



The Art of Social Justice: Examining Arts Programming as a Context for Critical Consciousness Development Among Youth

“It is crucial to extend opportunities for arts involvement to all students, and to expand the ways in which arts involvement can promote critical consciousness for youth of varying dimensions of oppression and privilege” (p. 424).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Critical consciousness is defined as the ability to use critical thinking to recognize and examine systems of inequality and take action against those systems. The three components of critical consciousness are **critical reflection** (the awareness of structural inequities), **political efficacy or critical motivation** (one’s self-perceived capacity to create social and political change and their commitment to effecting change), and **critical action** (the participation in individual or collective activities to challenge injustice).

Higher critical consciousness is associated with higher self-esteem, political engagement, higher professional aspirations, and academic engagement and achievement. Many approaches – such as perspective-taking, the development of social-emotional skills, and arts programming – can contribute to the development of critical consciousness, a tool that groups experiencing marginalization can use to combat oppression.

This research addresses two questions:

- i. Does extracurricular arts participation contribute to change in critical consciousness among adolescents?
- ii. Does the relation between arts participation and critical consciousness vary depending on the youth’s social group status (e.g. race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and gender)?

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in 38 public, charter, and vocational schools (middle schools and high schools) with Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in Massachusetts, USA.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about adolescents who engaged in extracurricular arts programming in the United States.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The research was conducted over two consecutive school years with two randomly-selected cohorts of students from the 38 schools. Data was collected at the start of each school year and at the end of each school year.

At the start of the school year, the research team distributed **baseline surveys** to students at a GSA meeting and in four randomly-selected classrooms at each of the 38 schools. The survey asked students to list four extracurricular activities in which they were involved, both in school and outside of school; students at the GSA meetings were asked to exclude the GSA in their answers.

Baseline surveys collect information on the status of a subject before interventions. To measure **critical reflection**, the survey used a specific tool (the *Critical Reflection: Perceived Inequality subscale of the Critical Consciousness Scale*) that had students rate statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Example: “Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get ahead.” A higher average score indicates a higher level of critical reflection.

To measure **political efficacy**, the survey used another tool (the *Perceived Behavioural Control subscale of the Social Justice Scale*) that had statements to be rated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 8 (strongly agree). Example: “I am certain that I possess an ability to work with individuals and groups in ways that are empowering.” A higher average score indicates higher efficacy to promote social justice.

To measure **critical action**, the survey included open-ended questions that asked students about their current club memberships. Only social justice-oriented clubs, such as the GSA, were included in the assessment of critical action. The assessment measured levels of participation across critical action activities: “0” (zero activities), “1” (one activity), and “2” (two or more activities). A higher number of activities indicated higher levels of critical action.

At the end of the school year, the research team distributed this same survey to the cohort of students who had participated at the beginning of the school year. Researchers then assessed how responses changed over the course of the year, and how changes in **critical consciousness** – as measured across critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action – could be **correlated** (or connected) to participation in extracurricular arts programming.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The research resulted in eight key findings:

- i. On average, all students’ **capacity for critical reflection increased slightly** by the end of the school year.
- ii. By the end of the school year, all students’ **sense of political efficacy decreased slightly**.
- iii. For all students, **arts participation was associated with a significant increase in critical reflection and action** over the course of the year.
- iv. For **racialized youth**, the **connection between arts participation and critical action was stronger** than for white students.
- v. For **white students**, the **connection between arts participation and critical reflection was slightly stronger** than for racialized students.
- vi. **LGBT2SQ+ students demonstrated a significant increase in critical action** over the school year and a **decrease in political efficacy**.
- vii. **Older students demonstrated a higher increase in critical reflection over the school year**.

- viii. **Female-identifying students significantly demonstrated increased critical reflection and decreased political efficacy**.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research suggests that arts programming can increase critical consciousness for adolescents, which can lead to positive developmental outcomes for youth. Because **arts programming encourages collaboration, empathy, and self-expression, it can be beneficial in raising critical consciousness** and helping youth better understand oppression. Critical consciousness, in turn, can promote critical reflection and critical action for youth experiencing marginalization to break barriers created by oppression.

Researchers suggest that **more funding for arts programming should be available** in schools and communities so that this programming can be made more accessible to youth of different lived experiences and intersecting identities.

As there was a demonstrated decrease in political efficacy in all students included in this research, facilitators of existing arts programs should **encourage an open dialogue with youth** to foster critical consciousness. However, they should also remain aware of how social group status can influence the comfort of youth of intersecting identities to participate. Facilitators must **ensure that a safe and supportive environment is created for racialized youth** to feel comfortable to exercise critical action and share challenges and frustrations. Additionally, facilitators can both **be a resource and provide resources** for students to learn about how they can create social and political change. Lastly, youth workers can **facilitate hope by focusing on celebrating successes and the benefits of collective action**.



Ibrahim, D. A., Godfrey, E. B., Cappella, E., & Burson, E. (2021). The art of social justice: Examining arts programming as a context for critical consciousness development among youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(3), 409-427.