to this interview?

4. How do different segments within the interview relate? Are different segments of the interview producing different stories, eliciting varying or contradicting data?
5. How do the data from this interview address the research question?
6. What has emerged that relates to other interview data? In what way – confirmatory, extending, nuancing, or contradictory – are these data related to data from other interviews? Data from other methodological sources?
7. What has emerged that is new in the analysis thus far?

With these guiding questions, I have been able to organize the data and identify patterns that will enable the reader to see the overarching themes and impact of this research.

### Limitations

The findings are limited to the three participants who were interviewed for this study. All three students represent the socio-economic climate of many inner-city youth, and all three come from an inner-city background. The first student is representative of the public education system; however, the other two participants were students attending a prestigious private school. Interestingly enough, it was their participation in the arts that helped them to get into the school; nevertheless, the impact of the education must be factored into an objective analysis. Within the findings of this study, the participants share how they felt their cultural awareness helped them to maintain within this

competitive environment, as a minority who did not share the same cultural axiology or economic means as the majority of their classmates.

Another limitation of the study is that the two aforementioned students are also the daughters of the researcher, a fact that can potentially impact their responses. The researcher took steps to clearly explain to all the participants that their responses were voluntary, and that they have the choice to not answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with and that their responses would not be held against them in any way. The students agreed and were very open about their experiences in the program.

### Conclusion

Through the process of developing this research I am hopeful to identify patterns of concepts that resonate, with some consistency, throughout the participants. It is my hope that this research can begin to uncover ways in which studying African culture can positively impact the lives of African-American students; academically, socially, and internally. The researcher will particularly be interested in patterns of affected or increased self-esteem, and cultural pride, and how those factors may correspond to increased academic achievement, focus, community participation and future aspirations.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three student participants of the Cultural Arts program volunteered to be interviewed at Cleveland State University. During the interviews, several recurring themes emerged from the students' expressed experiences. To better synthesize the data, these themes were categorized as: Cultural Identity, Academic Impact, Community, The Arts and Resiliency.

#### Thematic Patterns in the Research

##### Cultural Identity

Throughout the interviews, the participants referred to various ways the program has helped them learn more about themselves. This particular program is based in African/African-American culture and each interviewee was African-American. Continuously the program was referred to in ways that emphasized its impact on their

view of not only the world and the community, but who they were in it, alluding to a cultural consciousness. Examples of this exist in each interview and come through as a resounding theme. For example, when asked how he felt this program has affected him, William responded, *"This program has taught me that I come from royalty therefore I can achieve greatness because I come from greatness."*

Susan further expounds upon this in her interview. She stated, *"I definitely have a better understanding of who I am in the world, concerning my race, my history, my ancestry. I think that it's very important for me to have some kind of a background, something to fall back on and someone to look up to, because there are so many people that have done so many great things in the African-American and African community."*

Angela refers to how knowing her culture helped her to value people of other cultures. She indicated, *"It's definitely opened my eyes to the culture. And I feel like, if people learn about the cultures they can learn about people, all around the world. And as long as you're willing to accept new cultures, you learn more about them, you're basically willing to accept a new person. So I feel like learning about different cultures, in a way, really helps you to understand things about yourself. But in general it helps you to understand how to deal with people better. That's what it's done for me."*

When asked how he felt this program has affected the way that he views his culture, William stated: *"I have grown to have a deep appreciation and respect for my culture, first of all, because I know much more about it. There are so many great principles,*

*moral values, and proverbs that my culture holds that are overlooked because of people's distorted perceptions of it due to media; which is where this program steps in to illuminate the truth."* His answer has illuminated several dimensions of cultural identity, such as knowledge of culture; view of self and community through the eyes of the media and others; and how to correct perceptions. When asked how he felt this program has influenced him, his answers demonstrated that this program helped him to develop a positive view of himself, and to embrace cultural expressions of creativity, dress and creative identity.

### Academic Impact

Each student interviewed demonstrated evidence of academic success through their narrative of successful high school completion and participation in college level coursework. They're accomplishments are quite compelling evidence of academic success in relationship to other students in their neighborhoods and similar home, cultural and socio-economic environments. According to an article published in the New York Times review of America's Promise Alliance's, Closing the Graduation Gap report in 2009, in 2005 the inner-city of Cleveland's graduation rate was the worst in the country at 34.3%<sup>10</sup>, according to the School Report Card provided by the State of Ohio, its current graduation rate is 62.8%. Nevertheless, each of these student participants defied that reality, and those statistics, by graduating from high school with academic honors,

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<sup>10</sup> Dillon, Sam (2009, April 22). Large Urban-Suburban Gap seen in Graduation Rates. *The New York Times*, Retrieved November 15, 2011). Closing the Graduation Gap, America's Promise Alliance.



receiving scholarships to several prestigious schools, and enrolling directly into both locally and nationally recognized colleges.

In the interviews the participants elucidate the impact that the cultural arts program has had on their academic success, and how being a part of it has attributed to their quest for academic excellence. Angela said, *"Through this particular program, I feel like a lot of the things we've learned...school is the biggest part of it. And so being a part of this program and really through people that have come to be a part of this program, I feel like a lot of us come out of it learning just how important school is. If you want to do anything, later on in your life, you have to do school first. So that's one of the biggest things that I've learned and I think other people have learned too."*

William's response correlated his skill in the arts to his academic skill. *"There's no doubt in my mind that if I can do the complicated African dances that I'm taught then I can definitely do school work."* He also attributed it to mentorship and high standards that the program set for all participants.

Susan, a high honors student, chose to answer this question by giving an example of academic success that she observed in a fellow participant of the program. *"One guy who was in the dance company with me a couple of years ago, he was having a lot of problems at home: his mother has a lot of children and she just wasn't really paying much attention to him and he wasn't really doing well in school. But when he joined the dance company, he just had, really a purpose about him and it's really just awesome to*

*see when he gets on the stage. It was like this is where he really was meant to be and he really tried to explore the good side of him, that side of performing that he found he loved to do...now he's graduated from high school, which prior to this I don't know if he would have done it, because he didn't have a whole lot of people who were encouraging him to do it. But he's just done a lot better with his life, he's going to school, he's trying to become a doctor, actually!"*

### Community

In addition to the cultural arts influence on academic success, the narratives of the three youth indicated that the cultural arts also impressed on them the importance of community. These young people have gotten a firm grasp on the complex concept of community, and used vocabulary demonstrating that continuously throughout our interviews. Even in questions that specifically reflected on how the students were impacted, they continued to come back to their concept of community. Participants stated that the program helped them achieve self-development for the benefit of the community, not just for self-gratification and personal accolades. This resounding theme of community and their interconnectedness with it was quite fascinating, especially considering the age of the participants. Participants gave examples of receiving support from community, feeling a part of community and being a positive example to the community.

Susan, for example, also credits the program with helping her understand the increasingly complex role of the individual's wellbeing and how that is connected to a community of people who support others. During the interview, she referred several times to "the community", addressing herself as a member of "the community", and clearly articulating that she sees community as a deeply complex concept, one in which she is not only a participant, but significantly contributing factor. She states, "*...but the older I've gotten, and the more people I've come to know, I've started to see that things are not that simple. As far as people who are in a constant cycle of poverty, that's really a psychological thing, and it's not as easy as, you know, deciding I'm gonna do better one day. Because there's always obstacles and for some people it's almost impossible for them to even reach what I could consider being normal. And so because of that, I've started to see the community as being something that I really have to put all my efforts in, in order to make it better. And I can't be like, 'oh, it's gonna get better over time, or someone else is gonna do it'".*

In regards to community, Angela stated, "*Well one of the things that I learned was that community builds character. So, if it's a strong community you have individuals that have strong character. And I feel like this program, or programs like this, or programs that deal with the arts, help to build a strong community.* She ties in another aspect of this in her response to what she has gained or lost in the program, noting "*in terms of things that I've lost, probably some more selfishness, I guess. When you realize that you are working with the community, you quickly get over yourself. You quickly say, hey its more than just about me. So I feel like I've lost some of those tendencies.*"

In looking at how the concept of community was pervasive throughout the program, Angela affirmed that she is one of many who felt a part of the community. “Yeah, *I’ve noticed a lot of times when people come in, you know at a later stage, they tend to just become more community driven, more focused on things that can benefit other people. Personally I feel that I’ve learned those things since I was younger, but realizing that some people, couldn’t possibly (have) learned those things.*”

William’s take on community was that “*the community is in desperate need to know its worth and this program reaches out to its own community and beyond to do that. It holds the tools of empowerment that sheds light to the fact that we have the ability to come together and be something powerful, beautiful and uplifting; instead of joining together to come against each other. This program provides the opportunity for youth and adults to be that example*”. As a researcher, I considered this to be a clear commitment to wanting to give back to community and to make a difference.

### The Arts

With the overwhelming amount of social impact the cultural arts had, as an interviewer I wondered how authentic the actual artistic experiences were. The research was designed to study the influence of the cultural arts. In particular, I was interested in whether this program maintained artistic integrity, or if the arts were just a byline that brought young people in the door of a social service organization that wanted to build character and community. I asked the participants about how this program has affected the way they

see the arts. Interestingly, the participants appeared to discuss the arts in relation to some other dimension – cultural identity and creative expression for example. Angela’s response demonstrated an interesting balance between artistic expression and social advocacy/awareness. “...Positively affected the way that I see the arts. Primarily because I realize now, how the arts can positively affect other people. And it basically gives another creative outlet to express them. I think that’s a really good thing for people, especially the young children.” This statement, in conjunction with William’s previous statement about the intricacies and level of difficulty in the West African dance, supports the theme that the art form was of as much value as the accompanying cultural principles.

### Resilience

In these interviews we hear from remarkable, high achieving young people. As an interviewer I wanted to know if these young people were just an anomaly or if there were leadership skills that they learned in this program, and how they felt this program prepared them to be different from their contemporaries. When I asked Angela if she felt this program had anything to do with her uniqueness, she responded, *“I think it’s influenced me because it helped me to realize that I can be a leader. It definitely gave me a lot of leadership skills as well as communication skills. In addition to that, it’s taught me self-motivation, perseverance, as well as the importance of hard work.”*

Combing through the data, I began to wonder if these young people realized that their experiences, while wonderful, were very different than the data suggests for other young people of similar SES (socio-economic status) and background. I began to look for patterns in which they may have demonstrated that they understood that contrast. I found several clues that these students understood the difference between their experience and that of the peers. Also evident in the data was the suggestion that cultural arts programming was a solution to many community issues and that it would be beneficial for many. For example, Angela was asked how she felt that the cultural arts program has changed her outlook on the future, on other people's future and how her life has changed. She responded, *“Definitely for the better. People become more positive. Their outlook on life has become more positive. And so by giving them a base, by giving them something that they can look forward to and sort of think positive about in their future, then they can start to make positive changes, wherever they are now. So I feel that giving people a creative outlet to express themselves, helps them to release any negative emotions that they might have or that they've been holding on to. So, releasing those barriers or releasing the baggage, it just helps people to move forward a lot easier.”*

Angela's comments reflected the first time that mental and emotional health and well-being came to my attention in the analysis, a very important point that I nearly missed, honestly. I then looked back and realized that there was further corroborating evidence of emotional implications of this program, beyond the natural enjoyment that one would associate with young people having the opportunity to dance and create music. Susan stressed the importance that this program has had on her personal self-esteem and self-

image, “...I don’t feel I need to do that [negative] stuff because I know who I am. I know what having my culture will allow me to do in a career path. I don’t necessarily have to steal or sell drugs or any of those things in order to make a way, because I know that there’s a better route and I know how to get there, which some people don’t have. So it’s (the program) influenced me in a very positive way, my self-esteem has been influenced.”

This may have proved of further consequence for this particular participant, who, like her sister, attended a private school in which she was a minority, on scholarship. Susan shared how the skills and information she learned from this program helped her manage the arduous times that she experienced in that environment. “I go to a predominantly white school and when people in my schools would talk about, ‘Oh my family is French and this is what we do, my family is German, this is what we do’ ...I can be confident and say, ‘My family is from Cameroon, my family’s from Nigeria and my family from Angola...’ You know it really allows me to know who I am and most people (African-Americans) don’t know that, they just really have no idea and the furthest back their history goes is to the south. So this program and the people who are involved in it have really allowed me to see what’s important in life, to see how I can further my education and the importance of it, and how I can spread what I know onto other people.”

I’m beginning to observe the pattern of strong cultural identity that seems to be pervasive in this type of art program. This increased sense of identity may provide roots, or an anchor for youth, particularly youth who are at risk. With an increased positive cultural identity, students can have an increased sense of resiliency to deviant and negative behaviors and societal influences. The cultural arts programs keep young people

occupied during the high-risk after-school hours and help them to develop the internal fortitude that will help them say no to drugs, reduce teen pregnancy and curb violence in communities.

Of further significance was an observation of how the participants perceived those who did not participate in this type of programming, and how they felt this program would affect their future. Susan states, *“From this program I’ve gained a sense of awareness, of myself and also of the greater community....there’s some things that stereotypes will tell me that, this is a bad thing about myself, that I should feel bad about, but I know that that’s not necessarily myself. It might be a stereotype for my race but I don’t have to follow that model. I don’t have to be that person. And so knowing that means that I no longer have to be ignorant to that fact that I can do better, so I’ve lost that ignorant factor that unfortunately a lot of people still have.”* William summed up his outlook on his future and how this program has affected it, *“Through this program I have realized that everyone has the potential to be great. We just have to be taught certain things, loved a certain way, and have our greatness nurtured. No more feeding the negativity but instead growing and strengthening the positivity. Not everyone takes the same paths to greatness but we all can achieve success. Working together, edifying each other, loving one another, respecting one another, and understanding each other will make the world a better place.”* Notice the interesting use of language in William’s statement. Might cultural arts programming offer sustenance? Is there a hunger for meaning and belonging that the cultural arts programming provide? Based upon my analysis, I think there is something very important that we can glean from these data. Our young people



are hungry, they are constantly “feeding” on some message, some idea, some thought. Is the behavior, the attitude, the outward expressions of our youth a reflection of what we, as society are feeding them? Have they acquired a ‘taste’ for negativity, and do culturally relative arts teach them that they can acquire a more positive taste? Might cultural arts programming offer sustenance? Is there a hunger for meaning and belonging that the cultural arts programming provide? Based upon my analysis, I think there is something very important that we can glean from this data. Our young people are hungry, they are constantly ‘feeding’ on some message, some idea, some thought.

## CHAPTER V

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

My original research question was, “*What impacts do cultural arts activities have on the life experiences and cultural identities of African-American youth?*” I wanted to explore the intersections of impact in the students’ academic, community and personal lives. The overall resounding message leads me as the researcher to conclude that there are ways that cultural arts programs can serve as a conduit to youth learning more about themselves and their culture and that this information can serve as a means through which youth might participate in positive social change. The data reveal several ways in which cultural arts programming have impacted the academic, social, and community lives of these participants. To see a very well educated young leader of the future state that this program helped her to know herself, speaks volumes to its potential in the lives of other young people, who may be searching for a connection to something that affirms and guides them at a critical juncture in their personal development.

The participants comfort with the concept of community and their ability to embrace their charge as an agent of change in community is noteworthy and commendable. I found that the students spoke about community very passionately and referred to it in various ways. These participants looked at community as not only something that they were a part of, but they expressed a sense of agency, that they belonged to the community and that they were important to its health and future.

I found these data to be consistent with findings in my literature review, but I feel that the concept of cultural identity through the arts, changes the game significantly. Several studies reflect the increase in academic scores and decreases in troubled behavior, but most of those results seem to be individually beneficial. The striking difference within the data that is emerging at this time is that there seems to be more emphasis on self-development for the benefit of the community. Not just for individual purpose or greatness. This pivotal change in focus opens a broader discussion in terms of social impact and communal development through the arts. The ability of a program to develop individuals who realize the importance of good citizenship is noteworthy and commendable, as well as sustainable. Interestingly enough, after this interview, two of these participants, as well as the director of the program, moved to another state. The program has continued in the new locale through this generation of students who took the torch of being an active part of community and have implemented strategies to support this program in this new geographical area.

## Further Implications

The data are suggesting a strong connection between cultural arts and cultural identity, academic success, and community involvement, all of which can be beneficial for students. Previous data have suggested that each of these factors independently has produced excellent results. This research builds on earlier studies and is noteworthy in its inclusion of all three factors. Future research would benefit from a comparative study of students from non-culturally relevant art forms to those of culturally-relevant art forms and assess how they perform in the arts as well as how the art experience impacts them outside of that context, such as academics, cultural identity, and community involvement.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The Qualitative Interview Design that I utilized was the General Interview Guide Approach. This approach allowed me to expound upon answers and to generate new questions according to the flow of the interview. Below is a list of the original questions that were asked in each interview.

1. How do you feel that this program has affected you, in the way that you see yourself?
  
2. How do you feel that it has affected you in the way that you see the arts?
  
3. Excellent, what about the way that you see community? How do you think that this program has affected it?
  
4. How do you feel that this program has affected you, in the way that you view your culture?
  
5. How do you feel that this program has influenced you?

6. What have you gained, if anything from this program, and that's actually a two part question, because we'd like to know what have you gained, but what have you lost?

7. How have you changed, since you've been a part of this program?

8. So how do you feel that your outlook on community has changed, your outlook on school has changed or your outlook on yourself?

9. How do you feel that your outlook on your future or on other people's future and their life has changed?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us?