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"A More Complex Experience of Schooling" and "The Weirdness I was Looking For": A Grounded Theory Study of Students' Experiences of an Immersive, Secondary Arts School

D Bradford Hill
University Of Alabama At Birmingham

“A MORE COMPLEX EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOLING” AND “THE WEIRDNESS I WAS LOOKING FOR”: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF AN IMMERSIVE, SECONDARY ARTS SCHOOL

by

D. BRADFORD HILL

ANDREW N. MCKNIGHT COMMITTEE CHAIR
JOHN DANTZLER
MICHELE JEAN SIMS
DAYNA M. WATSON
ALAN L. WEBB

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EDUCATIONAL STUDIES IN DIVERSE POPULATIONS

ABSTRACT

Much research has focused on the significant benefits of integrating arts into general education curriculum, creating community partnerships for arts education, and including arts as stand-alone curriculum for students. Despite a thriving network of fine and performing arts secondary schools in America, there have been few efforts to articulate the phenomenon of immersive, secondary arts schools, their existence, and the experiences and possible benefits to their students within the schools’ cultures, structures, and curricula. Using a constructivist epistemology and a grounded theory methodology, twelve recent graduates of an immersive, secondary arts school in Birmingham, Alabama, the Alabama School of Fine Arts, were interviewed about their perspectives on their experiences as students for four to six years and the impact of the school’s culture, structure, and curriculum.

The results of this study emerged as a conceptual model representing the participants’ perspectives and understanding of the process they experienced as students. This model, which represents the common experiences described by the participants, is composed of six categories: (a) contextual factors of recent graduates’ previous schooling experiences before discovering an immersive, secondary arts school (b) the role of being driven towards something (c) group identity development (d) the role and interplay of

critique consciousness and critical consciousness (e) artist identity development (f) results of recent graduate's experiences at an immersive, secondary arts school.

Keywords: immersive education, arts education, arts schools, grounded theory, Alabama School of Fine Arts, Arts Schools Network

DEDICATION

To my wife and best friend, Elisabeth Rohlfs-Hill

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iii

DEDICATION v

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vi

LIST OF TABLES xii

LIST OF FIGURES xiii

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION 1

Scope of the Problem 3
Historical Marginalization of Arts Education in the Western School Model 4
Arts Education in the United States 7
Progressivism's Influence on Arts Education 9
The Cold War's Influence on Arts Education 12
Accountability Drives the Focus of Arts Education Research 14
Immersive, Secondary Arts Schools 16
Usefulness of the Term Immersive 18
Identifying Common Characteristics 18
Theoretical Framework 21
Need for the Study 23
Purpose 24
Research Questions 26
Definition of Terms 26
Organization of Study 27

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW 28

Impact of Exposure to Arts Education at a Young Age 29
Research on the Decline of Arts Education 33
Arts Integration Curriculum 35
Arts Education Through Community Partnerships 37
Arts As Curriculum 39
Two Major Types of Arts Education Research Findings 43
Instrumental Benefits and Academic Outcomes 44

Other Instrumental Benefits and Intrinsic Benefits 45
Research on Studio Habits of Mind 46
Intrinsic Benefits Vocabulary 48
Implications for Future Research 50

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY 5

Introduction and Purpose Statement 52
Research Design 52
Epistemological Position 53
Researcher Position Statement 54
Participant Recruitment 58
Purposeful Sampling 59
Participant 60
Isla 60
Neena 60
Appollo 61
Damion 61
Desmond 61
Cassandra 61
Talia 62
Quentin 62
Sutton 62
Sebastian 63
Kleis 63
Graham 63
Data Collection Procedures 63
Data Collection 64
Interviews 64
Data Analysis 68
Constructivist Grounded Theory 69
Coding Procedures 71
Initial Coding 72
Focused Coding 72
Axial Coding 73
Eliminating Confirmation Bias 74
Rich Description 75
Re-immersion in the Data 75
Interaction Among Coding Phases 76
Theoretical Coding and Theory Building 78
Memo Writing 79
Evaluative Criteria 79
Credibility 79
Resonance 81
Transferability 82
Credibility 82

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS 84

Conceptual Model of Participants' Experiences of a Secondary, Immersive Arts School 85
Contextual Factors of Students' Previous Schooling Experiences 87
Drive 88
External Drive 90
Overcoming Obstacles and Misperceptions About the School 91
Engagement With the School Prior to Application, Selection, and Admission 92
The Drive to Audition 94
Experiencing Acceptance into the School as Formative and Energizing 97
Anticipation, Forward Movement Towards Something 98
Group Identity Development 103
From Misfit to Tight-knit: Social Bonds and Social Cohesion 105
The Impact of the Small Size of the Student Population 109
The Bond of Diversity 110
The Role and Interplay of Critique Consciousness and Critical Consciousness 114
Switching from Academics to Arts During the School Day 116
Academic Curriculum and Critical Consciousness 118
Immersive Arts Education and the Critique Process 121
Artist Identity Development 126
Inversion of the Curricular Focus 127
Inversion of the Physical Structure of the Campus 129
The Impact of Extended, Focused Time to Immersive Arts Education 130
The Impact of ASFA's Arts Curriculum in Each Arts Department 132
The Impact of Employing Artist-Teachers 135
Taking Ownership of Creative Work 138
From Group Identity to Artist Identity 141
Results of the Immersive, Secondary Arts School Experience 144
Learning to Love the Work: Self-Discipline Skill and Preparation for Anything 144
Fearlessness and Risk-taking 147
Gratitude 150
Summary 150

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION 154

Preliminary Contextual Factors 154
Participants' Experiences of Awareness and Discovery of ASFA 159
Characteristics and Impacts of Immersive, Secondary Arts School Culture 162
Characteristics and Impacts of Immersive, Secondary Arts School Structure 164
Characteristics and Impacts of the Immersive, Secondary Arts School Curriculum 166
Limitations 168
Implications 172
Implications for Theory 172

Implications for Training and Practice 174
Recommendations for Future Research 184
Revaluation, not Devaluation 184
Conclusions 189

LIST OF REFERENCES 191

APPENDIX 207

A INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 207

B INFORMATION SHEET TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY 209

C INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER OF APPROVAL 211

LIST OF TABLES

1 List of Some Immersive, Secondary Arts Schools 20

LIST OF FIGURES

1 Coding Phases Interaction 78

2 Conceptual Model of Students' Experiences of an Immersive, Secondary Arts School 86

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 56.5 million students in the United States attend public or private K-12 schools (Riser-Kositsky, 2020). In the 2017-2018 school year, there were 130,930 schools (Riser-Kositsky, 2020) including all public, private, and public charter schools. While almost all schools focus on the traditional academic subjects of math, English, social studies, and science, much less time is devoted to arts education. Decades of research supports the positive impact that arts education has on student achievement, including extensive studies published as compendia (Fiske, 1999; Deasy 2002; Winner & Hetland, 2000). Arts education also provides an alternative means to view reality, expands the way students perceive the world, and often has immediately unobservable benefits for the workers in a market economy (Berliner, 2011). Yet, despite these positive correlates, the inclusion or integration of arts education remains marginalized in American schools. Research has also demonstrated a dramatic decrease in arts education in American public schools since the advent of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (McMurrer, 2008) which prioritized instruction in math and reading with increased accountability on schools to demonstrate improved measurable outcomes in those subject areas.

In addition to the research that evidences the positive relationship between arts education and academic achievement in areas that include math and reading, significant positive impacts on social and emotional well-being of students have been identified

(Catterall, 1997; Catterall et al., 1999). Despite these findings, emphasis on the importance of arts education has remained marginalized and the amount of instructional time has even decreased in American schools (Heilig et al., 2010; Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011) to the point that some researchers, policymakers, and practitioners increasingly express concerns about the declining status of arts education in the United States (Sabol, 2013).

While researchers have successfully and repeatedly established positive correlations between even limited exposure to and participation in arts education and improved academic and social cognition skills, only minimal efforts have been made to explore the experiences of those students who have *extensive* or *immersive* engagement in ongoing arts education. Furthermore, researchers have typically employed experimental quantitative methodology to yield findings that establish correlations that are subject to numerous variables which limit outcomes, (especially sample sizes) few studies, and an array effect sizes (Schneider & Rohmann, 2021). There are also social, cultural, and economic factors of families, students, schools, and school districts that create doubts about the strength of correlations found in research. Hence, there is a need for qualitative research that explores how students experience arts education and what these students identify as important, essential, and helpful about their educational experiences. Furthermore, more useful understanding can be discovered by exploring the experience of students in schools that make arts education their primary focus through the *immersion* of students in prolonged sequences of arts curriculum and extended instruction time, school structures that support and facilitate an arts education focus, and school cultures that privilege and value a mission of arts education. Discovering what is essential to and

valued by students in such schools would be valuable in efforts to help American schools better serve the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students.

Scope of the Problem

Commonly, when students, their parents, teachers, administrators, researchers, and policymakers refer to arts education they mean the arts electives that are offered only on the margins of the core, required and compulsory curriculum in most schools. They also often refer to the arts activities that are integrated into the required academic subject courses. These are the areas in which most arts education research on the impact on student achievement or well-being have been conducted. Even these marginalized areas of arts education are not flourishing. U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan stated in 2010:

> In America, we do not reserve arts education for privileged students or the elite. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, students who are English language learners, and students with disabilities often do not get the enrichment experiences of affluent students anywhere except at school. President Obama recalls that when he was a child 'you always had an art teacher and a music teacher. Even in the poorest school districts everyone had access to music and other arts.' Today, sadly, that is no longer the case. (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011, p. 6)

Duncan referenced the decline in arts education at that time, but Gardner (1999) identified a broader scope to the deeper roots of the problem with arts education in the United States: "most cultures, and certainly those that consider themselves to be highly civilized, do not need special arguments for including the arts in their schools. In the United States however, such automatic allegiance to the arts does not exist" (p. 4).

Historical Marginalization of Arts Education in the Western School Model

Historically, arts education has been marginalized in Western culture. The eighth book of Aristotle's *Politics* emphasizes the importance of drawing and music in the best aesthetic education for youth. However, the Aristotelian appreciation for art education was marginalized and eventually replaced by a devotion to craftsmanship in the service of Christianity which continued throughout the Middle Ages. Treatises such as *The Various Arts*, by Theophilus (1130), and *Il Libro Dell'Arte* (*The Craftsman's Handbook*) by Cennini (1390) are among the first manuals to be written about art instruction in service of Christianity in the Middle Ages. The Italian Renaissance established the distinction which persists today between fine arts and crafts and returned to Classical ideologies which aspired to capture ideal forms and beauty and gave rise to academies, similar to contemporary art institutes, which became common throughout Italy. However, the empirical sciences dominated the 17th century to the extent that when the Industrial Revolution occurs, characterized by the rapid increase of factory manufacture, technological development, and machinery invention, arts education again takes on a marginalized, utilitarian role in society's structure and this marginalization is mirrored by its devaluation in schools. John Locke's treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) criticized the English educational system as unsatisfactory but promotes visual arts education for laymen. Still, Locke suggested too much art education prevented one from learning more important knowledge and skills.

The worldview brought to the Americas by 15th and 16th century European explorers originated with the Roman Empire's goal of *Imperium romanum*, to civilize the people of the world to be like Roman citizens (Spring, 2016). To "save" any population

from “backward” and “heathen” beliefs and behaviors was virtuous but so challenging that many Europeans believed the innate inferiority of some races made any education for them impossible (Spring, 2016). This foundational dynamic of the Western school model has informed formal public education concepts in the United States since their inception. Spring (2016) identified the Western school as a model that displaces religious values with secular ones, promotes nationalism, and prepares students to work in global corporations, all in support of cultural and linguistic homogeneity.

The educational model in America has promised to reward students for hard work and achievement in a way that can empower them to transcend any ascribed socioeconomic status they may have inherited by birth. “However, the Western model school may also increase economic and social inequalities caused by differences in school achievement and access to schools” so that the “children of the poor may not have access to high-quality schools, while the rich protect the schooling advantages of their children” (Spring, 2019, p. 2). Anyon (1980) categorized different types of schools within the Western model in the United States as working-class schools, middle-class schools, affluent professional schools, and executive elite schools, each of which provide levels of curriculum to its students in alignment with the socioeconomic status of the school community. Therefore, meritocratic ideals are mostly unattainable, and students at working-class schools remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic status ladder while students at executive elite schools remain at the top. Students with different economic backgrounds are prepared by schools to serve roles based on their place on the socioeconomic ladder. The curriculum serves to continually reproduce the same class structure in society, and, therefore, the same social and economic inequities, disparities,

and gaps (Anyon, 1980). The structure of schooling within the Western school model in addition to the curriculum also contributes to these outcomes. The structure of American schools corresponds to the structure of the capitalist workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 2012). Schools prepare people for adult work rules by socializing students to function efficiently and with compliance in the same hierarchical structure of modern corporate systems. Bowles and Gintis (2012) identified this function as the correspondence principle and emphasize the role structured social interactions and individual student rewards play in replicating the workplace environment. This Western school model does not value arts education.

Recent research finds that most Americans currently believe the focus and purpose of secondary education is to teach academics, especially math and science, and to prepare students for work and good citizenship (Silliman & Schleifer, 2018). Although an increasing number of employers value soft skills like problem-solving and hard skills like public speaking and writing proficiency (Silliman & Schleifer, 2018)—skills which are highly developed in students immersed in specialized arts education disciplines—public secondary schools continue to privilege traditional subjects and skills that require almost all instructional time and resources. Furthermore, despite the steady growth of creative sector industries, serious attention paid to arts education in American schools remains elusive. Postman and Weingartner (1972) recognized how the Western school model marginalizes arts and explain how traditional public education inculcates convergent thinking including the attitude that the arts are minor subjects within the messages of American school structure: “The only learning that occurs in classrooms is that which is communicated by the structure of the classroom itself…” (p. 20). They

identified that the dominant message communicated by the Western school model is summarized like this:

> English is not History and History is not Science and Science is not Art and Art is not Music and Art and Music are minor subjects and English, History, and Science are major subjects, and a subject is something you "take" and, when you have taken it, you have "had" it, and if you have had it you are immune and need not take it again.. (p. 21)

In keeping with this metaphor, the Western school model has continued and escalated these vaccination efforts; however, too often, the vaccines are not used at all because careers for students in the arts are not considered to have legitimate utility within the expectations of social and economic mobility replicated by the curriculum and structure of American schools. Williams (2016) concluded:

> [i]t is clear, historically, that the definition of "aesthetic" response is an affirmation, directly comparable with the definition and affirmation of "creative imagination," of certain human meanings and values which a dominant social system reduced and even tried to exclude. Its history is in large part a protest against the forcing of all experience into instrumentality ('utility'), and of all things into commodities. (p. 151)

Arts Education in the United States

Though consistently marginalized, arts education has always played some role in American public schools. In the eighteenth century, arts education in schools focused primarily on drawing. Early scholars attempted to articulate trends in arts education in American schools. Whitford (1923) provided a cursory charting of arts education that includes these key moments: "introduced experimentally" in 1821; "adopted by Massachusetts [schools]" in the 1860s-1870s; "emphasis on technique" (1900); the "industrial arts movement" (1907). Whitford visualized these educational shifts on a graph indicating their movement between the major influences of "objective fine arts"

(including “pure aesthetics, formal practices, cast drawing, abstract design, pictoral”) versus “objective industrial arts” which he characterizes as “utility” (p. 113). With greater detail, Hamblen (1985) provided an overview history of arts education in American schools from 1750-1982. Hamblen explored the evolution of arts education in a chronology that focuses on the most influential figures and their attitudes about art education’s role in American education while also identifying the aesthetic-philosophical orientations era by era. Hamblen distilled these as follows:

- 18th and 19th centuries: Dependence on European models of instruction and academic esthetic standards.
- 19th century: Art instruction emphasizing morality, citizenship, and vocational skills; art correlated with other subjects.
- 1850-1870: Industrial/geometric drawing and pictorial drawing.
- 1870-1890: Industrial drawing predominant.
- Early 20th century: Correlation, child studies, multi-media, art appreciation,
- nonvocational; balance between disciplined study and freedom of expression; balance between idealized art and practical applications.
- 1960-present: A range of proposed theories and programs with multiple perspectives; in practice, continuation of studio model for instruction with rationales of creativity, self-expression, design abilities, and manipulative skill acquisition.)
- 1975, Major Perspectives: Visual literacy, creativity, and aesthetic education.

Hamblen (1985) concluded:

> Not surprisingly the majority of art education in absolute time, although perhaps not in terms of impact or intensity, has been devoted to the social utility of art study. Art has rarely been treated as an academic subject, and, concomitantly, has often been dismissed from the general educational program as a dispensable frill. This latter pattern is, certainly, the ultimate bane of art education. (p.117).

The support for the founding of numerous secondary and higher education arts schools in America is directly connected to the emphasis on economic utility and America’s own industrial revolution in the 19th century. For example, the Massachusetts Drawing Act of 1870 petitions for drawing instruction in Massachusetts public schools for manufacturing interests related to the large expenditures on imported goods, although classroom teachers

did not know how to teach drawing, so arts specialists were hired (Hudson, 2016) and subsequently the Massachusetts College of Arts and Design was funded for the same reason. Industrial drawing remained the dominant focus of arts education in American schools into the 20th century.

Progressivism's Influence on Arts Education

The shift in emphasis in arts education's aesthetic-philosophical orientation came in the early 20th century. Hamblen's (1985) chronology charted the shift from mimetic and pragmatic to a growing emphasis on the idealistic and existential. Not until the progressive education movement in America in the 1930s did arts education again find a climate compatible with turning serious curricular attention to arts instruction. Influential philosophers and educational reformers associated with the progressive education movement in the early decades of the 20th century influenced a more substantial and expansive reception of arts education in American K-12 schools and its potential to serve both a practical and aesthetic purpose. John Dewey's (1934) *Art as Experience* helped establish arts education as a serious educational need while Leon Winslow's (1939) *The Integrated School Art Program* advocated arts education as integral to creative expression, curriculum integration, and educational relevancy. *Creative and Mental Growth* by Viktor Lowenfeld (1947) was adopted by many elementary schools and identified developmental stages of children and aligned them with appropriate curricular activities that integrate arts. Still, most strides to center art instruction in American education shifted to the university level in part because aspects of progressivism that were less receptive to arts education emerged as dominant in American public schools.

The progressive movement had profound influence on public education, but it is important to identify which type of progressivism influenced arts education. Aspects of the dominant type of progressivism were antithetical to the ethos of advocates for more focus on arts education, the types of advocates who would eventually pursue establishing immersive, secondary arts schools. Therefore, it is important to make a distinction. As Labaree (2005) explained, "the history of the progressive education movement in the United States is that it was not a single entity but instead a cluster of overlapping and competing tendencies" (p. 279). The most dominant competitive tendencies were embodied by the administrative progressives and the pedagogical progressives. The administrative progressives focused on making schools more efficient organizations through administrative leadership and were profoundly influenced by the work of learning theorist and psychologist Edward Thorndike while the pedagogical progressives were influenced by the work of social philosopher John Dewey who promoted experimental curriculum and pedagogy. The administrative progressives applied the economic concepts of the industrial revolution to public schools and successfully moved away from numerous small local secondary schools to large centralized secondary high schools, implemented curricular differentiation in the form of electives and tracking, promoted standardization of academic curriculum, and favored an increase in state and federal regulation and bureaucracy (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, pp. 17-26). Dewey's pedagogical progressivism, however, placed emphases on learning by doing, problem solving, critical and creative thinking skills, cooperative learning, group work, highly personalized education, and assessment by evaluation of students' projects and productions (Dewey, 1929, pp. 77-80). As Lagemann (1989) explained, "one cannot

understand the history of education in the United States during the twentieth century unless one realizes that Edward Thorndike won and John Dewey lost" (p. 185). Also lost, according to Dewey (1902), was the potential for students to discover the "intellectual and social meaning of the work in which [they are] engaged" (p. 96). The way a school is structured has a direct and intentional impact on the outcomes for its students. The administrative progressives sought to affect utilitarian efficiency through school structure while pedagogical progressives sought to lessen or eliminate the alienation students experienced in schools structured to serve the needs of modern, urban, industrial societies (Spring, 2005).

The traditional structure and culture of most public schools from the 1920s to the present traces its roots to Thorndike's progressivism, not Dewey's. Dewey's concepts only ever took hold in practice in the far margins of public education where immersive, secondary arts schools have existed and implemented some of Dewey's essential concepts by having students focus their attention on learning artistic disciplines by doing them, doing them collaboratively, pursuing personalized interests, and taking ownership of their work through creative projects and productions.

The influence of pedagogical progressivism on arts education in public schools has been recognized for decades in addition to the resistance its reception has sometimes met. Miller (1966) asserted, "Music education…was profoundly affected by the [progressive] movement which arose in the schools immediately preceding the First World War and exerted its greatest influence between the two great Wars of 1917, 1945" (p. 3). Logan (1952) explained, "Art education in the United States owes much for its development to the Progressive Education movement" (p. 245) but further to

acknowledge that it is also perceived by mainstream educators to promote "unrestrained child horseplay and unjustified hopes for the millennium" (p. 245). The dominant influence of administrative progressivism created unwelcome spaces for arts educators in traditional public schools. Dunkel (1959) claimed, "Teachers of…music, and the arts, whose administrators thought they were Deweyites, usually had a hard time." (p. 232). By the 1960s, arts education and its pedagogical progressivist influences had found it difficult to find a welcome place in mainstream education, and there may be a correlation with the fact that many of today's best public secondary, immersive arts schools were founded in the 1960s and 1970s as separate specialty schools in which arts education could take center stage and be immune to marginalization.

The Cold War's Influence on Arts Education

While pedagogical progressivism has remained prominent in higher education into the present, its influence on arts education in American public schools lessened in the middle of the twentieth century. By the 1950s and the success of Russia's Sputnik launch and orbit, the emphasis on the maths and sciences gained even more dominance in American public schools as the desire to enhance the rigor of academic curriculum intensified and arts education remained marginalized. Some progressive education advocates still advocated for experimental curricula that sought to challenge the institutional oppression of the Western school model but were met with resistance by those insisting on enhanced academic rigor (Raber, 2018). The immediate post-Sputnik era mobilized arts advocates who "generated arts education policy concepts and framed the arts as a subject for curriculum-based instruction" (Heilig et al., 2010, p. 138), and the

establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965 as a new federal agency in some ways legitimized arts education advocates' efforts. These efforts unfolded as schools increasingly felt pressure to enhance math and science curricula to ensure that American students did not fall any farther behind Russia in the race to space. However, as arts education still failed to gain traction in public schools, corporate philanthropists through the Getty Foundation promoted an approach to arts education that involved applying the technical competencies of professional artist standards (Raber, 2018).

This approach, which centered arts instruction as a curricular focus, was referred to as Discipline-Based Arts Education (DBAE). DBAE's originator, artist and scholar Manuel Barkan, began in the 1960s, to call for a more expansive arts education in schools to include not only the presentation and production of arts but also education on historical context, critical analysis and aesthetics. Barkan saw arts education as requiring the development of sequential curricula. Greene (2018) also explored the need in the 1970s for all educators to instill and develop students' aesthetic appreciation and sensibilities. DBAE's expansive approach required more instructional space, time, and personnel and was a conscious effort to move away from a mere integration of arts taught through traditional academic subjects. For a while in American primary and secondary schools, as Greer (1983) explained:

> A trend toward Arts in General Education…emerg[ed] as the official stance for most state departments of education. What remains is the question of whether a discipline-based approach can be articulated in a way that ensures a place for art education as something more than the vehicle that allows for the lively presentation of other subjects. (p. 91)

DBAE's objective was to establish the arts as an essential discipline within the K-12 curriculum (Eisner, 1986; The Getty Center, 1985, 1987) and to remove arts education from the realm of the extracurricular. DBAE became a popular approach to training educators in higher education who wished to become general education art teachers but never took hold in American public K-12 schools as its own discipline. DBAE's intent to become its own separate discipline on par with the traditional academic subjects like math, science, literature, and history was ambitious and made it difficult for schools to adopt as demands for greater accountability in the traditional subject areas intensified for school leaders.

Accountability Drives the Focus of Arts Education Research

Periods of increased interest for the value of arts education since the era of pedagogical progressivism sometimes causes hope for arts education advocates, but this enthusiasm for formalizing arts education theory was overwhelmed by the hegemony of accountability (Allison & Hausman, 1998). The Western school model has always driven the demand for approaches to education that directly increase traditional academic achievement. Furthermore, McMurrer's (2008) research demonstrates a dramatic decrease in arts education in American public schools since the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Heilig and colleagues (2010) provided a historical narrative about the evolution of art education in American public schools and argue that the focus on high-stakes testing has had unintended consequences, particularly on arts education. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* and *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* both intended to instill a renewed excellence in the academic subjects that are

traditionally standardized and tested, and neither report extensively addressed arts education. In 1987, the National Art Education Association published *Excellence in Art Education: Ideas and Initiatives*, and while findings are focused on the important and necessary role of arts education, it promotes only the development of artistic appreciation and self-expression rather than the creation of art by students (Efland, 1990). The Reagan era's insistence on formalizing arts education curricula and standards influenced the very concepts that evolved into the Bush-era No Child Left Behind (NCLB) focus on accountability. Though arts education eventually found itself listed along with other subject matters as a discipline in the Goals 2000 Act of 1994, the overwhelming impact of accountability continued to marginalize arts education. Accountability and the training and resources that accompany it have increased for math, science, and English at the expense of arts education (Chapman, 2004; West, 2012) despite its designation as a "core subject" in both NCLB and Race to The Top (RTTT) legislations. Although federal government guidelines, in the form of NCLB and RTTT, mandate the arts as a "core subject," classroom instruction has often only focused on where the money and testing are located (Chapman, 2004; West, 2012). At the state and local levels, where graduation requirements are authored (Carlson & Planty, 2011), decisions are made in support of traditional subjects at the expense of resources for arts education. The expectations and requirements for college admissions also influence the decisions made at the local secondary school district levels (Balduf, 2009; Conley, 2010) which do not privilege arts education. The Common Core standards of the Obama era continued to marginalize arts education and place even less emphasis on aesthetic analysis or appreciation while concentrating on reading and writing. Arts education is not codified in the recent

Common Core standards, and they serve a "handmaiden" type role to literacy (Wexler, 2014).

In most instances from the progressive era to the present, wherever arts education exists in public schools, it is extracurricular and integrated. Wherever it is extracurricular, it is defined by its marginalized relationship to the dominant curriculum. Wherever it is integrated, it is defined by its marginal role within the dominant curriculum. The Kennedy Center defined arts integration as "an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 1). The "understanding" and the "connect[ion]" are dependent at any instructional moment on the greater importance and value that is placed on the traditional subject that will be tested in a standardized manner and is being taught by teachers who are usually not trained as artists. The loss of arts education in the current high stakes testing environment is problematic because arts provide an alternative means to view reality, expand the way students perceive the world, and often has immediately unobservable benefits for the workers in a market economy (Berliner, 2011). The value of arts education—even within a consumer-driven education model—continues to be viewed as benefits that are invisible to school leaders who are held accountable to the bottom-line results of what is tested by standardization.

Immersive, Secondary Arts Schools

There is an overlooked and under-researched area in K-12 arts education in the United States. Of the 130,930 schools (Riser-Kositsky, 2020) including all public,

private, and public charter schools that exist in the United States, there is an extremely small number of secondary schools that go beyond arts integration and place a curricular focus on an arts education which includes the creation and performance of art by students. The exact number of schools like these that exist in the United States is undocumented, but the Arts Schools Network (ASN) has a membership list of 120 schools according to the ASN website (Brookes, n.d.). The ASN is a "non-profit association founded in 1981 with a mission to inspire emerging and seasoned leaders in K-16 arts schools by providing quality resources, support, and networking opportunities to elevate their institutions" (Brookes, n.d.). Of these 120 member schools, there is a mix of schools that ranges from a fully immersive focus on arts education to a substantial emphasis on the arts to arts integration teaching strategies. Furthermore, some schools with membership are higher education institutions. Therefore, the number of secondary schools in the United States that offer students an immersive experience in arts education is exceptionally small. The body of research conducted on these schools and their students is even smaller. However, there is much to be gained from studying the experiences of students in immersive, secondary arts schools. Research into these schools' histories via their websites which share missions, visions, histories, policy manuals, student handbooks, curriculum catalogs, daily bell schedules, and school philosophy documents, yields some common characteristics which distinguish them from other schools that offer relatively arts-rich offerings and resources, and even from some other schools that identify themselves as arts schools in their school names.

Usefulness of the Term Immersive

I have elected to employ the term *immersive* to describe and distinguish these secondary arts schools. This term distinguishes itself from more commonly used indicators that are often used in relation to arts education, arts schools, or arts programming opportunities for students. Other terms or phrases often used include *intensive arts, arts-intensive, expansive arts, extensive arts, arts integration, arts as curriculum, arts infusion, and arts concentration*. Two of the more commonly recognizable phrases are *intensive arts/arts intensive* and *arts integration*. I have previously defined *arts integration* and its limitations in this context. *Intensive*, a term used by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Precollegiate Arts Schools (ACCPAS), by definition, indicates thoroughness but for a short amount of time. However, *immersive* is a term that denotes complete involvement or engagement, and originates from the Latin root *mergere*, "to plunge," and eventually carries the denotation of full absorption of something or complete submersion in, surrounded by something. Applying the term *immersive* to a distinct group and type of schools whose approach to arts education is not currently categorized in research literature contributes to the usefulness and potential transferability of this study.

Identifying Common Characteristics

Immersive, secondary arts schools share numerous characteristics that distinguish them from traditional schools and other schools that might provide some form of arts education. Because "student success in these schools of the arts is well documented" (Daniel, 2000, p. 1), former Principal of LaGuardia High School of Music & Arts and Performing Arts, Rod Daniel, attempted to identify common characteristics among them.

However, Daniel's research reviewed schools most of which could not be defined as *immersive*. Below is a list of commonly held characteristics of *immersive* arts schools in the United States based on reviews of the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection database as well the individual school websites which publish missions, visions, histories, policy manuals, student handbooks, curriculum catalogs, daily bell schedules, and school philosophy documents:

- Immersive arts curriculum of approximately two and half hours or more of daily focused arts instruction and participation
- Nomenclature such as Major, Specialty, Focus, Concentration to identify each student's arts area of talent, interest, and focus
- What is traditionally defined as extracurricular is inverted to become the curricular focus
- Bell schedules, course schedules and offerings, school and performance calendars are all created in support of immersion into arts instruction and performance, and longer school day hours
- Formal and frequent opportunities to perform, exhibit, and showcase creations
- Diverse student populations
- Residential or partially residential options
- Function like magnet schools and draw students from beyond traditionally zoned boundaries such as city, county, district, region, or state
- Academics are arts integrated in addition to the extended amount of arts focused specialty time
- Nurture a critique culture within arts specialty areas that requires and supports students through the difficult process of analyzing, reviewing, and evaluating peer work
- Require prospective students to apply and audition for selective admission
- Located in or near large urban centers
- Do lots of community engagement in community/region to share the arts with others
- Maintain partnerships or collaborations with other community/region arts organizations
- Provide or encourage professional opportunities for their students
- Employ artist-teachers who are or have previously been professional artists and are not required to have traditional teaching certifications

While many immersive, secondary arts schools are public magnet schools, they have differing enabling capacities and designations that include public, magnet, private,

charter, independent, non-standard, Governor's Schools, and constituent institutions of a university or college. See Table 1 for a list of some immersive, secondary arts schools in the United States, listed in chronological order of the year of their founding or the year they became arts schools (all are public schools except where noted).

Table 1

List of Some Immersive, Secondary Arts Schools

Immersive, Secondary Arts School	Founded	Location
Idyllwild Arts Academy (private)	1946	Idyllwild, CA
Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts	1961	New York, NY
Interlochen Arts Academy (private)	1962	Interlochen, MI
University of North Carolina School of the Arts (High School constituent program)	1963	Winston-Salem, NC
Harlem School of the Arts	1964	Harlem, NY
Alabama School of Fine Arts	1971	Birmingham, AL
Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts	1971	Houston, TX
New Orleans Center for Creative Arts	1973	New Orleans, LA
School for Creative and Performing Arts	1973	Cincinnati, OH
Duke Ellington School of the Arts	1974	Washington, DC
Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts	1976	Dallas, TX
San Diego School of Creative and Performing Arts	1978	San Diego, CA
Baltimore School of the Arts	1979	Baltimore, MD
Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts School	1979	Pittsburgh, PA
Walnut Hill School for the Arts (private)	late 1970s	Natick, MA

Los Angeles County High School for the Arts	1985	Los Angeles, CA
Douglas Anderson School of the Arts	1985	Jacksonville, FL
Perpich Center for Arts Education	1985	Golden Valley, MN
Orange County School of the Arts	1987	Santa Ana, CA
New World School of the Arts	1987	Miami, FL
Denver School of the Arts	1991	Denver, CO
Las Vegas Academy of the Arts	1992	Las Vegas, NV
Creative Arts Secondary School	1993	St. Paul, MN
Boston Arts Academy	1998	Boston, MA
Chattanooga High School Center for Creative Arts	1998	Chattanooga, TN
South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities	1999	Greeneville, SC
Mississippi School of the Arts	2003	Brookhaven, MS
Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists	2005	St, Paul, MN
Chicago High School for the Arts	2009	Chicago, IL

Theoretical Framework

To help make sense of the ways in which immersive, secondary arts schools and their students experience their educational processes, I will begin by utilizing and sensitizing myself to the subject through the guiding framework offered by art education, psychology, and human development scholars, most notably Hetland (2013), Winner (2000, 2013, 2019), and Sheridan (2013). In *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (2013), these scholars develop a framework grounded in observational and qualitative data collection, create descriptive coding of data to analyze

rigorously the essential and important aspects of the process students experience in secondary visual arts courses, and identify the development of particular habits of mind for the students. These habits of mind include the following: Developing craft, engaging and persisting, envisioning (thinking in images), expressing (finding meaning), observing (really seeing, not just looking), reflecting (questioning and explaining), evaluating, stretching and exploring (taking a leap), understanding art worlds. The researchers also identify the school and classroom structure as influential aspects of arts students' experiences as well as the aspects of the school culture and curriculum which develop students' understanding of the domains and community of the arts world. As Winner (2013) stated, "the how of studio teaching" leads to "a dispositional view of what the arts teach" (p. 15, 41). Because the researchers viewed these habits of mind as applicable to other arts disciplines and because they are inclusive of the role of school structure and culture as well as curriculum, this initial framework is ideal for exploring how a theory of the process students experience in immersive, secondary arts schools could be grounded in constructivist data. Additionally, the challenge of articulating intrinsic benefits that can be discovered as a result of experiences with arts is addressed by social scientist researcher Kevin F. McCarthy (2004) in *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*. McCarthy (2004) argued that because people are drawn to the arts for personal reasons that provide the individual with meaning, pleasure, and emotional substance, just as much emphasis on intrinsic benefits should exist as on instrumental benefits. McCarthy (2004) challenged researchers to "develop a language for discussing intrinsic benefits" (p. xviii) and suggested a starting point for a vocabulary that includes these concepts: captivation, pleasure, expanded capacity for empathy,

cognitive growth, creation of social bonds, and expression of communal meanings. The guiding framework and conceptual articulations within the work of McCarthy and Hetland, Winner, and Sheridan helped me explore the data collected from participants' experiences in immersive, secondary arts schools in search of new grounded theory.

Need for the Study

Despite a thriving network of fine and performing arts secondary schools in America, there have been few efforts to articulate the phenomenon of immersive, secondary arts schools, their existence, and the experiences and possible benefits to their students within the schools' cultures, structures, and curricula. A dissertation and a graduate thesis were published on the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) which is a school that this current study would define as an immersive, secondary arts school. One was a history overview of NOCCA while the other was an overview of the school's governance and structure. Similarly, a dissertation was published in 1976 overviewing the history and course offerings at the Alabama School of Fine Arts which is also a school that this current study would define as an immersive, secondary arts school. In a thesis entitled "Exploration of Models in Arts Schools Movement" Tatum (2013) surveyed several schools that achieved Exemplary School status as defined and assessed by the Arts Schools Network organization. Survey data were used to illustrate the way arts schools work in 11 different operational areas identified as of primary importance to the running of a school and included purpose and mission, size and scope, finances, governance and administrative structure, faculty and staff, facilities, learning and information resources, recruitment, audition/reviews, enrollment, retention, promotion,

community involvement, and curriculum. Not all the schools surveyed shared the characteristics of immersive, secondary arts schools as defined in Chapter 1 of this current study.

In "Performing and Visual Arts Schools: A Guide to Characteristics, Options, and Successes" Daniel (2000), the former Principal of LaGuardia High School of Music & Arts and Performing Arts (the school on which the popular 1980 film *Fame* was based), identified common characteristics among several arts schools whose "student success… is well documented" (p. 1). Most of the schools researched did not share the characteristics of immersive, secondary arts schools as defined in this current study in this chapter. As Creswell (2018) explained, a "deficiencies model" is a legitimate approach to a research problem (p. 112), and immersive, secondary arts schools require further consideration as subjects or sites of arts education research.

Purpose

Much research has focused on the significant benefits of integrating arts into general education curriculum, creating community partnerships for arts education, and including arts as stand-alone curriculum for students. The research has been dominated by studies attempting to find correlations between the time spent in arts studies with instrumental benefits, namely, academic achievement. There has also been much attention paid by researchers to other the instrumental benefits that result from students' participation in arts education such as social and cognitive development and attitudinal and behavior outcomes, However, there have been few studies to focus on what and how immersive, secondary arts schools—in which arts education is not integrated but centered as mission of the school and the primary focus of the curriculum and its structure and

culture—and their students' experience of a process that provides both instrumental and intrinsic benefits. The thriving network of immersive, secondary arts schools in America include schools whose existence and successful practices are a substantial resource that research must explore. There have been few efforts to not only articulate the phenomenon of the experiences of students in these schools, but also to recognize their existence and examine them as research information-rich environments with unique school cultures. There is an absence of scholarly literature on this topic.

Schools, school leaders, arts educators, general educators, arts advocates, and policymakers that employ recommendations from this study will be better prepared and equipped to provide students with transformative school experiences, and administrators and faculty will be able learn about how unique school curricula, structures, and cultures can create and sustain empowering learning environments. The intention of this study is to improve the current understanding of arts education's full range of beneficial impacts on students and to assist in educating those actively participating in policymaking and the organization of schools. Arts education needs to be more fully understood to benefit individual students as well as the general public. For future researchers, a framework for exploring additional aspects of these schools will be in place, and the potential for discovering patterns and identifying theories that can provide a template for replication will be grounded.

Research Questions

There was one central research question that was the focus of this study and five subquestions that provided support for understanding processes within a non-standard school culture and structure.

Central Question

(RQ1) What is the educational process that students experience within immersive, secondary arts schools and how do they describe it?

(SQ1) How is the process impacted by the student population?

(SQ2) How is the process impacted by the structure of the school?

(SQ3) How is the process impacted by the curricular focus of the school's specialty programs?

(SQ4) How is the process impacted by the professional faculty of artist-teachers?

(SQ5) How is the process impacted by the school culture?

Definition of Terms

Immersive, secondary arts school: A school with students in all or some of grades 6-12 whose structure and curricula allows two and a half or more hours of daily, focused arts instruction taught by artist-teachers who are also professional artists.

School culture: For purposes of this study, "a complex and multifaceted set of values, traditions and relationships that are dynamically shared and transformed among people within certain sociopolitical and economic contexts and it is created, socially constructed, learned and dialectical." (Nieto, 1992, 2010, p.136).

School structure: This is term is used to describe aspects of the way a school is organized that could include but are not limited to, daily schedules and schedule types, school calendar, physical spaces and how they designed or used, organizational leadership, admissions processes.

Studio habits of mind (SHofM): Eight habits of mind identified in the research of Hetland (2013), Winner (2000, 2013, 2019), and Sheridan (2013).

Intrinsic benefits vocabulary: Six terms or phrases developed for the purpose of articulating intrinsic benefits experienced through arts education and experiences and identified in the research of McCarthy (2004).

Constructivist grounded theory: A flexible set of principles, theories, and methods for approaching qualitative inquiry that emphasize the interpretation of data for developing an understanding of the studied phenomena (Charmaz, 2014).

Alabama School of Fine Arts (ASFA): A partially residential, competitively admitted, public school dedicated to providing gifted and talented middle and high school students immersive instruction in one of five dedicated arts areas: Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theatre Arts, and Visual Arts. Students also receive college-prep instruction in academic core subjects.

Organization of Study

Chapter 2 presents a literature review, highlighting literature related to common types of arts education approaches and strategies, common types of research design outcomes, and the studio habits of mind and intrinsic benefits vocabulary models for understanding arts education and experiences. In Chapter 3, the research methodology for this study is fully described. The results of this study are reported in Chapter 4, and the results and implications are discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because immersive, secondary arts schools have not been the subject of research designs, this chapter summarizes existing literature on the benefits of arts education for young children and research on the decline of arts education in American schools. Information regarding the areas of arts education that are the subject of most research designs—arts integration, arts through community partnerships, arts as curriculum— are summarized along with a review of current literature in each area. Research regarding the positive impact of arts education on students' academic achievement and cognitive benefits, behavioral and attitudinal benefits, and the social and emotional benefits is reported in addition to the research literature on the intrinsic benefits of arts education and the challenges inherent to this area of research focus. The literature employing a studio habits of mind framework or McCarthy's (2004) intrinsic benefits vocabulary framework are also reviewed. Finally, the implications of the reviewed literature across these areas for future research is examined.

Literature reviewed in this chapter were collected primarily through database searches in ArtsEdSearch, EBSCO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Key search terms included: arts education, arts schools, fine arts schools, performing arts schools, secondary arts schools, arts-based education, school structure, school culture, history of secondary arts schools, arts integration, discipline-based arts education, arts education research outcomes. Literature were included based on their fit to the purpose of this

study. Additionally, literature was identified for review through the reference lists of key books included in or consulted for the literature search, as well as the reference lists from related dissertation projects.

Impact of Exposure to Arts Education at a Young Age

NASA has used a creativity test to identify and select scientists and engineers who demonstrate the most potential for and possession of creative thinking habits. In 1968, Land and Jarman (1992) administered the same creativity test to 1,600 five-year-old children. The researchers re-tested the same children at 10 years of age (in 1973), and 15 years of age (in 1978). Then, in 1985 the researchers administered the same test to 280,000 adults to assess their creative habits of mind. The percent of the 5-year-olds on the creativity test whose scored in the "highly creative" range was 98%; the percent of 10-year-olds scoring in the "highly creative range" was 30%; at 15 years of age only 12% of the same children tested at "highly creative"; only 2% of the 280,000 adults, who were all between the ages of 25 and 31 at the time of their test, scored in the "highly creative" range. The researchers concluded that while very young children seem to all possess and demonstrate highly creative thinking habits and skills, non-creative behavior is learned over time and seems to make arguably innate creative skills less accessible, or simply stated, unlearned (Land & Jarman, 1992).

More recent research suggests the conclusions of Land and Jarman (1992). The important benefits of the arts to very young children and their development is confirmed by many researchers (Ewing, 2010; Twigg & Garvis, 2010; Twigg, 2011a, 2011b; Wright, 2012). Children draw, sing, and dance before they begin reading and writing (Kress, 1997). The arts philosopher Collingwood (1938) in *The Principles of Art*

identified dance as the mother of all languages…the original language of total bodily gesture" (p. 243). The arts are the first literacies children display (McArdle & Wright, 2014).

Researchers conducted a comparative study of active versus passive participants in a six-month music group in which all participants were infants. Active group infants focused their attention and participated in singing and dancing whereas passive group infants had music played in the background as they engaged in other activities. The active music group's outcomes for emotion regulation behaviors were significantly greater than the infants in the passive group. (Gerry et al., 2012). In a 2006 study, researchers compared outcomes of the effects of an eight-week instructional program in creative dance and movement. Forty preschool children from a Head Start program were randomly assigned using a control group. Participants were assigned to either the experimental dance group or the attention group. Researchers concluded that engagement in the dance program was related to improvements in social competence which included pro-social behaviors and cooperation, and to significant reductions over time in internalizing and externalizing problems (Lobo & Winsler, 2006).

Similarly, Drake and Winner (2013) conducted studies of children aged six-to-eight and ten-to-12 who were assigned to groups asked to think about past events that caused upset or disappointment for them. One group was also instructed to draw a house to distract them from the negative thoughts while the other was instructed to either draw the actual negative event or to copy another drawing. The group of children engaged in creating an original drawing experienced an improved mood and were better able to

regulate negative feelings while the effect disappeared when children were charged with a copying task.

More literature exists that supports the pattern of substantial arts education impacts on students who are especially young. In a comparative study conducted in 2013, researchers determined that the impact of music from a music-based education program indicated positive effects on a variety of skills for the children participating as reported by teachers who noted improvement in social skills over the course of a school year (Ritblatt et al., 2013). Again, two studies of drama-based education programs of young children yielded positive results. Researchers concluded that oral storytelling impacted children's self-esteem and identity development, engaged the imagination, stimulated sympathetic responses, and helped children to process their social experiences at school (Mello, 2001a, 2001b). Also, a study by Nicolopoulou et al. (2009) reported the transformative power of play in a storytelling context and concluded that involvement decreased participants' disruptive behavior and increased pro-social behaviors while improving their self-regulatory capacity to experience notably less anxiety and unhappiness.

More recently, an experimental research design study was used to investigate the effect of arts exposure for very young children involved in a museum program. Children in kindergarten through second grade were randomly assigned to a program that included pre-curricular materials, a museum visit with a guided tour, arts-based activities, and post-curricular classroom materials. The study used an experimental research design to investigate the effect of arts exposure on the development of children's attitudes toward art. In this study, the researchers:

> [c]ollected original data from students in their classrooms that measured their attitudes toward art museums and art generally, as well as art knowledge. We found that exposure to the arts at an early age produced significant positive effects on the development of students' attitudes toward the arts. Our findings demonstrate that arts-based exposure facilitated by schools can be an effective strategy for developing positive orientations toward art in young children. (Kisida et al., 2018, p. 1)

Because research with very young children is replete with difficulties due to their still-developing written and verbal language skills, some research approaches have been based in the meanings derived from the actual artistic creations by children. According to Wang et al. (2017), arts-based research uses artistic forms and expressions to explore, understand, represent, and even challenge human experiences. Barrett and colleagues (2012) reported that children ages five to eight participated in their research and were asked to share their perceptions of the arts. Barrett et al. (2012) acknowledged that the children were co-constructing along with the professional researchers and that the children were "knowledgeable informants in respect to the phenomenon under investigation- their understandings and experience of the arts" (p. 187) which eliminated the need for additional mediation between the adults and the children.

In another arts-based research study, children were allowed to work collaboratively to produce an end-of year performance in which they immersed themselves in the story using arts-based strategies to gain understanding of plot, characterization, setting, and themes in a more substantial way than is afforded by only a reading of the text. Their participation in multi-modal presentations and re-presentations

of the story yielded a deeper understanding (Barton & Baguley, 2014). That very young children are highly motivated and curious is one of numerous reasons why arts education needs a place in compulsory schooling that is more centered than it has been historically and to the present.

Research on the Decline of Arts Education

A recent marketing research study revealed that Americans believe the arts should be an integral aspect of students' experience in the education system, especially in secondary schools: middle school (93%), high school (92%). Specifically, Americans view creative writing (71%) and music (70%) as most important for secondary students followed by drawing/painting (58%), media arts (56%), performance arts (54%), and graphic arts (53%). Furthermore, Americans believe arts education is as important today as it was fifteen years ago and will be in the coming decades (Jackson, 2019). However, because arts education is not an integral part of most public schools in America, the research that reveals the decrease in or lack of arts education remains relevant.

Gara et al. (2020) utilized data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a large, multi-wave longitudinal study administered by NCES every four years between 1987 and 2011 and concluded that during the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, the percentage of music and visual arts educators decreased in American public schools. NCLB affected a national public education climate of high stakes testing which created political and social pressure on academic performance and accountability on public school leaders. Therefore, more school resources were expended on the traditional subjects that comprise the content of standardized testing such as language arts, math,

and science. Art teacher positions in many school districts were used to instead hire general education classroom teachers (Shaw, 2018; Trafi-Prats & Woywod, 2013). Time that had been utilized by arts educators increasingly became re-purposed for remedial instructional time and test preparation in reading, math and science (Sabol, 2010). In some cases, arts educators who were retained were asked to assist in teaching other traditional subjects (West, 2012).

Rabkin and Hedberg found that childhood arts education had been declining well before and into the NCLB era from 1982 to 2008 and that low income, black, and Hispanic children disproportionately saw more of the decline in childhood arts education (2011). McMurrer's (2008) research demonstrated a dramatic decrease in arts education in American public schools since the advent of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 by analyzing the Center on Education Policy (CEP) survey data to determine that approximately 62% of school districts increased instructional time for English language arts and/or math, while 44% of districts reduced or eliminated time on art and music. The loss of art in the current high stakes testing environment is problematic because arts provide an alternative means to view reality, expand the way students perceive the world, and often has immediately unobservable benefits for the workers in a market economy Berliner (2011).

Arts education for very young students, as discussed previously in this review, has substantial benefits which are potentially greater the earlier students participate in arts activities and arts making. Despite these findings, the efforts of arts education advocates have struggled to substantially increase the quantity and quality of arts education

experiences and opportunities in American schools. Instead, existing literature continues to document a decline.

Arts Integration Curriculum

Many arts education experiences, opportunities, or activities for students in elementary, middle, and high schools fall into one of three categories of arts education: arts integration taught by general classroom or academic subject matter teachers, arts education through community partnerships, and arts as curriculum. Immersive arts education in secondary schools whose structure, curriculum, and culture is wholly devoted to in-depth, focused arts instruction, and which more fully characterized in Chapter 1, have been the subject of few research designs.

According to The Kennedy Center, arts integration "is an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art from. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (Silverstein & Layne 2010, p. 1). A large portion of scholarly research that collects data on the impact of arts education on student and learning outcomes refers to arts education that connects to another subject area. The other subject areas connected are typically the traditional subjects of English, social studies, math, or science. The classroom teachers integrating the opportunities for students to construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form are not arts education specialists. According to Richerme et al. (2012), these teachers are non-arts educators who include "generalist classroom educators at the elementary and sometimes middle school level as well as secondary specialists in non-arts content" (p. 5).

Much research has been done to assess the impact of arts integration on students in K-12 schools. Arts-integrated school programs are associated with academic gains across the curriculum as reflected in standardized test scores, and more substantial positive impacts are reported on the achievement of struggling students than in some more traditional arts education programs (Rabkin & Redmond, 2004). In 23 arts-integrated schools in Chicago, most serving low-income students, standardized test scores of students rose significantly higher and faster than the scores of students in regular public schools (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999). Recent research of note includes efforts to move beyond studies that establish correlations to examine the possibility of producing causal evidence for the value of arts integration.

Hardiman et al. (2014) tested the effect of arts integration on long-term retention of academic content using a small preliminary randomized control trial. Researchers compared arts-integrated instructional units with conventionally taught units in fifth grade science classes. While results initially showed no differences, the retention rate for arts-integrated instruction among students who performed at lower levels of reading achievement was 97.6%, while the retention rate for conventional instruction was 72%. An exploratory case study explored the experiences of six students who attended an arts-integrated elementary school and re-examined their experiences four years later. Participants explored what they remembered about their arts-integrated learning experiences and reported connections to present interest and attitudes. Participants reported they had maintained a relationship with the arts as teenagers, including ensemble work and artistic sensibilities, currently had a positive mindset about school, including an appreciation for their teachers, and felt they could learn best through variety. Participants

also described perceived connections between their self-concept and their social relationships to the arts integration experiences and learning (Steele, 2019).

Arts Education through Community Partnerships

While arts integration research suggests meaningful benefits for students, there are limitations to quality and quantity of arts education experiences that non-arts educators can realistically provide for their students due their limited arts expertise. Most classroom teachers have had minimal or no training in arts education and are not prepared to fulfill roles of arts integration education (Woodworth et al., 2007). Researchers have suggested that it is unfair and uncomfortable for non-arts educators to be tasked with this important role, and students are best served when non-arts educators serve as collaborators with specialists (Byo 1999; Hash, 2010; Van den burg, 1993). One approach to arts education that can help alleviate this burden has been arts education partnerships. Arts education partnerships (AEP) can provide mutual benefits to schools and their communities. Partnerships enhance relationships within the community (Nelson, 2001) and play a vital role in community growth (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). AEPs can strengthen bonds among parents, schools, and communities and create paths for students to become actively involved in new ways within their communities. AEPs can also yield long-term economic benefits as they develop creativity and collaborative capacities in children who can help to sustain these communities into their adult working lives (Speiss & Lynch, 2008).

May and Brenner (2016) argued for the need for policy that will secure high-quality arts education for all children through AEPs. In the absence of real progress toward consistent high-quality, well-funded arts education programs, May and Brenner

argued that some "partial solutions" are better than none while highlighting a successful "small-scale" but high-quality arts program. May and Brenner focused on The Madison Violin Project which began in the fall of 2008 as a collaboration between a large university music school and Madison Elementary School which was situated in an extremely low SES neighborhood with an attendance rate consistently below state averages for Indiana. The school had recently gone through five different principals under five different superintendents, annually dealt with a budget shortfall, and most recently had placed 11 teachers on the reduction in force layoff list. The project had the goal of providing violin instruction to young children who had no access to music education. The researchers set out to answer research questions concerning the cognitive and social effects of early violin study, and the study became a six-year longitudinal study with qualitative data. Teachers identified substantial improvements in reading and listening skills, students demonstrated increased academic maturity and seriousness, and parents learned to view their own children in ways that instilled new pride and admiration: "the power of music as a vehicle for social change is evident from the reflections of teachers, parents, and administrators at Madison" (p. 227).

In *Third Space: When Learning Matters*, Stevenson and Deasy (2006) conducted a research project on an AEP which began in 2001 and involved the community in fine arts integration to increase students' success rates in economically disadvantaged areas. Researchers conducted case studies of 10 schools in urban and rural locations. The partnership committed to providing some arts specialists within schools in addition to training some teachers in arts integration strategies. Most schools in the study utilized an artist-in-resident or the school's arts specialists to develop quality classroom instruction.

This type of artist-in-residence program creates the conditions for community collaboration, partnership, and important role modeling. Researchers reported that students connected with the school, their subjects, and their teachers in more meaningful ways: “The arts were the context for making these connections and provided a powerful framework in which students engaged in the processes of learning that developed their academic, personal, and social capacities” (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005, p. 36).

More recently, researchers conducted a randomized controlled trial of over 10,000 elementary and middle school students from 42 different schools who were selected by lottery to be provided with substantial arts education experiences as part of the city of Houston’s Arts Access Initiative (Kisida & Bowen, 2019). These arts education opportunities were provided through school-community partnerships with local arts organizations, cultural institutions, and teaching-artists. Findings reported included a significant decrease in the number of students involved in disciplinary issues (primarily among male, middle school, African American students), significant improvement in writing assessment scores which included composition skills through an open-response expository essay, and increased peer to peer compassion. Among the elementary school students, who comprised 86% of the sample, these arts educational experiences significantly improved their school engagement, college aspirations, and arts-facilitated empathy.

Arts as Curriculum

The Kennedy Center defined “arts as curriculum” as the “arts programs that many schools offer: music, drama, dance, theater and are offered for students to develop

knowledge and skills in a particular art form guided by national, state, or local standards for each of the art forms" (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 1). One of the distinctions between arts as curriculum and arts integration is that arts as curriculum includes discrete arts course offerings not connected to another traditional academic subject area as with arts integration. Another distinction is that such discrete arts courses are typically taught by arts education specialists. Richerme (2012) explained the distinctions:

> Although in schools they are often referred to as 'specialists,' certified arts educators are more broadly educated than teaching artists, who tend to be highly specialized in sub-fields of their discipline…Certified non-arts educators include generalist classroom educators at the elementary and sometimes middle school level as well as secondary specialists in non-arts content. At the elementary level, generalist classroom educators have the majority of the school day with their assigned group of students…At the secondary level, specialist non-arts educators have a strong understanding of their subject area, which makes them ideal partners to work with certified arts educators and partner arts organizations to identify deep cross-curricular connections. (pp. 3-5)

Like general classroom teachers in both elementary and secondary public schools, arts education specialists must maintain certification through ongoing professional development. Arts as curriculum provides more focus on an art form and, as with nearly all arts education experiences or training, yields documented benefits for students.

Longitudinal research of student outcomes has consistently suggested that when at-risk or not at-risk students engage in arts education, they outperform their non-arts peers on a host of educational, social, and behavioral outcomes (Catterall et al., 2012). Catteral et al. analyzed data from four large-scale, longitudinal, national data sets to examine how a student's level of arts participation during the K-12 years is related to their academic achievement and civic engagement in the postsecondary years. For example, "High school students who earned few or no arts credits were five times more

likely not to have graduated than students who earned many arts credits" (p.14). Intensive arts experiences for at-risk youth correlated to academic and civic engagement levels close to or exceeding those of the general population. Researchers identified very strong associations between arts engagement and positive academic outcomes for intensive, high-arts/low-SES youth.

The National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88) was a panel study that followed more than 25,000 students in middle and high schools for ten years and has been a useful collection of data used by many researchers. Catterall et al. (1999) utilized data for a two-year exploration of interactions between arts education and student achievement. The first phase of the study examined involvement in the arts across all disciplines, but because the second phase examined the potential importance of sustained involvement in a single discipline (instrumental music and theatre arts for case examples), it is an especially valuable study of student benefits associated with arts as curriculum engagement. Researchers reported consistent positive developments for students engaged in arts education, but the comparative gains for arts-involved students became significantly more pronounced over time and included students of low socio-economic status. Researchers also reported significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by grade twelve among students with consistent involvement in instrumental music at a high level during their middle and high school years. The improvements grew over time when compared to students who had no involvement in instrumental music. Significant associations were also reported for gains in reading proficiency, self-concept, motivation, higher levels of empathy, and tolerance for others among students with

sustained involvement in theatre arts (acting in plays and musicals, participating in drama clubs, and taking acting lessons).

Recent research continues to provide evidence of the benefits of arts as curriculum. A quasi-experimental study of impacts of longitudinal variations in arts educational resources based on secondary administrative data from Boston Public Schools is a significant confirmation of benefits. Utilizing K-12 student records and surveys, and parent/teacher school climate surveys compiled from 171 traditional public schools over eleven school years from 2008-2019, Kisida and Bowen (2019) examined the variations in students' arts resources and learning opportunities, with arts access defined as student enrollment in arts courses. Instead of comparing students' involvement in arts courses with students' non-involvement in arts courses, researchers employed a fixed effects strategy to compare students themselves at different points in time so that results of when the same students took arts courses versus times they did not are integral to the findings. Positive effects on student attendance were reported with more significant positive outcomes for students with chronic absenteeism. Parent and student school engagement was indicated as higher and positive impacts on arts enthusiasm, school belonging, and learning engagement were reported. Furthermore, as students took more arts courses, teachers identified greater work effort in their classes and increased parent activity within the school and school community.

A large study of data from the National Center for Education Statistics High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS) was undertaken to estimate how many schools in the United States offer arts as curriculum with discrete arts courses (Elpus, 2020). Data were based on the four major arts disciplines: visual art, dance, theater, and

music. Among all public high schools, 88% offered at least one arts course in any discipline; 12% offered none, 12% offered only one of the four arts disciplines, 28% offered two, 31% offered three, and 17% offered all four major arts disciplines. Public charter schools have the lowest availability of arts courses at 37%. While 37% of private schools offered no arts courses, 1% offered only one of the four major arts disciplines, 28% offered two, 26% offered three, and 8% offered all four major arts disciplines. Visual art was the most available arts discipline with at least one course in visual art offered in 79% of all high schools. Music was the second-most available at 74% of all high schools. Theater courses were at 46% and dance at only 16% of schools.

While 88% of schools may offer at least one arts course in visual arts, music, theatre arts, or dance, it is of note that in most schools, such courses remain outside of the required curriculum for earning a high school diploma or being eligible for college admission. Such courses, while defined as "arts as curriculum" by The Kennedy Center, are extracurricular, elective courses within the typical high school matrix of credits and requirements. Even among schools that offer a multiple-year sequence of arts courses, the courses are not required.

Two Major Types of Arts Education Research Findings

As in most fields of research, there are numerous quantitative and qualitative methodologies and research designs that arts education researchers employ. In the last two decades, debates have emerged over which type of research findings are the most useful in contributing to a body of research that can best leverage both increased inclusion of arts education in public schools and funding for arts education. This debate is between documenting instrumental benefits that result in quantifiable academic outcomes

and instrumental benefits including cognitive, social, attitudinal, behavioral, and health in addition to intrinsic benefits.

Instrumental Benefits and Academic Outcomes

McCarthy (2004) described instrumental benefits as those that "promote important, measurable benefits, such as economic growth and student learning, and thus are of value to all Americans" (p. xi). Because of the emphasis on school accountability for increasing academic achievement as measured by standardized testing focused on the traditionally centered subjects of the Western school model (English, social studies, science, math), arts education research has often attempted to establish the instrumental benefits of arts education that correlate to increased positive and measurable academic outcomes. By the early 1990s, there was pressure on arts education advocates to articulate the public value of the arts in schools. The vocabulary of the response which would dominate the discussion was that of instrumental benefits.

Winner and Cooper (2000) conducted a comprehensive review of all research designs implemented between 1950-1998 aimed at discovering academic outcomes as instrumental benefits to arts education (1,135 studies at that time). They focused on two research design types: correlational and experimental. The researchers established five meta-analyses for interpreting combined data: Correlational Composite, Verbal, and Mathematical; Experimental Verbal and Mathematical. Their conclusion was important in the field of arts education and arts education research:

> [a] positive relationship between studying the arts and academic achievement does exist. However, thus far we have no evidence to suggest a causal relationship between art study and verbal or math achievement. The claim that involvement in the arts improves verbal and math achievement is consistent with-but not proven

> by-the positive effect sizes found here. Because the effect sizes are based on correlational studies, they do not allow us to conclude that arts education causes academics to improve. It is certainly possible that studying the arts leads to the development of cognitive skills that in turn lead to heightened achievement in academic areas. It is also possible that studying the arts leads to great engagement in school, which in turn leads to greater academic achievement. But these studies do not allow us to rule out a causal relationship in the opposite direction: high academic achievers may choose to study to arts. (p. 14, 33)

These conclusions did not deter arts education researchers from implementing experimental designs. Schneider and Rohmann (2021) reviewed 26 research designs in which quasi-experimental and experimental studies with pre-test and post-test designs were conducted to report on academic competencies outcomes. The studies looked primarily at effects from music, drama, dance, and visual arts involvement of students. The researchers concluded:

> [s]tudies and methodological characteristics did not justify definite conclusions. Whereas experimental designs are considered the "gold standard" to demonstrate causal impact, the present review has demonstrated that the "gold standard" is often associated with a range of methodological limitations which create uncertainty in the conclusions. (p. 1)

The researchers further suggested that qualitative studies held promise for theory building due to the methodological limitations inherent in the application of experimental designs.

Other Instrumental Benefits and Intrinsic Benefits

The most common types of instrumental benefits researched as outcomes that do not focus on academic outcomes include cognitive, social, attitudinal, and behavioral benefits. While these outcomes may not be the "gold standard" of the type of outcomes that most impress legislators or policymakers, they are often reported as findings from arts research designs. All the existing literature reviewed in this chapter as arts exposure research on young children, arts integration research, arts education through community

partnerships research, and arts as curriculum research reported instrumental benefits that include cognitive, social, attitudinal, behavioral, and benefits.

Intrinsic benefits have not been as widely reported in existing research literature. A fundamental difference in the concepts of instrumental and intrinsic benefits is that instrumental benefits are desirable for end results gained whereas intrinsic benefits are desired for their own sake. Intrinsic benefits are more challenging to articulate in the language of research design and findings expressed most often in arts education research. Some existing literature that explores intrinsic benefits in arts education will be discussed in the next section.

Research on Studio Habits of Mind

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of research designs of arts education that have reported findings on cognitive, social, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes as evidence instrumental benefits. One useful theoretical concept that some researchers have incorporated are studio habits of mind (SHoM) (Hetland et al., 2013; Winner 2000, 2019). These education, psychology, and human development scholars, in *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (2013), developed a framework that helps articulate the essential and important aspects of the process students experience in secondary visual arts courses. They identified the development of particular habits of mind for the students that include the following: developing craft, engaging and persisting, envisioning (thinking in images), expressing (finding meaning), observing (really seeing, not just looking), reflecting (questioning and explaining), evaluating,

stretching and exploring (taking a leap), understanding art worlds. The researchers view these habits of mind as applicable to other arts.

Existing literature suggests the usefulness and adaptability of the SHofM framework in research designs. Researchers discussed the implications for the arts in higher leaning through the lens of the eight SHofM during and after a collaborative project which included 12 visual arts education students and 12 music students together creating a booklet for a Baroque music performance (Tan & Kan, 2022). Pantaleo (2019) applied SHofM as an analytical structure to examine the nature of pedagogy and student learning opportunities that emerged from a classroom project intended to develop nine-year-old students' visual meaning making skills by focusing on the visual art and design elements in picturebooks. The SHofM framework was again applied for understanding how visual arts participation is rapidly evolving through digital tools and the internet. Sheridan (2011) focused on two habits of mind, observe and envision, and analyzed how they are taught in high school arts classrooms with traditional media compared with the digital context of an informal educational class using 3D computer modeling and animation. The SHofM framework facilitated the discovery of learning patterns, sustained pedagogical reflection, and foundational structure for study designs for learning in and through the arts. In response to the failure of American schools to equip students with competencies of creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking as essential skills, MInnebo (2020) utilized the SHofM framework to design curriculum for a visual arts classroom intending to focus on the skill of active self-reflection for learning. The researcher discusses qualitative data collected through observation, art documentation, and conference interviews with participants. Program efficacy was

assessed using the SHofM framework in conjunction with a pilot community program designed to enrich student learning of common core standards through a local artist-in-residence partnership with public schools.

Increased engagement, community involvement, and student growth, demonstrated the power of the arts and the potential for policy change (Hunter-Doniger 2016) as researchers explored how SHofM influenced the Success in Postsecondary Writing contributed to the development of critical thinking in the classroom. Using a systematic review of a meta-analysis approach the researchers were able to investigate the selected habits of mind and compare them to externally verified critical thinking skills through a multiple regression methodology. Researchers found justification for the instructional leadership approach of expectation of educators to implement the SHofM framework and recommended fieldwork as the next step for proper evaluation.

Intrinsic Benefits Vocabulary

Despite the challenges of articulating the intrinsic benefits of arts education and experiences, research designs that report such findings have increased in recent years. Oliver and Walmsley (2011) identified three models that have been conceptualized and applied effectively: Brown's (2006) benefits map, White and Hede's (2008) schema of impacts and enablers, and McCarthy et al.'s, (2004) benefits framework. Each of the frameworks contribute to an emerging confidence for articulating some of the essentialist abstractions inherent in intrinsic benefits. While McCarthy's (2004) framework remains dichotomous in its positioning of instrumental and intrinsic benefits of the arts, when addressing the need for researching the intrinsic benefits, the author referred to them as

"the missing link" (p. 37) in arts education research and stated, "People are drawn to the arts not for their instrumental effects, but because the arts can provide them with meaning and with a distinctive type of pleasure and emotional stimulation" (p. xv 2004). McCarthy (2004) offered a vocabulary for discussing and exploring arts education's intrinsic benefits, and the depth of articulation of the terms he includes are useful tools for describing such benefits. McCarthy included these terms in this emerging framework language: captivation, pleasure, expanded capacity for empathy, cognitive growth, creation of social bonds, and expression of communal meanings. This part of McCarthy's model is referred to in this study as the intrinsic benefits vocabulary.

To move beyond measuring arts experiences only in quantitative ways and focusing only one the raw data of attendance numbers, Radbourne et al. (2010) utilized three years of data collection on arts audiences to create and test a measure that would incorporate qualitative and quantitative deigns. Using McCarthy's (2004) intrinsic benefits vocabulary, researchers designed the Arts Audience Experience Index which uses surveys and deep feedback focus groups to measure and assess the intrinsic benefits of arts audiences while also providing quantifiable measures. The Arts Audience Experience Index was tested with two companies who became case studies for the researchers. Researchers reported benefits for new understanding of how to quantify previous qualitative audience data as an effective measure of quality in the performing arts sector in hopes of improved audience attendance and experiences. Exploring the aesthetic experience of arts audiences is complex, and because it affects individuals in conscious and subconscious ways, researchers utilized McCarthy's intrinsic benefits vocabulary to help create a more systematic measurement approach to convey the

intrinsic value. Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013) conducted initial exploratory research and developed meaningful and intuitive language to describe discrete elements of the artistic and aesthetic experience. Researchers recognized the need for a "new vocabulary of impact" (p. 227) to best document intrinsic benefits and employed several emerging constructs involving McCarthy's intrinsic benefits vocabulary to create and implement survey instruments. Researchers also conducted focus group tests for face validity in which participants reported an additional educational purpose for themselves in helping them also define a new way of thinking critically about the role of arts and arts experiences in their lives.

Implications for Future Research

The reviewed literature highlights important areas of arts education that justifiably receive substantial attention from arts education researchers, practitioners, advocates, and policymakers. The arts education that occurs every day in public, private, charter, and alternative schools is invaluable to many students who benefit in numerous ways in the moment and for the rest of their lives. The reviewed literature also highlights the continuing decline and marginalization of arts education of all types. Partially because of the persistence of that marginalized status, newer and important frameworks have emerged to explore and report varied types of benefits of arts education. Two current frameworks for understanding and articulating these benefits, the studio habits of mind framework and the intrinsic benefits vocabulary framework, provide promising insight into how and why arts education is so transformative and essential to all areas of positive student outcomes; however, this outcome research and conceptual literature provides

very little information about the specific experiences of students in immersive, secondary arts schools.

For this study, the studio habits of mind framework and the intrinsic benefits vocabulary framework discussed in this chapter provides an orientation to and a useful guide for examining how students in an immersive, secondary arts school describe their experiences of such a school's culture, structure, and curriculum and their own subjective evaluation of what aspects of this type of school are helpful or unhelpful.

By utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach, the voices of the individual students in such a school are kept central in the development of a conceptual model for understanding the participants' experiences. Without readily accepting the assumptions underlying the studio habits of mind framework and the intrinsic benefits vocabulary framework presented in this chapter, as is consistent with a constructivist stance of highlighting the subjective experiences of individuals, the conceptual model developed from data collected in this study will fill the gap in existing research literature on the beneficial outcomes of the arts education students' experience at an immersive, secondary arts school.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Purpose Statement

This chapter examines the research design of the study. The purpose and research questions are identified, followed by the definition and discussion of grounded theory methodology, researcher position statement, participants, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness.

Research Design

This research study was conducted using a grounded theory methodology informed by a constructivist epistemology. Grounded theory is a process of collecting qualitative data and undertaking data analysis to generate categories (a theory) to explain a phenomenon of interest (Opie, 2004). The data are collected through face-to-face interviews between researcher and participants, and the theory is generated from the collected data. The resulting conceptual framework is grounded in and emerges directly from the participants' own lived experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Similarly, Creswell (2012) viewed grounded theory as a powerful tool when a researcher needs a broad theory or explanation of a natural phenomenon. Because the emerging theory is "grounded" or rooted in the data, it provides a more sophisticated explanation than a theory derived from other studies. Grounded theory design is appropriate when the current available theories fail to describe the phenomenon of interest

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Since immersive, secondary arts schools afford a unique experience to students within K-12 education, a constructivist lens can provide focus to the study.

Epistemological Position

The epistemological position of this research assumes that reality is co-constructed between the researcher and the researched participants and shaped by individual experiences. Among epistemological frameworks this is known as a constructivist view of truth. The constructivist view does not embrace reality as having a fixed objective or absolute value. In contrast to objectivist approaches to knowledge that maintain that truth is essential and static existing independently of human knowledge and perceptions, constructivism embraces the complexities of positioning knowledge within the interactions of abstract concepts and lived experience. As Von Glasersfeld (1995) explained, "It is made up of the network of things and relationships that we rely on in our living, and on which, we believe, others rely on, too" (p. 7). Individual, political, and cultural powers can exert influence on the construction of knowledge, consciousness, and understandings of reality. Extrapolating patterns and themes in commonly shared experiences and interpretations of experiences create conditions in which individuals become more fully educated about reality. The researcher and participants interpret and construct a reality based on personal experiences and interactions with immediate environments. “To the constructivist, concepts, models, theories… are viable if they prove adequate in the contexts in which they were created" (p. 7). This positioning for a conceptual framework for a grounded theory study is “constructed from the theories and

experiences the researcher brings to and draws on in conceptualizing the study" (Merriam et al., 2015, p. 12). Since the purpose of grounded theory is to develop a theory or model to explain a phenomenon for which no theory exists, a conceptual framework of existing theories will be integrated into this study.

Researcher Position Statement

Hays and Singh (2012) emphasized five considerations for the role of a researcher which include reflexivity, subjectivity, research teams, peer debriefing, and voice of participants. Research reflexivity involves "the active self-reflection of the investigator on the research process" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 137). In this study, I assumed three of these roles. The study is inspired by my own professional experiences as a former teacher, current administrator, and parent at an immersive, secondary arts school, the Alabama School of Fine Arts (ASFA), as well as my advocacy role for immersive arts education as a board member of the Arts Schools Network. To assure trustworthiness in my position as researcher, let me explain that I am currently an employee at ASFA from which research participants have recently graduated. I serve as a school administrator in directing curriculum and instruction. I am a supervisor to instructional professionals, and I do not assess or evaluate students in any capacity. All research participants were graduates of the school, and I assured them that there were no intentional or unintentional negative consequences possible as a result of their participation; their involvement was completely voluntary. The topics within the research were not focused on sensitive issues, however, it was possible that incidents of previous childhood bullying or feelings of social exclusion could arise comparatively or contextually.

Because I have in-depth familiarity with the school and its history and having been aware of marketing research engagements funded for the school and involved in strategic planning cycles supporting the mission of the school, I am attuned to how others perceive the school, including legislators, board members, faculty, staff, students, and parents. Well-rehearsed narratives set in and root deeply. Therefore, I was justifiably vigilant in conducting my research in the most trustworthy ways. My attention to establishing trustworthiness as a researcher included making certain I did not ask leading questions, or define important terms (*school structure, school culture, diversity*) in ways I have come to personally think of them but allow research participants to reflect and elaborate on their own experiences and interpretations. Furthermore, I paid close attention to my interactions within each interview and listened intently and carefully to establish a rapport which could facilitate the best experience for each participant (Lune & Berg, 2016). I asked thought-provoking but open-ended questions and followed up with probing questions which encouraged speakers to elaborate on their meanings and perspectives and do a deeper dive towards their own objectivity (Charmaz, 2014). I patiently allowed participants to not be interrupted by me, even when something piqued my interest and curiosity. This afforded each the space to really hear themselves speak and reflect on their own meanings. Given enough space and time, participants often reflected until they arrived at more accurate articulations of what they wished to convey. I also allowed for the complexities and messiness within their experiences to arise and take new, unexpected directions without satisfying my impulse to suggest a way back to a topic they had been discussing or to suggest alternative words or phrases when they struggled to locate the language they sought to give expression to what they struggled to

describe (Law, 2004; Mercieca et al., 2021). This came naturally to me as a former teacher experienced in asking the best questions and allowing students to always find their own voices. The result was an impressive collection of thick, rich data to be the solid earth in which theory would eventually be grounded (McClelland, 2017).

I shared my ideas with others to ensure multiple perspectives viewed my role as ethical and acceptable. I continually examined my personal influences and biases which could impair interpretations of the data. However, the subjective nature of constructivist methodology employs epistemology that does not embrace the traditional relationship between "interpretation" and "truth" but explores the productive relationships among all research participants and the researcher. Therefore, hermeneutics played an essential role in the validity of my research results as I interpreted data and findings through the lens of someone who has experienced numerous positive, affirming processes and outcomes within the types of immersive arts schools that are the subject of my research.

I have also been professionally aware of some of the problems and difficulties of student life in such schools. My reflexivity demanded that I remain attuned to my own biases so that I am methodologically self-conscious (Lynch, 2000) of the interplay among my position as researcher and the individual experiences of research participants. Researcher bias within the context of qualitative analysis of data generally, and grounded theory data analysis specifically, is not assessed as being wholly unacceptable and is even beneficial as it allows space for unique and well-developed expertise to inform findings in important constructivist ways. What was most relevant for my own position as a researcher was to reflexively engage in “continuing, dynamic and subjective self-awareness” (Finlay, 2003, p. 108) as I examined and codified data. This examination was

an introspective and ongoing "audit" (Peshkin 1988) that continually brought me back to acknowledging my own subjectivity and its role in my research. I also gave voice to the participants. Hayes and Singh (2012) recommended that researchers address "the accuracy, completeness, and emotional content of participants' voices" (p. 148). I sought to capture participants' interviews accurately by studying and re-studying data multiple times, taking reflexive stances, and including direct quotes to describe emerging themes during the data analysis.

I also served as data collector and analyst. "Constructivist grounded theory reshapes the interaction between researcher and participants in the research process and in doing so brings to the fore the notion of the researcher as author" (Mills et al., 2006, p. 31). As analyst, I used "inductive data to construct abstract analytic categories through an iterative process" to evaluate recent graduates' experiences (Charmaz, 2014, p. 15). While some researchers disagree on the role of theory in research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012; Schram, 2003), most agree the grounded theorists bring prior knowledge, experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions with them. Because a researcher is influenced by past knowledge, they must understand how to apply that knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). "The goal of grounded theory is to generate a conceptual theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved. The goal is not voluminous description, nor clever verification" (Glaser, 1978, p. 93).

Because of my professional familiarity with ASFA, in analyzing and documenting data, I avoided "taking sides" since I am professionally immersed in the field that I am researching. I disclosed negative as well as positive results and respected the privacy of

all participants including ones I may know professionally. I bracketed my own views by avoiding yes/no questions and leading questions while creating the most general, open-ended questions possible.

Participant Recruitment

Prior to beginning participant recruitment and data collection, I gained approval from the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board (IRB) whose purpose is to protect human participants in research. As required by the university, I submitted a research project description, interview protocol, any recruitment materials, and the proposed informed consent document for IRB approval. Participant recruitment and data collection began once approval was received. Participants who were recent graduates of a local immersive, secondary arts school were recruited. Recruited participants had all recently graduated from The Alabama School of Fine Arts (ASFA) which is a partially residential, competitively admitted, public school dedicated to providing gifted and talented middle and high school students immersive instruction in one of six dedicated arts areas: creative writing, dance, music, theatre arts, and visual arts. Students also receive college-prep instruction in academic core subjects.

Participants were recruited via a social media invitation posted where ASFA alumni are known to visit frequently. A copy of the recruitment letter is included as Appendix B. Participants understood they would receive no compensation or benefit for participation.

Purposeful Sampling

Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is central to grounded theory methodology as it identifies the constituency of the experiences under examination. This study employed purposeful sampling to seek an "information rich case" from which the researcher "can learn a great deal about issues of central importance" (Patton, 2002, p. 230). This commonly employed qualitative research strategy serves the goal of reaching an in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations while also making the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). I interviewed participants who were 19 years of age or older and recent graduates from a local immersive, secondary arts school (ASFA) in Birmingham, Alabama, and this represented a type of intensity sample (Patton, 2002) which provided an information-rich environment to demonstrate "the phenomenon of interest intensely" (Patton, 2002, p. 234). However, the intensity of the sampling did not yield extremes or deviancy which could "distort the manifestation of the phenomenon of interest" (p. 234). This sampling involved identifying and selecting individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The importance of availability and willingness of participants, plus the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner is recommended Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979).

For purposeful sampling, data were collected until theoretical saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of new emerging categories or themes (Charmaz,

2014). Becker (2012) stated that there is no specific number of interviews to achieve theoretical saturation or methodological rigor. Mason (2012) warned researchers that a smaller sample size that allows sufficient time for thoroughly analyzed data is preferable to an unnecessarily large sample size that yields data too unwieldy to be properly analyzed effectively. For this study, sufficient theoretical saturation was accomplished with 12 participants. After the first six participants were interviewed, and preliminary analyses of their interviews completed, additional participants were recruited to ensure theoretical saturation was achieved.

Participants

Isla

Isla is a 19-year-old white female. Isla majored in dance, enrolled in the 7th grade, and spent six years at ASFA. She previously attended a well-funded, public suburban school system whose student population was homogenous. She is currently attending college and majoring in psychology.

Neena

Neena is a 21-year-old white female. Neena majored in creative writing, enrolled in the 7th grade, and spent six years at ASFA. She previously attended a rural, public school whose student population was mostly homogenous. She is currently attending college majoring in English literature and creative writing.

Appollo

Appollo is a 22-year-old black male. Appollo majored in creative writing, enrolled in the 9th grade, and spent four years at ASFA. He previously attended a suburban, public school whose student population was mostly Black and homogenous. He recently graduated from college and began his first full-time job. He also began graduate school seeking an MFA in theatre.

Damion

Damion is a 20-year-old black male. Damion majored in music, enrolled in the 8th grade, and spent five years at ASFA. He previously attended an urban, public school whose student population was homogenous. He is currently attending a music conservatory.

Desmond

Desmond is a 22-year-old white male. Desmond majored in music, enrolled in the 9th grade, and spent four years at ASFA. He previously attended a variety of schools including a moderately diverse suburban public school and a homogenous religious private school. He is currently attending college majoring in music production.

Cassandra

Cassandra is a 22-year-old black female. Cassandra majored in music, enrolled in the 8th grade, and spent five years at ASFA. She previously attended a suburban, public

school whose student population was mostly homogenous. She is currently in her first year of law school.

Talia

Talia is a 20-year-old white female. Talia majored in visual arts, enrolled in the 8th grade, and spent five years at ASFA. She previously attended a rural-suburban, public school whose student population was mostly homogenous. She is currently attending college majoring in architecture.

Quentin

Quentin is a 20-year-old white male. Quentin majored in visual arts, enrolled in the 9th grade, and spent four years at ASFA. He previously attended a suburban, public school whose student population was moderately diverse. He is currently attending an arts conservatory majoring in visual arts.

Sutton

Sutton is a 22-year-old white female. Sutton majored in theatre arts, enrolled in the 7th grade, and spent six years at ASFA. She previously attended a suburban, public school whose student population was moderately diverse. She is currently attending college and majoring in psychology.

Sebastian

Sebastian is a 21-year-old white male. Sebastian majored in theatre arts, enrolled in the 9th grade, and spent four years at ASFA. He previously attended a suburban, public school whose student population was moderately diverse, and a suburban public school that was homogenous. He is currently attending college majoring in theatre.

Kleis

Kleis is a 23-year-old white female. Kleis majored in dance, enrolled in the 7th grade, and spent six years at ASFA. She previously attended a rural, public school whose student population was moderately diverse. She recently graduated from college after majoring in dance and has begun work as an events coordinator.

Graham

Graham is a 21-year-old white male. Graham majored in creative writing, enrolled in the 7th grade, and spent six years at ASFA. He previously attended an urban alternative school, whose student population was moderately diverse. He is currently attending college majoring in Russian studies.

Data Collection Procedures

Because all 12 participants were 19 years of age or older, I did not need to use a consent form but only an information sheet in an email invitation to participate in the study. Each participant was a volunteer with proper assurances of confidentiality. To be eligible, participants had to be at least 19 years of age, be a recent graduate of ASFA, and

be willing to participate in a 60 to 75-minute interview via Zoom or phone. I conducted conversational interviews that lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes each. The interviews were conversational due to the absence of current qualitative research on my research topic and the exploratory nature of subject areas (Mertens, 2011; Patton 2014).

I intended to allow myself latitude afforded by a conversational interview approach in case the interviewee wished to explore topics that might initially seem tangential but still prove useful. The participants were given the choice of a virtual platform or a phone call for the interview. I made video recordings of each interview in addition to another audio recording of each interview as a backup. The video recordings were made using Zoom video teleconferencing technology; Zoom also uses voice to text technology to generate transcriptions of interviews. However, the voice to text transcriptions required thorough editing since the transcription capability is not completely accurate. I conducted 12 interviews. After fully transcribing each interview accurately and doing open coding, I sent transcripts to each participant and encouraged and allowed participants to review a transcript of their interview to assist with member checking validity. Each participant acknowledged receipt, confirmed the accuracy of their initial interview transcript, and accepted my invitation to participate in a brief follow-up interview, also via Zoom. All follow-up interviews occurred within 10 to 14 days of the initial interviews and lasted 15 to 25 minutes each.

Each interview was securely stored, including acknowledgment of the consent process, on a password protected device that I own, and I will keep these recordings a minimum of three years afterwards in accordance with the common rules regulating interview data that is not applicable to HIPPA, FERPA, or FDA regulations. Each

interview was also recorded as a voice memo on an iPhone and saved as mp4 audio files on the same secure device.

Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012; Charmaz, 1996, 2014). Once the initial interviews of three of the study participants were completed and a preliminary analysis of data was conducted, I conducted a follow-up interview with each of these participants to gain a deeper understanding of the emerging categories and themes and for purposes of member checking. Three additional participants were then recruited to further explore the emerging data themes in these initial rounds of data analysis.

Investigating the experiences of recently graduated secondary arts school students allowed me to move towards any patterns of experiences and processes that emerged from data. Guba and Lincoln (1989) (as cited in Mills et al., 2006) asserted, "Constructivism is a research paradigm that denies the existence of an objective reality, 'asserting instead that realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals'" (p. 26). The purpose of theoretical sampling was to develop an emerging conceptual framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) so that the data would become saturated, or, in other words, the data reaches a point at which new concepts no longer emerge (Charmaz, 2014). Themes were produced through analysis of individual codes and categories which are intentionally reconstructed and elevated to reflect an abstract conceptualization (Charmaz, 2014). In turn, any emerging conceptualizations were used to generate a conceptual framework with which to describe findings. This approach to understanding the processes of an experience or experiences of students in immersive, secondary arts schools was appropriate because no such

theoretical framework had been developed to understand and assess these transformative experiences.

Also, by applying constructivist grounded theory in this research, it allowed me to analyze the data to construct, discover, and generate new theories to inform arts education advocacy. Arts education advocacy needs to be better informed and supported by research data. Arts education advocates attempt to promote more arts education to influential audiences of educators, school administrators, and legislators with the political resources to fund and promote immersive arts education more fully. Arts education advocacy continues to be dominated by attempts to correlate exposure to arts education and academic achievement. However, identifying more fully the benefits of arts education to students that are intrinsic as well as instrumental can create the possibility of a more robust platform for advocating for additional schools and curricula to be immersed in arts education experiences and disciplines.

Data Collection

Interviews

Interviews are a primary data collection method in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I conducted conversational interviews. This type of interview accommodated the potential to explore concepts as they emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Lyons & Coyle, 2007). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), grounded theory approach intends "to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory…unified theoretical explanation" (p. 82). This approach was best suited to approach questions about the general explanation/theory of a process that individuals go

through as part of an experience that is individual, shared and even shaped through their interactions.

Sometimes, participants experience self-consciousness, embarrassment, or the desire to edit their own voice in checking the literal transcriptions of their interviews. Transcripts are supposed to document natural conversational language, and these rarely consist of complete and grammatically correct sentences. I assured participants that their contributions were worthy, valid, and respected and that their unique perspective, voice, and lens were of higher value than the accuracy of their grammar or dialogue (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I adopted an iterative (the performance of repetitive analysis) process of coding the initial data from conversational interviews while conducting in-depth comparative analysis. I employed theoretical sampling to discover emerging themes that assisted in the development of an emerging conceptual framework. I looked for recurrent themes in any collected data. I horizontalized data (treated it all as having equal weight) and then developed clustered meanings and themes that appeared to best report the essence of meaning within participant experiences. After developing axial coding phrases (that helped draw connections among the emerging themes), the goal was to memo evolving theoretical ideas and concepts that moved towards articulating a substantive-level theory to explain the process that began the research (the experience of students in an immersive, secondary arts school and the process they experience) and then to ground the theory in the data. This process allowed me to analyze data to construct, discover, and generate new theories to inform arts education practice and advocacy. I reported the results of my data collection analyses, then discussed the importance and relevance of

these results and how they relate to my literature review, research questions, and my overall conclusions.

Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) approaches were used to analyze collected data. I entered the research space already sensitized to the topics, participants, and/or processes under study; however, grounded theory methods assume a minimum of or no preconceptions about the potential findings (Glaser, 1978). I continuously engaged in the iterative process of examining each data source as they were collected and created analytic memos (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I looked for recurrent themes in my collected data. I "horizontalized" the initial data collection gathered from broad questions then developed "clustered meanings" and themes that moved toward being able to report the essence of phenomenology with a composite description in written form.

"Horizontalization is the process of laying out all the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight…these data are then organized into clusters or themes" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). I returned after developing "axial coding phrases" to pursue deeper data that moved my research toward "saturating" the research model. Next, I used memo writing to capture evolving theoretical ideas and concepts towards the goal of articulating a substantive-level theory to explain the process that began the research study and to ground the theory in the data. I detailed how each research question was addressed by applying the grounded theory methods of initial coding and focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Strauss & Corbin,

1998). The data analysis attempted to "theorize a social process… [to] focus on understanding the intentions and strategies of actors involved in that process employing a systematic analysis of data through categorization and comparison." (Dey, 2007, p. 171). In this way, the analysis took an inductive and constructivist stance (Charmaz, 2011).

Constructivist Grounded Theory

This study employed a grounded theory methodology to address the research questions and subquestions. Grounded theory is an approach to qualitative analysis that aims to develop an abstract or theoretical understanding of an experience, set of experiences, or a process (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strass 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory seeks to develop a theory to explain a phenomenon when a theory does not already exist, to explain a phenomenon based on a theory that has not been previously considered for the phenomenon, or to develop a theory based on aspects of more than one theory (Creswell, 2013). No theory has yet been put forth to explain the educational process experienced by immersive, secondary arts schools and the experiences of recent graduates of such schools who participated in the process. This research design is committed to helping establish how immersive, secondary arts schools function to provide students with valuable experiences and to promote these findings for adoption more broadly in American public schools. As Barone (1994) explained, there is an under-valued importance and lack of socially committed literature in educational research intended to transform the landscape of American schooling.

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory or model to explain this phenomenon. In *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Charmaz (2014) identified the principles of grounded theory as a methodology:

> Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves…[and] begins with inductive data, invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods, and keeps you interacting and involved with your data and emerging analysis. (p. 1)

As described above, the experiences and interpretations of recent graduate participants in this study served as the foundation for developing a localized theory to be grounded in the daily and cumulative experiences of recent graduates in an immersive, secondary arts school. This created an ideal template for grounded theory. Charmaz (2014) argued that theorizing is a social action, and constructivist grounded theory requires researchers to reflect on the social production of the theory itself. Influenced by Charmaz's understanding, Corbin and Strauss (2008) explained that consequences cannot exist within a vacuum because they are always connected to contextual conditions, actions, and interactions. This research design allowed voices of recent graduates of an immersive, secondary arts schools to co-create with me as researcher theory about the experiences of students in a type of educational experience that is rare in American public schools.

More specifically, constructivist grounded theory methodology approaches research as construction while acknowledging that it occurs under varying conditions specific to contexts of which researchers "may not be aware and which may not be of our choosing" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). It is important to identify how worlds are socially constructed and that reality and interpretations are active and in flux. Charmaz (2014)

explained how “constructivist grounded theory adopts the inductive comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach…It includes the iterative logic…as well as the dual emphases on action and meaning inherent in the pragmatist tradition” (p.12-13). Constructivist design was adopted also because I have experience in the studied phenomena, and it is easier to reflect the reality as compared to objective outsiders (Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2008). I adopted this iterative process of coding the data from the conversational interviews with alumni of an immersive, secondary arts school while conducting in-depth comparative analysis to ensure validity.

Coding Procedures

Grounded theory design is broadly applied in educational research (Creswell, 2012). Constructivist design in grounded theory is typically composed of four stages of coding: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). Following the coding procedure phases identified by Charmaz, I deconstructed the mass of collected data into smaller segments or categories. Coding attempted to begin finding meaning in the data fragments (Charmaz, 2014). If a researcher assumes linearity in the coding phases, then the iterative process has been abandoned. The framework demands that the process is both iterative and dynamic and is not one-directional. Rather, the phases are in constant communication with each other as meaning evolves and important information, insight, and connections are discovered. This iterative process also gives clarity to what data needs to be collected additionally in the next data collection process (Charmaz, 1996, 2014).

Initial Coding

Employing a line-by-line method, I assigned initial codes to all data using a line-by-line method. This phase is done quickly to ensure spontaneity of the researcher's "open" mind which is receptive to engagement of possibilities and unexpected insights (Charmaz, 2014). This is sometimes referred to as "open" coding. As each interview was coded, I used iterative methodology to locate similarities and differences among participant experiences and understandings (Charmaz, 2014). I wrote by hand in the margins of the typed, line-numbered interview transcripts, and the attached units of meaning initially associated with each code were bracketed. Bracketing supports the iterative process whereby emerging data collection raises additional questions to be pursued with a progressive focus (Schutt, 2006). Because participants had a shared experience that, while not identical, could be very similar, it was even more crucial to look at implied meanings that could be gleaned from individual contexts (for example, the participants' use of the term "culture major"). Therefore, I included *in vivo* codes in my initial coding of the data. Charmaz (2006) explained, "*in vivo* codes serve as symbolic markers of participants' speech and meaning" (p. 55).

Focused Coding

In focused coding, I re-coded the transcripts guided by a specific thematic concept. After the initial fragmenting of the mass of data collected, focused coding begins to reassemble data but only at a level of sorting and synthesis. (Charmaz, 2014). The constant comparative method continued looking for connections and comparisons among codes (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory coding is an emergent

process, and I allowed this emergence through comparison and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). To achieve the needed focus, I organized initial codes into categories in a digital table for enhanced visual focus. Each category was then assigned a descriptive code phrasing.

Axial Coding

The third level of coding, axial coding, is an advanced procedure for interconnecting the categories into more hypothetical relationships in which connective relationships are developed (Charmaz, 2014). Where designed fragmenting of data occurred in initial coding, axial coding begins gathering data back to begin the initial construction of the whole (Charmaz, 2014). I created the foundation on which to build theory in the next step of theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). For this study, I further narrowed down the focused codes bringing the focused codes into connection with related components using a digital chart similar to a storyboard.

After my first attempts to engage with my collected data in a complex way, I was initially pleased with potential findings and the veracity with which they could potentially communicate findings. Participant data began to find an organization around my research questions and research subquestions. A thematic description of the school where I have spent most of my career and from which all participants recently graduated emerged, but most of the analysis appeared unsurprising to me from my experience as an employee. Also, no definitive theory appeared to be emerging to illuminate as much about the immersive, secondary arts school experience as I had hoped. Still, an immense amount of significant and compelling data were in front of me and in my mind from so many months of engagement. However, the message from the data still seemed elusive,

marginalized within the data. I concluded that I had allowed my research questions and research subquestions to inform the data too much and the result was that the school itself, which is worthy of attention and research, was too centered within the data as it had been coded to this point. The need arose to re-consider the influence of my own confirmation bias.

Eliminating Confirmation Bias

While I did not actively seek evidence from the data collected from the interviews of research participants to construct, imagine, or interpret into a specific preconceived conclusion (Rajsic et al., 2014), my researcher confirmation bias was in danger of allowing me to passively receive data and themes that would not surprise me because of my positionality within the research topic. I had no intention to deceive, but bias is usually implied and unconscious (Brownstein & Saul, 2016). Also, there was no deception within the data as I had organized it, rather it was merely functioning to describe much of what was already known about the school to me, and I had not yet succeeded in reflecting thoroughly and accurately the experience of the participants that existed in the data. I also was not indifferent to the data's relationship to truth or falseness and was not participating in what Frankfurt (2009) defined as *bullshitting* . None of these things were true of my data analysis. To read deeply into the data and instead of comparing data I was mostly reading in a left-to-right manner, I had to go back into the data with eyes more fully open. "Trustworthy research may confirm what a researcher believed, or anticipated, before the commencement of the research, but to be trustworthy it must be open to surprise" (McSweeney, 2021, p. 16).

Rich Description

Before I returned into the depths of the data, I also had to re-evaluate my experience as a writer and the way my writing experiences govern my approach to textual data. My education and professional background are in the humanities and literary criticism. That style privileges economy and distillation. That style is a gift sometimes but a hindrance in grounded theory coding phases and analysis when a researcher attempts to give full voice to participant data. I watched the interview videos again before returning to the written interview transcripts, and that helped me hear again the richness I had been in touch with before I had previously chiseled away at the descriptive thickness. That thick description is necessary for the descriptive interpretation of complex cultural and social situations. I began to listen again to important background details because "Thick description refers to the researcher's task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context" (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543). My research questions needed to only have been the tool to excavate the data but not to interpret the data. The questions are not incidental, but they are subordinate, because it is "this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 255). The thoughts, emotions, and the web of social interaction is what gives the data such richness (Ponterotto, 2006).

Re-immersion in the Data

I re-entered my coding phases in order to break all of the data down again but this time allowing for the inclusion of expansive textual data from participants instead of reductive textual data. As I broke the data apart, I also opened my eyes more to the active, interactive, moving parts among the chunks of data so that intersections had

opportunities to develop. Before I delved into re-assembling the data, though, I was reminded of how similar in so many powerful and transformative ways participant experiences were. As participant experiences mirrored each other with such similarity, it was easy to fall into re-assembling the data that I broke apart through phases of coding and put them back together again in the same predictable ways. So, I remained hyper-vigilant to avoid the preconceptions and receptive to surprise.

The transcription of interviews and memos included 24 interviews (12 initial and 12 follow-up and member checking interviews). The interviews encompassed over 16 hours of recordings and the transcriptions contained over 127,000 words. Line-by-line, handwritten annotations in the margins of hardcopy, paper transcripts, resulted in 374 initial codes representing 1,545 separate initial-coded references. After this re-initializing coding phase, I began searching again for the patterns and frequencies and returning to memos frequently. The commonalities of experience and repeated references within the data resulted in 51 focused codes.

Repetition and frequency within data codes earned my attention as it should. The greater challenge was determining which less frequently used codes should garner attention and significance. This, for the qualitative researcher, involves deeper contemplation, reflection, and broadminded interpretive capabilities and perceptiveness. I remained open and receptive to the continued interactions among the coding phases until I began to see surprising and unexpected connections, and more importantly, interactions among the data and intersections among the categories which were emerging more clearly than anticipated. Ten emergent categories allowed me to see even more clearly the commonalities I had never seen previously. While not all emergent categories were

surprising, many were, and the real unpredicted result was the way even the unsurprising categories were clearly connected to multiple other categories. Although I was able to further merge some categories until there were five, the profound discovery was the complexity of their relationships.

Interaction among Coding Phases

Before moving into theoretical coding and theory building, it is important to emphasize the interaction among the coding phases used in the grounded theory study. The crucial realization I experienced as a researcher was that the initial, focused, and axial coding phases, while having an order to which they should be conducted, should not be siloed during the laborious progress of coding. This is one of several iterative aspects within constructivist grounded theory. The discoveries made in each coding phase not only influence the other coding phases, but they should actively be communicating one amongst the others. In Figure 1, I depict the communication as if in a cycle of correspondence and with arrows that even suggest ongoing movement as if turning over and over within the interaction among the coding phases.

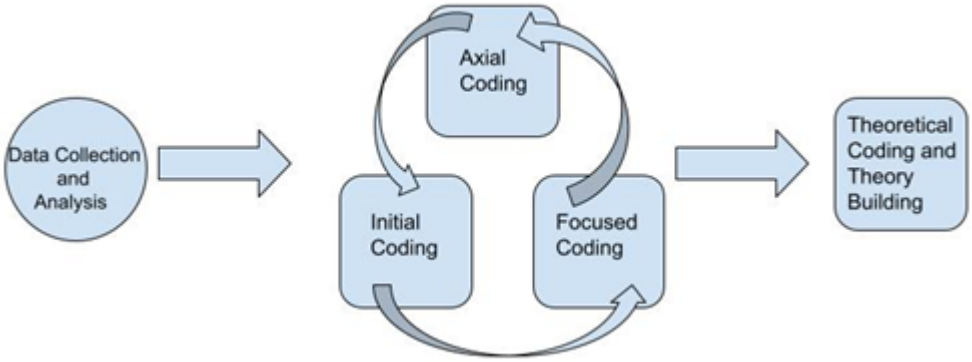

Figure 1. Coding Phases Interaction.

It is that prolonged conversation during which depth and complexity begin to speak with increasing clarity to open ears and begin to communicate new ideas for focused codes, axial codes, and categories. I learned to move beyond mere linear descriptions of a phenomenon I already knew well to return into an iterative process where I could hear and fully participate knowingly in the conversation.

Theoretical Coding and Theory Building

At this level of advanced coding, after completion of axial coding, I used coded data to identify how more substantive codes related to one another in order to create a theoretical foundation in preparation for theory development (Charmaz, 2014). This level of coding also often involves further refining of axial codes towards a model for understanding the experiences and processes of participants (Charmaz, 2014). Through coding and memo-writing, I developed an emergent model of how recent graduates of an immersive, secondary arts school described and understood their educational experiences. This advanced level of coding explored more visual representations of the emerging process discovered in the data.

Memo Writing

Memo writing was an on-going process from the beginning to the completion of the research and a necessary step between data collection and the reporting of study results (Charmaz, 2014). Memo-writing moved me to begin analysis at the point of data collection, and it helped me avoid process paralysis in generating theories while reflecting on potential biases the investigator may have held (Charmaz, 2014). I practiced journal writing to collect memos, captured important insight from reflection, noted anticipated procedural dilemmas and decisions, and experimented with vocabulary towards conceptualization of emerging theory.

Evaluative Criteria

The process of achieving trustworthiness through evaluative criteria or in grounded theory research is multifaceted (Charmaz 2014). Though these may vary, guidelines include credibility, resonance, and transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

I achieved credibility by continuously being guided by these questions outlined by Charmaz (2014):

> Are the data significant to merit your claims (Consider the range, number, and depth of observations contained in the data)?, Have you made systematic comparisons between observations and between categories?, Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?, Are there strong logical links between the gathered data and your argument and analysis?, and Has your research provided enough evidence for your claims to allow the reader to form an independent assessment—and agree with your claims?" (p. 337).

I employed a constant comparative method between initial coding (and incomplete understandings that raise questions) and focused coding/categorization to move towards theory building (Charmaz, 2014, p.18).

I kept a living list of data notes to ensure the "social and theoretical significance" of emerging themes (Charmaz, 2014, p. 337). Because credibility also involves the researcher's views and actions, constructivist grounded theory requires strong reflexivity throughout the research process. Researchers must explicate their taken-for-granted assumptions, which requires gaining "methodological self-consciousness" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 35) of how hidden beliefs can enter and influence the research process. In this research study, I thoroughly acknowledged my role as researcher and my positionality in relation to the research site, research participants, and the subject matter's relationship to my professional career and personal interest and advocacy role.

In the section immediately following my three coding phases, I recognized the need to re-examine my role as researcher in a candid consideration of my own awareness and recognition of some of the dangers of researcher confirmation bias which had influenced my data analysis. Far from hindering my research efforts and success, the reflexivity I engaged in provided me with the kind of clarity required for potential application of the grounded theory conceptual model that emerged from large amount of data.

Resonance

Evaluating the resonance of a constructivist grounded theory study involves determining whether the study maintains the methodological principle of theory development that is deeply embedded with the collected data itself. I adhered to Charmaz's (2014) guidelines to achieve resonance by functioning on the macro and micro levels of data examination and coding. Resonance demonstrates the researcher has constructed concepts that not only represent the research participants' experience, but also has the capacity to provide insight to others (Charmaz, 2017). Again, because of my positionality within my research subject, I adhered to the necessity of locating the phenomena I researched within its appropriate context whether on the macro or micro levels of the participants' experiences within the time and place of their immersive, secondary arts education involvement, including pre-contextual factors for each individual participant, specific artistic training disciplines within a larger school framework, and even post-contextual factors introduced by most research participants during interviews.

Furthermore, because of my professional association with an international network of immersive, secondary arts schools, my visits and tours of other such schools than the one related to my research participants, and my active participation at the governance level of the official network of such schools, I had to carefully check my own potential to inadvertently bring to bear on the collected data, experiences I may know about of students or graduates from other schools within the network as well as the thousands of students who have matriculated at the school where I am employed. I

recognized and successfully met the challenge of grounding my theory and research principles exclusively within the original data I collected.

Transferability

Constructivist grounded theory research does not intend to achieve generalizability. Rather, the investigator desires to produce research that is useful for the public and that may possess transferability (Charmaz 2014). Research might be transferable in its application to other populations. If research is transferable, it will clarify research participants' understanding of their everyday life experiences, present coded categories that are a transferrable process, form a foundation for policy and practice applications, contribute to creating new lines of research, and reveal persistent processes and practices (Charmaz 2017). My research findings successfully met the transferability criteria and have potential to be applied to dozens of immersive, secondary arts schools in the United States. The theory I grounded in the original collection of data will be enlightening to arts educators and arts leaders in the ongoing efforts support the importance and benefits of arts education in American secondary education. Furthermore, there arts education leaders throughout the network of arts schools in the United States who utilize research to advocate at the local, regional, and national level for inclusion, recognition, legislation, funding, and expansion.

Confirmability

After fully transcribing each interview accurately and doing open coding, I sent transcripts to each participant and encouraged and allowed participants to review a

transcript of their interviews to assist with member checking validity. Each participant acknowledged receipt, confirmed the accuracy of their initial interview transcript, and accepted the researcher's invitation to participate in a brief follow-up interview in which the researcher and participants discussed again accuracy of representation and participants were given another opportunity to suggest any necessary modifications. No participants recommended changes. I also arranged for multiple readers of the research study in an effort to benefit from peer debriefing. Three readers other than the researcher, all unrelated to the research and mostly unfamiliar with the research topic, provided feedback about the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Editorial assistance from their feedback assisted my efforts to eliminate errors in grammar, formatting, content, clarity, and readability.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore how recent graduates described their experience attending a secondary, immersive arts school and to develop a theory to explain the phenomenon of the process through which such students go. The results of this study are described below. First, the emerging conceptual model is presented that depicts how participants described their experience of the immersive, secondary arts school. The six dominant themes which emerged were these: contextual factors of previous school experiences; the drive participants possessed; group identity development; critique consciousness and critical consciousness; artist identity development; and results of participants' experiences. Subcategories also emerged from the data analysis to explain, illustrate, and articulate these six dominant themes, and these subcategories included these: external drive, pre-engagement with the school before application, selection, and admission; overcoming obstacles and misperceptions about the school; the drive to audition; experiencing acceptance into the school as formative and energizing; anticipation, forward movement towards something; social bonds and cohesion; small size of student population; the bond of diversity; switching from academics to arts during the school day; academic curriculum and critical consciousness; the critique process; the inversion of curricular focus; the inversion of the campus' physical structure; extended, focused time; the arts curriculum in each department; employing artist-teachers; taking ownership in creative work; moving from group identity

to artist identity; self-discipline skills and preparation for anything; fearlessness and risk-taking; and gratitude. In subsequent sections, each component of this model is described along with illustrative excerpts from participant interviews.

Conceptual Model of Participants' Experiences of a Secondary, Immersive Arts School

The findings from this study represent the experiences of 12 recently graduated participants described in Chapter 3. While all 12 participants in the study described their experiences in strongly positive terms, some negative experiences were shared by two participants. These two participants' negative experiences reflect in a mirroring way the positive experiences of all participants so that all experiences support the same emerging themes.

The conceptual model of participants' experiences of an immersive, secondary arts school which emerged from the analyses of the interview data is depicted in Figure 2. This model, which represents the common experiences described by the participants, is composed of six categories: (a) contextual factors of recent graduates' previous schooling experiences before discovering an immersive, secondary arts school (b) the role of being driven towards something (c) group identity development (d) the role and interplay of critique consciousness and critical consciousness (e) artist identity development (f) results of recent graduate's experiences at an immersive, secondary arts school.

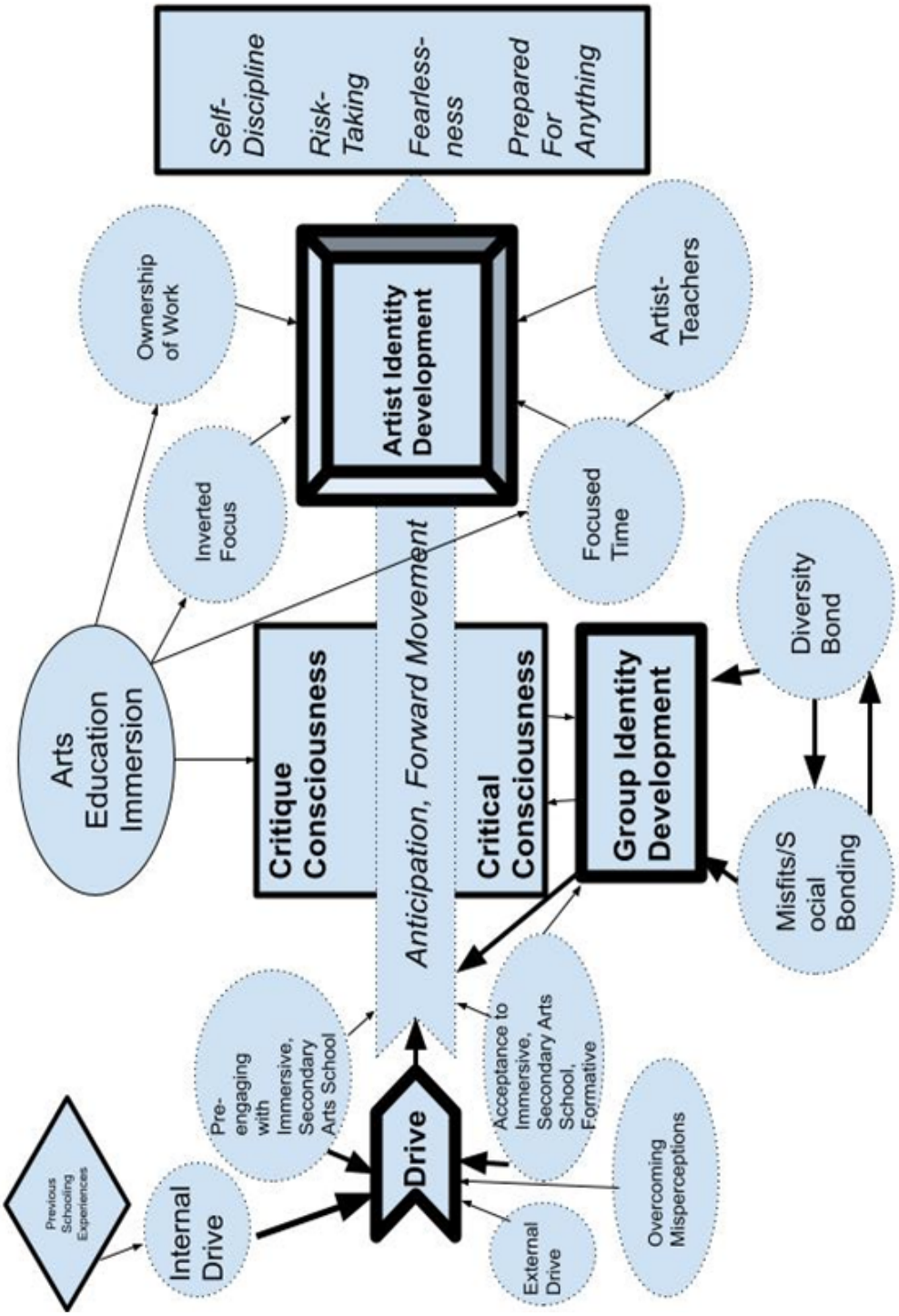

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Students' Experiences of an Immersive, Secondary Arts School.

Contextual Factors of Students' Previous Schooling Experiences

All participants' perspectives on and descriptions of experiences attending a secondary, immersive arts school (ASFA) are influenced by previous experiences of schooling. Therefore, it is important to first contextualize the results in this chapter with some analysis of these previous experiences. Seven participants had previously attended regular, public suburban schools; two had attended regular, public urban schools; two regular public, rural; and one an alternative, independent school. All the participants spoke very positively of their experiences at ASFA in comparison to previous schooling experiences. All participants referenced the homogeneity of the student populations at their previous schools, the lack of challenging curriculum, and their negative experiences of the social aspects. One participant called the curriculum and social aspect of his previous schooling experiences "pretty alienating" (Quentin, 1). Several participants emphasized how the curriculum and social aspects of their previous schooling experiences were tied to the religious and political values of their home communities which made them feel alienated because they did not share similar values. Several participants' previous schooling experiences included bullying or negative treatment because they were perceived to be "gay" (Desmond, 1, Appollo, 1).

Desmond explained, "a lot of people associated being artistic and creative with being gay… and so I mainly got made fun of for that…and was bullied here and there" (1) while Appollo shared that he "was a gay preteen. And of course, that's going to be weird almost everywhere and there was like plenty of intolerant bullies" (1). Several participants said that their lack of interest in sports made it difficult to fit in at their previous schools. Participants did not feel a sense of belonging at their previous schools,

and in reference to her own lack of engagement at her previous school, Neena explained she had "nothing tying [her] to the school" (1). All participants identified arts education and arts education resources as being marginalized or non-existent in their previous schooling experience, and several participants identified that while in some schools music education opportunities exist, they are primarily only in the form of bands to play in support of athletic teams.

Drive

Participants reported a recognition in themselves of a drive to pursue something different than the educational experience they had been receiving at their previous schools. The presence of this drive was significant in their process of discovering ASFA, researching and exploring opportunities at ASFA, and then applying and auditioning. The drive is reported as if it is internal but influenced by external factors.

Most participants reported an awareness of a longing for a different educational experience that drove them to eventually discover ASFA. Isla reported that she had that drive despite attending an excellent school system previously and explains that her siblings had all gone to the schools in her family's socioeconomically privileged district:

> The schools my siblings went to were good schools in some ways, like, they loved going, and it's a good education; most students go onto college for sure from there, but I needed something more and different. I knew of ASFA somehow in elementary school, just sometimes hear other kids mentioning it, I guess, but I knew for certain later because some dancers in the Nutcracker, the big one downtown with Alabama Ballet, I was an angel a couple of times, and so some of those dancers were from ASFA, and I just felt this urge to go all out and wanted to dance so much and just knew that I had to be at ASFA and was driven to be as good as I could be and be around the best dancers who, they're just the best, the ones who lived for it. Oh, of course, I always heard about ASFA through classes I was taking at Alabama Ballet on Saturdays too and Ms. Teri taught at ASFA and did lots of choreography for the Alabama Ballet also, so definitely I wanted that

> and to be around that all the time. I was kind of afraid of it but also so drawn to it, so it drove me to convince my parents that's what I wanted. (1)

Similarly, Quentin reported feeling that drive to pursue more arts education and arts experiences than he was receiving at his previous school. He was hesitant to leave his previous school because he became close to the only visual arts teacher there, but his drive propelled him:

> I really feel like I sort of escaped [my previous school], but I also feel a little bit guilty because of leaving behind [my arts teacher]. She was great to me, and we were close; she was really the only person I could talk to there at all, about art, really anything, you know, but I think she sort of didn't get too close because she had so many students to deal with and lots of them weren't even really into art anyway, and she knew I was going to apply for ASFA, and I feel bad because I know she wasn't teaching art the way she wanted to teach art, I mean, it's not like she really enjoyed teaching still life drawing all the time like wire frame thinking and such. But I was driven to do more, I mean, I needed more than just that, and the stuff I was into on my own in art books was cool, but I needed the time to work on my art, and ASFA had a whole faculty of artists, and I just really wanted to see if I could get there. (1)

Kleis described her drive as something she could not articulate:

> I just felt so driven to get out of school. It wasn't even a small-town thing really. I don't know, just wanted to dance and knew when I read up on [ASFA] that I was going no matter what it took. (1)

Desmond felt compelled towards something special and different at a very early age:

> In like second grade I remember telling my mom I had to do something special; I don't know what I said exactly, she told my step-dad I was always talking like that, that I was always, well, I kept changing schools anyway, but knew I'd find my place if I kept pushing in that direction I'd arrive, not like I was arrogant or anything, that's not I mean at all, no, no, I'm sorry, I just mean it's like I was on a different map or something and even if I wound up lost it didn't matter, I had to take a different path. I'm so glad I found ASFA but I wish I'd found it sooner (1).

Neena reported that she felt "energized inside" (1) to get into ASFA, and Graham described how he had "a determination inside him" (1) to be selected to attend ASFA and

that he worked intensely on his writing portfolio because he wanted his "determination to be seen through my work and my art not just something I claimed I felt when they interviewed me at auditions" (1).

External Drive

Participants reported some external factors that drove them to pursue application and audition to ASFA. Some reported family members who had previously attended ASFA or who had wished they had attended including siblings, a parent, and a cousin. A participant was encouraged by a sibling who knew of the school, and another was encouraged by his grandmother who recognized the opportunities in music education and insisted "this is where you ought to be" (Damion, 1). Another participant had visited the campus with a friend whose sister was already an ASFA student. She recalled being "in awe of just the environment…the different studios …the sculpture in the courtyard and I thought that was so cool and it just fueled my determination to be a part of what this place had to offer" (Talia, 1). Some participants identified influential teachers from previous schools who had recommended they apply and audition. Appollo reported, "I had teachers always willing to encourage me to seek out bigger and better things and wrote my recommendation letter" (1). Others reported that students at their previous schools were aware of ASFA as an opportunity for creative students and that some teachers on their faculties promoted the opportunity and volunteered to write recommendations.

Overcoming Obstacles and Misperceptions about the School

Participants were driven to overcome misperceptions and obstacles to apply and audition for ASFA. Several participants reported seeing the ASFA campus and building from the interstate nearby or from the nearby arts and cultural district when their families attended concerts or museums close to the campus. The visibility of the campus in an urban center and cultural district creates positive exposure for the school, however, participants reported being unaware of exactly what the school was or if it was something that would be accessible to them. Some reported that their parents or siblings would mistakenly indicate that the school was a college, not open to the public, or too expensive for most people to attend. Desmond reported that he had to convince his mother that ASFA was "accessible to a lot more people than most think" (1). Neena recalled:

> [s]omeone made the claim that [ASFA's] only for rich kids who go to like these gifted schools when actually that's not true at all and I had to explain all this to my parents. I had to sort of walk them through the website and some articles online about the school. I even showed them a document on the website where it had fees and they misunderstood that to be like a really huge tuition, but I showed them that it's just like other public schools that have all kinds of charges and fees you have to pay all the time for books or clubs and sports and that it's probably even cheaper than most schools when you add it all up. My dad said that commuting would be just way too much, but I told them that they'd driven my sister back and forth to cheerleading camp all summer and back in the spring too, and that this is what I wanted and so I finally convinced my mom. (1)

Sebastian reported that it took his parents some time to understand that the school is a free, public school and he had to "hammer that in" (1) before his parents allowed him to audition. Graham reported that he created a short Power Point presentation on the school to present to his parents:

> We laugh about that now because I actually sat my folks down in front of a desktop and went through and made my best points and arguments about how great this school could be for me and for them. I even told them how the school

> keeps the students extra-long every day and that they wouldn't have to pay for like extended day like after school care or whatever for me because my dad could just swing by after he got off work about 5:00 and wouldn't have to make two trips like he even had to do for my middle school and it'd just be perfect even for their own schedules. (1)

Several participants reported the need to convince their parents that ASFA has strong academic offerings in addition to the focus on arts education and that students miss no academic requirements that are needed for college admissions. Kleis explained that in addition to her parents' misperceptions about the school, she had to work to convince them to allow her to board in the schools' dormitory residences:

> [m]y mom wanted me to stay at home and thought it made no sense to like waste the time living in the dorms when we only lived about 45 minutes away anyway and her friend's daughter was doing great at the dance studio, like you know, the little like strip mall dance studio that some of my friends went to with me. But I told her that to dancers ASFA might as well be the Royal Ballet because ASFA gets dancers into the best dance schools and professional dance companies all the time which in dance is even better, really, well some would say, but it is. It wasn't easy at all. I even filled out the parent questionnaire online myself and my mom never knew, but I got them to where they were like, ok, ok, apply but they didn't think I'd get in. (1)

Participants' driven determination played an important role in the process of gaining acceptance to attend ASFA even when obstacles presented themselves, especially the misperceptions about the school as a public, tuition-free school.

Engagement with the School Prior to Application, Selection, and Admission

Participants had the drive to become engaged in opportunities to learn more about the school and its programs prior to applying. These opportunities provided students with insights about the school's curriculum, faculty, structure, and culture. This was part of a process for students of determining if they felt like they would be a good fit for the school and vice versa. Participant responses made it clear that these early impressions

served as previews of the sorts of experiences they would later encounter more fully during four to six years as a student. Participants reported experiencing the campus and the arts programs through community engagement opportunities in which their current schools made trips to campus for concerts or plays or in which ASFA student groups would perform on their schools' campuses. Damion's experiences made an indelible impression on him:

> Yeah, so when we went to that performance [at ASFA] I remember it vividly because I remember, they played Harry Potter music. They had like a movie screen in the background, and they were playing the music in front of it. I remember it very, very, very, very vividly I remember that, because I was, I believe, in the second row, towards the stage, I remember that and I didn't think it was this funny that I like I remembered it afterwards, like after I left. Because I just thought we were just going to see, you know, a show or something like that or just business, but it always stuck with me that it was students that were like still in school performing so well in that environment, and I was like wow what place is this? I just remember that whole experience just seeing like this great school. In general, I thought it was something like a, like a company or something like that, because it sounded so good, I thought it was just like the outside orchestra or something that sounded so good, and then I found out later that it was a school. And then, when it came around a time for me and school, trying to find a place to go, ASFA came right back up, because it seems like the right place for me, like I had to go there. (1)

Other participants described similar experiences when watching ASFA student groups perform or viewing visual arts gallery's student exhibits during the day of their shadowing experiences. Shadowing is when a student is interested in the school and spends a day on campus following a student host through their daily schedule. Desmond recalled the day he shadowed:

> I remember when I was there, there was an experimental music orchestra or something that was a, you know, I actually, the day I shadowed even back in eighth grade I remember, there was a performance that they brought in, and musicians to come play this John Cage piece where they like put all these nails and bolts and screws and erasers and pieces of paper in the piano. And I was like, you know, it's like a lot of banging and like crazy noises, and I was like what the

> hell is this, you know, what is this school? It was like that weirdness I was looking for; it was like that really crazy stuff. (1)

Participants referenced their shadow experiences as part of their process for experiencing the school in a way that made them want to apply and audition. Participants also reported that their attendance at open house events as encouraging them to apply and audition:

> [b]eing in the space, open house was an overall good process, because it can be hard to know what to do, but then you just know when you're there and see the students working as tour guides and you just know this is the place for you. (Sebastian, 1)

Some participants explained that their involvement with arts educators who had some professional connection to ASFA (adjunct faculty, part-time employees, alumni who taught private lessons in an arts discipline) was important in their decision to apply and audition for enrollment.

The Drive to Audition

Participants had the drive to follow through with the intimidating task of auditioning. For immersive secondary arts schools like ASFA an audition process is required in addition to completing an application. The audition experience is significant in participants' memories and a point of pride. Participants recalled the experience as nerve-wracking and daunting. These descriptions of nervousness were shared in positive tones and with fondness. Some participants had never experienced auditioning in front of a panel of artist-faculty before while others who had some audition experience felt it was more anxiety-inducing since more was at stake than a single event, and they anticipated attending school for several years if selected for enrollment. Sutton recalled her experience:

> I was nervous out of my mind. Interview was extremely stressful, the improv was so daunting but I got in. So, I remember thinking oh my gosh that was so bad, but they saw something you know. As I auditioned, even though I messed up, I asked, I just started over, and I did what you should never do, which was asked, "Can I start over?", you should just start over. But I messed up, forgot my lines, started over and then, when I finished they gave me a thumbs up under the table. So, it was nerve-wracking. But because I had somebody who I had who helped me, I think I was well prepared. Then I would have been much more nervous, and I maybe would have not gotten in. But I read [ASFA's] audition materials and tips so I could conceptualize what it would look like beforehand. (1)

Cassandra reported a similar experience but with even more self-doubt. She reported that she tried to keep thinking of the encouragement her older brother had given her that helped drive her so far in her process of applying and being invited to audition. She told herself that many others had not even been invited to audition to help boost her confidence.

> I remember a lot. I remember everything that I asked. I think it's the only part of my life that I thoroughly remember almost every element about um. So I remember my audition; I was terrified and I was telling myself maybe I didn't want to do this after all, and maybe I should just stay in a normal school and do normal kid stuff. I was afraid to open my voice and like open my mouth and sing in front of people like I remember I sang. What do you call it "Reflection" by Muon for one of my audition songs yeah and uh it's there was, like the first time I had ever sang in front of like an audience of people who were judging me. I was scared because I didn't want to really put myself out there and be rejected. And also, I don't like, I'm sure you also do like the beginner theory exam. And I was like I have no idea what this is, like I don't know what this is, and I walked out confused and just, yeah, I was like, I walked out of the school that day and I was like Okay, I definitely didn't get it. Like I did not get it, no one likes my voice, and I definitely didn't do good on that test…I think it was a good experience for me. I was nervous, I was nervous like anything yeah. (Cassandra, 1)

While Damion reported that in his audition he was able to remain calm, he identified both his drive to seek out a school faculty member ahead of his audition and that teacher's support as the factors that gave him the best chance to succeed:

> I called [the music teacher] beforehand and met up with him and he kind of gave me a flow, a general flow how things would go because I've never done

> something like that, before. So that helped, that was a little bit of help there to kind of give me, you know a good feel of what to expect in that audition. And yeah, I was just overall, I was calm in general. I wasn't nervous too much. I was calm because I had an idea, and [the music teacher] stepped in to make sure I, you know, got an understanding of how everything would go so yeah it was a fun process I got there and I'll always remember it so well, always. (1)

Participants described several other factors that helped to balance their audition anxiety. Participants reported that the experience was welcoming and that faculty and fellow auditionees were kind and encouraging. Some were impressed by the school's current students who were present to assist as ambassadors of the school. These ambassadors were "super focused on making sure everyone felt welcome there… like this is a place where you can be and feel like you belong here" (Appollo, 1). Participants also felt comforted and encouraged by how the faculty, staff, and students emphasized how important passion, work ethic, and determination were in addition to talent.

One participant explained that they came to understand that the faculty were looking for "potential over prodigy" (Desmond, 1). Some reported that faculty allowed the flexibility within audition requirements so that they could share personal preferences in addition to required materials so that students could better demonstrate their potential. One participant recalled that she was allowed to share a painting that was a personal favorite from her portfolio and because of the relaxed, professional way she was interviewed "it felt like they were wanting to get to know more about us as people as well" (Talia, 1). These aspects of participants' experiences are important to include in these findings as they establish some early impressions participants had of their experiences which are developed more profoundly in other findings of participants' later experiences as students once they were enrolled in the school.

Experiencing Acceptance into the School as Formative and Energizing

Participants reported that receiving acceptance letters from ASFA following auditions was significant to them as a developmental turning point and as an experience that fueled their drive with new energy. Most participants reported the excitement experienced in receiving letters from ASFA which announced their acceptance for the subsequent school year based on their successful audition. Each spoke of the memory in terms of detailing where they were, how the news from letter was shared, and who shared the news with them. Neena recalled:

> I had just gotten back from the grocery store with my dad… and my mom just yelled, 'You got into ASFA!' I had been wanting to get into ASFA since I was in kindergarten I'm not even joking, My grandparents framed [the letter] somewhere. It just made such an impression on me to know I had done something huge like that. (1)

Desmond reported his response upon opening his acceptance letter:

> [I] cried like a baby, I was so excited, and it just made me want to drop out of my school immediately and get going right then. I was so fired up, like, you know, let's get this started now, I don't want to wait any longer. Why can't I start right now? I had never felt that motivated about school or really anything. I remember I was so jacked I didn't know what to do with my energy. (1)

Some participants expected to receive an acceptance letter while some assumed they would receive a rejection letter. Cassandra had felt like she would be declined enrollment especially because she lacked as music theory knowledge as some other students who auditioned on the same day. However, she reported:

> [t]hen, when I got my acceptance, I remember, I was like, I was so shocked and excited because I couldn't believe that um despite not doing good on the test, I never asked but, and I don't know if anyone would ever told me anyway, but despite me not knowing anything about theory or not ever having really sang in front of a panel of people judging me, people saw potential in me and that was an honor for someone to think that I could or like that I was worthy of further

> education. So, I was so happy and wanted to starting showing the school they had made the right decision, like I was ready to prove myself more. (1)

The experience of receiving the official acceptance letter seemed to have energized most participants significantly. Their driven determination which led them to apply and audition had been validated, and most seemed to develop more drive with their recognized success and acknowledged talents. Two participants initially received rejection letters after the first year they auditioned. These two participants' negative experiences, however, reflect in a mirroring way the positive experiences of all participants so that all experiences support the same emerging themes. These two participants reported that initially they experienced their rejection letters with predictable disappointment but that it turned quickly into a determination to be successful when they re-applied the next year. These two participants took pride in how the experience helped them cope with the anxieties of the college admissions process more effectively several years later. All participants remembered their experiences vividly and the experiences played a substantial role in the development of their individual and shared experiences as students at ASFA.

Anticipation, Forward Movement towards Something

The drive and determination that participants reported as important to their process towards initially pursuing ASFA was not only given more energy by being accepted to the school but also was perpetuated by a shared sense of impassioned movement towards new and exciting things to be experienced at ASFA as their new school and as a different type of school. Participants reported that the purpose they discovered and the drive they experienced through the structure and curriculum of ASFA

was accompanied by a motivating sense of anticipation. All participants reported the positive impact of preparing for and participating in ongoing performances and events. Desmond reported that he was always trying to "channel that drive…to like work towards a recital, or some big project, or like a big event" (1). Participants reported that the animated anticipation began for them soon after they started at ASFA. Sutton reported:

> [I] had so, so many expectations and anticipation from literally in seventh grade when I stared at ASFA and I learned what all the projects were and how the projects and productions and my role in all of them would just get bigger and more meaningful as you get older and move up in grade levels. It's just exciting to look forward to and to build towards and to try and anticipate what you want your role—and I don't even mean like being cast for like a role or character, really—I mean like where I fit into my role in my department and where I can be most creative (1).

Sebastian described the same experience and how it motivated him to move out of his "comfort zone" because he "just always knew it was coming" (1). Graham described his ongoing enthusiasm as "always wondering what my next project would be, what new creation would be next, and to see how far I could push myself and grow" (1). Participants reported experiencing additional motivation because they anticipated peers, faculty, family, visiting school groups, and public audiences would see their work and their projects on a regular basis.

This sense of anticipation and forward movement towards things was reported by participants as not only beginning early in their experience as an ASFA student but as ongoing. The structure of ASFA's calendar and school day is designed to accommodate numerous performances during the school day as an essential part of the arts curriculum so that all students can perform, present, and exhibit their artistic creations and productions for an audience of their student peers, the entire faculty, school staffs, and the public. Opportunities for students to share their creative work is a priority of the

school's overall structure and curriculum. These opportunities during the school day are in addition to the numerous evening performance requirements on weeknights and weekends.

Overall, there are senior readings every Friday night for a semester and underclassmen readings every two weeks; poetry slams; collaborative interpretive readings and dance with ballet and modern dance students; 3-D poetry exhibitions; three annual mainstage, multiple-night dance performances; senior choreography composition performances; three annual mainstage, multiple night music gala performances; approximately 35 annual recitals; three annual mainstage, multiple night theatrical performances; two black box studio multiple night theatrical productions; one professional actors' equity theater collaborative production; senior-directed one-act plays; department showcase events; six student art gallery exhibits annually. To ensure that all students have the time and means to see their peers' work, special school-day schedules are implemented with frequency to bring all students together for performances. In addition to the in-school performances for peers, students participate in community engagement performances either on ASFA's campus or other schools' campuses and other venues, and the school structure supports students to be excused for these requirements. In this way, they reach an even wider audience and provides students from other schools to also be exposed to arts experiences.

Appollo described the ongoing activity of the school and the students in all of these ways as being like "a perpetual motion machine" (2), and Talia reported that she and her friends referred to the school campus as "the building that never sleeps" (1). Isla reported "it's almost like there's no bell at the end of the day or something because it

seems like so many students stay past when they can go home and sometimes get to school early to work on stuff" (1). Research participants reported that these numerous opportunities for students to perform and present for audiences including their peers were among their favorite experiences annually. Participants used a variety of positive explanations and descriptions to report the importance of this aspect of their experiences. Neena called it "really valuable" (1); it made Isla "so proud of fellow students" (1); and Appollo was always "really excited to see what our friends had made" (1). Kleis reported that these school-day performances were where she could

> [f]eel like true joy. So that was a really, I enjoyed it for my own purposes in terms of like being able to show people that I loved, me, you know my dear friends and teachers alike. To show them what else I was, you know, capable of that felt really powerful and then it was also incredibly cool. And to be able to witness that, from my peers, to go see a reading or a music show or something like that. Those were some of my favorite days like when everybody, you know got together in the theater and did you know these kind of big collaborative like show and tell type moments. yeah I loved it. (1)

Damion described the experiences like this:

> I got to see a different art; I got to see other people that were like-minded do their art. Do their art and I think that, seeing that this is wonderful; it's just probably you get to see them in their essence and their own bliss, their own style, their own thing. And you look at that and not only do you get inspired to create your own, but you get inspired to present your own lens, the school gave me that opportunity. (1)

Quentin reported his appreciation for and inspiration from the experiences like this:

> I understand that's like, a really crazy opportunity, and I think it's so fantastic that you get exposed to so many different things. Like, I found out through all these school performances of ours and everyone's that I am in love with contemporary dance. And I also, I like jazz performances at school. I don't know a single student who always wasn't thrilled for these performances, and…it forces you to really experience something that maybe you wouldn't have if you were someone like me who I would have never have gone to go see as something that never would have caught my attention. As something that I would have ever wanted to have on my radar. (1)

These opportunities to perform and be an audience for ongoing performances are actually required as Sutton emphasized:

> It is an opportunity, but it was also a requirement and which I think is important, an important distinction. I loved it, it was one of the more life-affirming aspects of ASFA being able to put on a show and be proud of it or unanimously being ashamed of it and share that together. Performances were some of my favorite times whether I was acting or in tech so even like overall, it was my favorite. And to see your peers perform. The jitters before. The exhilaration of performing. And then the celebration…We were encouraged to celebrate ourselves and others after performances. (1)

For students who were exhibiting their work in a gallery, the experiences were still similar. Taila used similar descriptions as other participants:

> Having something that I'm working on and kind of like building towards over time; I enjoyed it and also, I had on a personal level, and I can't really speak I guess for the performing arts, but from a visual arts perspective, I feel like my ability to be introspective and kind of like self-reflective I guess, was so important in my own work and seeing others' work. Whether it's my own work or someone else's, we're all working on something that's so personal to myself, to ourselves. (1)

Participants reported the importance of supporting the work of their peers and that these in-school and after-school performances sometimes afforded them the only opportunities they have ever had to view dance performances, literary readings, or styles of music like jazz or classical. Participants reported surprise at how much they enjoyed modern and contemporary dance performances and that exposure to so many performances inspired and expanded their creative process in their own artistic discipline in ways that add to that sense of anticipation of what everyone is working and moving towards.

Group Identity Development

Research participants reported that many of their most significant experiences at ASFA involved the group identity they shared with peers. The drive to pursue a selective secondary arts school that participants described having was integral also to the development of the group identity they described. Appollo reported that his awareness of sharing a new identity with peers at ASFA began before he was enrolled for his first school year:

> I just remember one of the first conversations I had with a group of ASFA, well just students in a class I guess, no in a Homeroom actually one day, and we were just sitting around talking and remembering how we'd all gone to the theater at ASFA like a few weeks after we'd gotten our letters, and it was like a welcome meeting or something and all new students were required to be there, and someone's dad told a bunch of us afterwards that he couldn't even remember what he was doing when he was our age, but that he sure wasn't doing anything like us, like, you know, just having the, the audacity to do something like try out for an arts school to do something so different and really amazing like that, and so young. And several of us remembered him saying that, um, and how it sort of made us really think, and we'd not forgotten it because, yeah, really, it's really true that like so few kids would ever dream of stepping out like that and just saying let's do this, let's see where it takes us, and we really felt so together when we were talking about that and that whole idea. (1)

Cassandra reported that in most social situations in schools "you're kind of in a fight or flight, but, you can always relate to an ASFA student if you're an ASFA student. You're connected" (1). Participants reported that they recognized in others what they were familiar with in themselves. For example, Sutton explained that there was a "common denominator" (1) that drove students to ASFA:

> That was, I think, part of the culture, which is we all in some way, we all respect. We respect each other and there's this common denominator of dedication. We're all dedicating ourselves to something. And I think there was the sense of joy and joy in my peers. Unlike what I might have felt at other schools. I was often delighted to see just the ranges of expression that was welcomed and normal at ASFA. (1)

Graham reported that he and his peers were "united and coherent around being interested in art" (1). Several participants described students at ASFA as sharing a seriousness about their dedication to what Damion called "their artistic values," (Damion, 1) and most participants used derivatives of these words to describe students' commonalities in pursuing artistic disciplines: *drive, determination, dedication,* and *devotion.* Some participants used the word *mature* to describe their peers' disposition about why they were at the school. Desmond reported that he and his peers "were all driven by some art that was out there" (1). Sebastian reported:

> [t]here was something at stake about your being at ASFA, you know; you had to keep showing your worth and being on top of things. If you weren't devoted, you weren't gonna be able to stay. At a more standard public school you could get away with that, and there was no real barrier to going to other schools. You just go and can be okay even if you're not into it and don't put in the effort, but no one at ASFA was like that, even the people I knew who really struggled with grades were still dedicated and working hard. (1)

Damion had come to ASFA from what is commonly called a "failing school" by state accountability measures. He reported how his dedication multiplied at ASFA:

> If I had stayed at a failing school, I could easily shut doors to the work and stress, 'cause I'd have friends who shut the door on work and stress, and that's contagious, it spreads and then everyone says they're not gonna do the work, but that's not how it was [at ASFA]. Inspiration spreads [at ASFA]. When I found out my purpose in music at ASFA, it's like my mind clicked. I'd say like a light switched turned on. Everything just clicked. And it made me realize I needed to keep up my academics, then I found out how that helps me as a person. I understood how everyone was just driven to be their best in their art and in academics. (1)

Participants reported being influenced by being surrounded by so many peers at ASFA who shared "the fundamental drive to do something" (Desmond, 1) and who, because of their common passion for their art, "were all kind of pushing each other" (Isla, 1). Talia

reported that while her previous school experience had limited her creativity to only "sporadic" moments, her "time at ASFA really helped me feel in control and having like a purpose for my creative thoughts" (1).

From Misfit to Tight-knit: Social Bonds and Social Cohesion

All participants reported that their experiences at ASFA was very positive while almost all participants reported negative experiences at their previous schools. A common negative experience at previous schools involved the unsuccessful struggle to fit in among other students or feel a sense of belonging. Cassandra said:

> I felt like in my previous schools, I had to do a lot more to fit in, and I did not fit into those spaces or with the students, and I didn't want to change who I was just so I could make myself fit.

Quentin shared that his previous school experience felt "pretty alienating" (1) when it came to both social dynamics and a curriculum in which he could not see himself reflected. Appollo said his previous schools were "never like the right fit" (1) and experienced "intolerant bullies" (1). Kleis reflected on her previous school experiences:

> Well, I certainly never fit in in the way I felt like I was supposed to, or maybe the way my parents thought I should, or I guess would. My parents are great, I'm just saying it didn't happen that way for me, and I guess. It's not like misfits are unusual in schools, in any place, they're not. It's just that it's kind of special that I was able to go to ASFA and find like three hundred other misfits. We used to sing "Island of Misfit Toys," just break out singing it sometimes, especially when something crazy weird happened, but that was all the time, so I guess, I mean that's kind of the whole point. (1)

These previous negative experiences contrasted to what all participants reported about their experiences at ASFA. Participants repeatedly used the term *likeminded* to describe their experience of the student culture at ASFA. Participants used words like *misfits* and

outcasts to identify themselves and their peers; four participants used the word *misfits* to describe themselves and their peers at ASFA, and three used the word *outcasts* for the same purpose. Cassandra described herself and her peers at ASFA:

> Everybody, even the people that weren't in your specialty department, all were basically kind of outcasts, kind of artistic type of people who, at some point were all in a public school and didn't feel like you belong, and now you're all a bunch of weird people who are dangerously smart and hyper-focused on one thing. (1)

Similarly, Quentin reported that ASFA is "a school made for people who don't suit a regular public-school setting" (1). Talia shared:

> I was a big huge nerd and didn't really, I didn't have a ton of close friends [at my previous school], and because I didn't do like sports and after school type stuff so I didn't love it there…And then the transition into ASFA was pretty incredible, really transformative because I kind of immediately found that everything, everyone I met was feeding a real natural kind of enthusiasm and curiosity that I had and I had not found that [at my previous school]. The kids around me [at ASFA] were much nerdier than I was. That was so cool. (1)

Participants reported experiencing a sense of belonging and positioned that feeling within what some participants repeatedly called a *sense of community*. Participants used various terms, and sometimes repeated them, to describe that feeling of belonging and being a part of something: *family, like a family*, *likeminded, collective, team, my tribe, my people, like a home, tight-knit*. Damion reported his experience:

> [f[inding people like you, they're like minded but you're finding people that not only want to, you want to grow with them possibly. But you're creating like I said before, like this circle around you for your own sake, in your own future and in general. And it just creates not only a beautiful path down the road for you and for them, but it just is a beautiful representation to show the world in general. This is how this is supposed to be, you know, it doesn't matter like…whatever you come from. If you're likeminded, if you're working together, and you're just like, look at this big family here. Like when I see ASFA people, when I graduated from ASFA, I love them, like a family, to me. (1)

Cassandra reported that she "spent more time with people at ASFA than I did with my family, so it wasn't just another place to be, it was where I was supposed to be. And it wasn't hard to fit in" (1). Some participants reported experiencing an awareness of a shared political community and world view that contributed their sense of community. Participants also reported feeling *surrounded* in a positive way, much like Damion's description of a "circle around you for your own sake" (1), and several used the word *immersed* to describe how the sense of community was felt all around them. Participants also used various terms including *ensemble, feeling seen, being seen, not anonymous*, *understood, appreciated, recognized* to describe the way students and their peers related.

Participants reported the tight-knit group identity they shared also in terms of social bonding and social cohesion in direct contrast to the experiences of social exclusivity in their previous school experiences. These social bonds and cohesiveness were reported among participants as stretching across grade levels and arts specialty departments. Participants reported that was commonly experienced by students, and that they are aware of the shared feeling among their peers. Participants described this social cohesion in contrast to social cliques that were prevalent in their previous schooling experiences. Quentin reported:

> [i]f you go to like a public school and you, well, in the cliques that I would have to become a part of for like survival, you know, you are outside of the social norm, you are actively the, just an outsider, but you are different from the surrounding kind of people in like large, kind of the stereotype of high school, whereas you know you have all those cliques that they all. There's like a dominant network of cliques, then they're all the sub-cliques, but at ASFA you're just, you're there and it's all level, you're allowed to be a part of the whole group together, without the kind of fear of social rejection. (1)

Sutton described the experience like this:

> [m]y public school experience, my prior school experience that is, was very cliquey. But I think that, I guess, I'd say that cliquing was combatted, at ASFA, our social dynamics, it in so many ways combatted cliques. You know the entire school doing something together or dance and theater joining in to do something and there's so many opportunities for a sense of larger community that the clique stuff is just like, shrug, it just didn't happen. (1)

Graham reported that "a feeling of friendship and camaraderie" served to "neutralize the social dimensions and allowed you to really interact with other people as artists" (1). Participants reported the sense of all students being "on the same page" (Sebastian, 1), having "in common things to talk about" (Appollo, 1) making it "much easier to make small talk" (Isla, 1). Cassandra reported that there were several ways students bonded with their peers:

> [s]o there's a bond of time, there's a bond of specialty, there's a bond of being different. There's a bond of being diverse. There's a bond of being in an experience that other students are not in. If I meet somebody from ASFA or students that I know that went to other art schools, I'm just, the culture in, especially being in Alabama…there's nothing, there's nothing else like that. You don't get that type of culture anywhere else, no one else in Alabama was experiencing the same thing that I was experiencing because they weren't in the art school. I just feel like there's a bond of unique experience. (1)

Neena reported her belief that students who attend ASFA experience a sense of loyalty to the school and to their peers since they had no sense of identity or purpose "tying them to their [previous] school" (1) because they had never fit in or had experiences which cohered them socially to their peers.

The Impact of the Small Size of the Student Population

Research participants reported the overall small size of the student population as a positive aspect of the school structure. Because the school structure requires application and audition as part of an enhanced educational challenge, and because the audition process is highly selective, the total enrollment remains small ranging annually from 335 to 360 students. This small population plays a role in the development of social bonding and cohesion. Sebastian reported that his previous schools occupied sprawling campuses with numerous disconnected buildings and that "the buildings were big, and the schools are packed" (1). Participants reported that the student population of ASFA was small enough that they were able to know all their peers "pretty intimately" (Quentin, 1). Graham reported that he knew "everyone in my grade and almost everyone in other classes as well" (1). Sutton reported how the small size of the school population impacted her experiences:

> So I had been attending a very large school system. I was at a fairly large elementary school and then I went into an even larger middle school, but I was only there for about a year. I often desired to be in a smaller school, and I think that there was a sense of being anonymized or unseen in a way in the elementary and middle school system that I was in prior to ASFA. Simply because there were so many students and such large classes, and when you walk down the hallway you can't even, you know, breathe, there's so many people. So, I definitely remember feeling overwhelmed and sort of lost in the numbers. So that's the first difference going to ASFA. It was like, oh my gosh, I can breathe, I can develop relationships with somebody who's going to be, you know, down the hall for pretty much the entirety of my time here, which is different than my other school experiences where everyone and my teachers were constantly changing and rotating. (1)

Desmond described the small population as "a close environment" (1) that demanded that everyone treat each other with respect "because you're gonna see them everywhere so if

you have any problems with anyone you better deal with it, and I think that was really a good thing" (1).

The Bond of Diversity

Research participants reported that the student population diversity was a significant aspect of their experiences at ASFA. Students do not come to ASFA from the same school zones or districts but from every region of the state of Alabama. To accommodate this geographic diversity ASFA is partially residential and houses between 50 and 80 students annually and employs a full-time residential staff. Much of the homogeneity that exists within school districts and geographic regions does not occur at ASFA. This results in a student population that is diverse in ways including but not limited to these: race, ethnicity, national origin, cultural identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, academic background, appearance, religious beliefs, familial status and dynamics, socioeconomic status, and life experiences.

When Cassandra referred to students' feelings of social bonds, she included the "bond of being diverse" (1). This could sound like a contradictory statement, but as Damion observed "that's what [the school is] is designed to be like" due to the school's "framework" (1), and Isla reported her awareness of students from urban, suburban, and rural areas (1). Other participants referred to previous school experiences as "homogenous" (Sebastian, 1), "undiverse" (Talia, 1), which at Quentin's former school had caused his experiences to be "filled with slurs" (Quentin, 1).

Participants reported ways this diversity helped developed a cohesive group identity. Far from being divisive, fragmenting, or isolating, participants reported that the diverse student population was *welcoming, validating, encouraging, supportive, freeing,*

and *free from peer judgment.* Quentin reported, "students don't feel attacked for their own identities" (1) while other participants referred to the student population as one in which they felt safe and experienced peer support through students "standing up for them" (Sebastian, 1).

Participants reported that they would not have had experienced so much diversity if they had remained in their previous school systems. Damion reported:

> I'm better at conversing with people, friending people, 'cause it was a very diverse school. I was used to going to an all-Black school, but there were so many people at ASFA you're in classes with. The school gave to me a new White American friend or a new Indian friend and gave me cooperation with other colors; it puts you in a position where you have to talk with everybody even though you still have differences. You learn that we all complain about the same things. It's a beautiful thing, just the idea of that unity. Not only did I make friends of different cultures, but it exposed me to a different world in general, and you start seeing like a microcosm of the world, you know it's just like you see people of different races, different cultures, different backgrounds. (1)

Appollo reported he had "never had a Jewish classmate before I went to ASFA" (1), and Cassandra reported she had peers who had "never [previously] encountered a gay person in their life" (1). Participants reported that students identifying as LGBTQ did not have to worry at ASFA about their identities as they did or would have at previous schools. Neena reported, "I think the fact that there are so many LGBTQ students at ASFA is also really positive, especially because in this state, kids who are gender non-conforming will not as easily be just like treated like anyone else if they go to the school district that their zone for (1). Talia compared her experience with her current college experience:

> Since I'm going to school in New York now, I think, when a lot of people hear I'm from Alabama there's some assumption maybe I didn't go to a diverse school. And that everyone in Alabama is white and heterosexual and so on…Ironically, I feel, like most of the time my high school was more diverse than a lot of these people's. I think it, I mean it affected me, obviously in only good ways. Because I just remember, my schools before ASFA, especially when it comes to LGBTQ

> issues, those kids like that didn't exist at my middle school, and they had to be closeted. It just wasn't spoken about, and people didn't embrace themselves, I guess, as much as people at ASFA do in that regard. And so just being aware and acknowledging the existence of people within the LGBTQ community definitely I think is different than other Alabama public schools and probably other public schools in general. (1)

Regarding his previous school, Quentin reported:

> [y]ou couldn't go a day without hearing at least two slurs…At ASFA there's more of an emphasis on things like pronouns or certain identities and doing your best to validate them and not make people feel sort of ousted for those. I think that's such an important thing because, even if, I imagine you don't fall into one of those categorizations, [my previous school] had no regard for something like that which is a horrible thing because you have this sort of threat of it's the kind of a stereotype of Alabama where, in the South, generally, you have this kind of persecution attitude. But I think places like ASFA are so important because they show the diversity within a place like Alabama. (1)

Participants also reported their race did not restrict them in the diverse population at ASFA:

> Being black wasn't a monolith which, if you go to like [other] public schools, especially in Birmingham, everyone expects you to be Black in a certain way, or even to be White or Asian… a certain way, but at ASFA you can kind of be whoever you actually are. (Cassandra, 1)

Kleis reported that when it comes to a diverse and accepting student population, ASFA provided "a quiet education" (1). When asked to elaborate on the full meaning of that phrase, Kleis explained:

> [y]eah quiet, I meant that acceptance of everyone for who they were, it was just kind of silently happening all the time and it didn't feel like we were, like everyone does now in colleges or where you work, like doing Diversity Training or a Tolerance Training. Company trainings about LGBTQ issues, equity and inclusion, like these very kind of codified things. It's kind of, it's wild that [ASFA] never did, but I just don't remember there being moments, where people were critical of one another's sexual orientations, race, preferences. There just wasn't room for that, so it did feel like a quiet education, because no one was like highlighting that particular part which, I think, made it like nobody made it a thing, so it wasn't a thing. (1)

Participants reported that the diversity of the ages of students at ASFA was an important factor in developing a group identity among students. ASFA's structure does not divide middle school grades and high school grades into separate schools the way most other schools do. ASFA combines grades 7 through 12 into a unified school population in both academic and fine and performing arts courses. That span of grade levels and ages is atypical and creates a unique structure for the student population and its educational, cognitive, and social development. Participants reported positive experiences having students as young as 12 in the same school as students as old as 18. Participants reported that older students took pride in taking care of the younger students, and that the age differences created more perspective and learning opportunities.

While students were generally separated by grade levels in academic courses, students of different ages and grade levels populated most of the arts courses. Most students begin in grades 7, 8, or 9. Quentin reported this as a positive aspect of the school structure for arts education because "There's nothing formed about you really yet. You're this kind of mold that's just kind of growing and in all these different ways" (1) and that students that young can still be shaped impressionably by experiences. Cassandra reported that it was a positive experience for her "developmental years" (1) to be spent surrounded by students dedicated and driven by their passion for the arts, and Sutton reported that the result of "having 12-year-olds and 18-year-olds all in one big building" was "a sense of larger community" (1). Participants reported that being exposed to such diversity "when you're so young" (Appollo, 1), "from a super young age" (Kleis, 1), and "from the impressionable age from seventh grade" (Isla, 1) is "great to grow up in" (Cassandra,1) because it "teaches you tolerance, acceptance, embracing and love for

other people" (Appollo, 1). Participants reported that "challenged their preconceived notions" (Graham, 1) about others, made them "more socially conscious and aware" (Cassandra, 1) and lessened racial insensitivity. One participant reported their belief that having diverse populations in schools with younger students is the best way to "combat racism…that has been institutionalized for so long…and ingrained into society" (Isla, 1).

The Role and Interplay of Critique Consciousness and Critical Consciousness

The development of a powerful and positive group identity reported among research participants helped prepare them for and support them through the focus and intensity of an immersive, secondary arts school like ASFA. The unique structural and curricular aspects of such schools are part of a process that participants experience as they develop a critique consciousness as well as a critical consciousness and eventually move forward towards the realization of new self-identity which will be discussed later in these findings.

The development of what I will refer to as critique consciousness and critical consciousness, though, is crucial in the reported experiences of the research participants. While the focus of my research and findings is focused on secondary arts education that is immersive, it is a significant finding to have discovered an unexpected connection in how recent graduates reported the pedagogical influence the arts curricula had on their academic curricula. Both the arts and academic experiences employed an intensive critical lens in a process of looking at the world deeply and differently. By critique consciousness I refer to the immersive arts education practice of artist-students, artist-teachers, and sometimes guest-artists routinely participating in a review and discussion

assessing artist-students' work critically (in any artistic discipline) to help them develop, nourish, and internalize critical reflection skills.

By critical consciousness I refer, in a Freirean sense, to an understanding of the world through careful analysis and judgement that can perceive social conditions which require action to change or improve. Critique consciousness is focused primarily on training artist-students to improve work they have created and push themselves individually to grow artistically; the experience looks inward. Critical consciousness is focused primarily on educating students to think critically about institutions and conditions the world has created; the experience looks outward. Research participants reported that their experiences in both areas were central to their own development process at ASFA.

To understand participants' experiences more fully, the basic structure of ASFA's school day must be clarified. Immersive, secondary arts schools like ASFA are structured to place an immersive focus on arts education, but college preparatory academic courses that fulfill and sometimes exceed traditional high school graduation requirements are also maintained as part of that structure. To have high quality education for both the arts and academics necessitates a school day that is longer than regular schools. ASFA's school day runs from 8:00 a.m. to 4:40 p.m. Dance students have an even longer day that extends on most days to 5:30 p.m. Also, students stay even longer during times when performances, exhibitions, installations, and readings are approaching. All participants reported that the longer school day hours were both challenging and rewarding and had a significant impact on their experiences. Before reporting the specific findings about participants' experiences of the intensely critical processes, it is important to report the

phenomenon participants described in moving every day between the academic and the immersive arts part of their school day.

Switching from Academics to Arts during the School Day

Participants reported that transitioning from the more traditional, academic part of the school day to the extended and immersive focus on their arts disciplines was like flipping a switch that turned on one part of their brains and/or turned off another part of their brains. Damion reported ASFA's devotion to both arts and academic education:

> [It was] basically like killing two birds with one stone; you're growing both directions at the same time, during the same day, every day. And you get used to it and learn how to really control like the different parts of your mind, which, like, you really need to do 'cause your mind can get tired if you're not careful. You figure out how to switch your mindset off from academics and start focusing on what you love. I mean, I love the academics you know, but you know what I mean, my passion, what I really love more than anything else, right, is my music. (1)

Sebastian reported a similar experience:

> [h]aving those three or four hours, the four hours really in upper grades, it's just so important, and you can switch your mindset off from academic and start focusing on the theater time you love, like this part of the day from math, science, history, or anything else of that nature, academics, your mind switches over to this mindset of, okay, let me focus on what I most want to do now, you know, so that structure and just having that, through your day, your normal day is really good, and on top of that, ending the day with that makes it even better. You know you go home, and you do your homework and stuff, but you still are in this mindset of like man I love my school, I just finished this monologue, I got to work on these lines, because it not only pushes you, it pushes you further in your growth and you're just primed every day to switch into that mode. (1)

Neena described the same mind-switching experience and suggested also the simile of the brain as a building with different rooms in which an academic mode was stored and a creative mode was stored:

> I think having that much time was really, really useful. I feel like the fact that I was going to another part of the building was like to another part of my brain, no truly. Generally, it was going to be another part of the building and I was kind of switching my brain around there even as I walked to class to kind of warm my mind up. It very useful having this kind of separated, but not too separate, parts of the day from academics to arts. I am in school mode, then I'm in creative writing mode. Creativity mode. And then also just being in the same place as everyone else in the department, and that helped me make the switch so easily. (1)

Isla reported the same experience also and added imagery suggesting that a switch that is flipped too quickly and too often would not be good for the brain's circuits:

> Yeah, we had core classes in academics and then arts and it was kind of separate. I liked that. I liked being able to compartmentalize. Going like creative, non-creative, creative, non-creative. Oh no, no, that would've burned me out so bad. No, that would've been distracting. Gotta have that compartmentalization. I mean, I think my brain is just that way, all of our brains, right, they're all compartmentalized, and that helps you learn your way around your brain sort of. (1)

Talia's experience was reported in similar terms also, and she extended the experience to what she was currently experiencing among different peers in college:

> I feel like having that block of time where we kind of like have to learn how to turn on the creative and, just like creation part of our brain, really helped me prepare for what I'm in now because I noticed how a lot of my friends and peers, who went to you know a high school that didn't have that structure and focus, they have a hard time kind of like switching or like going into the like creative processing part of the brain. They kind of have to work into that, but I feel like because I had that structure I'm able to much more intuitively activate kind of a creative mindset. Because it's, it was just so like encouraged. Not saying we didn't have a choice, makes it sound bad, but it was because it treated the creative thinking and creative processing as just as important as any other subject which I think is like really important, in general, and also in what I'm doing now so. (1)

This structure of ASFA's school day which separates traditional academic courses into a block of time during the first half of the day and immersive arts focus into a three- to four-hour block of time during the second half of the day was experienced as positive by participants. Participants used these similar terms to describe the phenomenon they

experienced: *switching mindset, separated, compartmentalized, switching my brain,* and *switching to the creative processing part of the brain*. While these experiences were reported in terms that could connote disconnection, as if students shut down a part of their brain entirely to ignite another part, participants reported other experiences that suggested a more complex range of ongoing cognitive activity and a significant intersection among findings.

Research participants reported being aware of a sense of their brains switching between immersive arts education and academic education. This experience reflected an awareness between a doing mode of mind and a being mode of mind. However, both modes were active modes and are not mutually exclusive in their activity. A common theme that was reported by participants in discussion of their experiences in both immersive arts education and academic education was their own development of exceptional critical skills.

Academic Curriculum and Critical Consciousness

ASFA's school mission is focused on immersive arts education but the college-preparatory academic curriculum also impacts students' experiences despite the abbreviated class lengths of 45 minutes. Sometimes the parents of students who want to attend immersive arts schools like ASFA have concerns that the academic curriculum will be weak or inferior. However, participants reported that their academic teachers used class time more efficiently, assigned more meaningful but less time-consuming projects, and Talia reported, "I never felt like I was getting slighted in any way with my academic education" (1). Cassandra reported that academic teachers never burdened students with

"a bunch of busy work" (1) and that the efficiency "made it more rigorous" (1) and focused on more relevant subject matter. Participants also reported that academic teachers and students tended to implement a critical awareness and practice in academic settings in the tradition of the way artists tend to view things from different and challenging perspectives. Desmond reported that several of his academic teachers had artistic sensibilities and that "their classes were less about some standard that was chasing after them and telling them to what or how to teach us and more, I don't know, like more about experiencing the class, feeling deeply about what we're studying" (2). Quentin described the same experience:

> I used to talk to my teachers about how I felt like they were teaching us more as if, like they were artists, say, more as if I guess there was more art than science to the way they taught us. I love science, so I don't know, I mean that more like, there's not always a single right way to look at things, but I think teachers in like the huge school I went to before ASFA probably had to just stick to their textbooks and they had like 30 kids in every class. (2)

Regarding academic teachers, Graham explained:

> [t]eachers just went with it, I mean, if we're bringing our little artist minds into the room, might as well roll that way, right? But I just think they were that way anyway. Like, naturally curious people who, they're just going to want work at an arts school no matter what they teach. (2)

Participants reported that their experience of the academic curriculum made them more critically alert and more aware of the importance of including diverse perspectives and looking at the world through multiple lenses. Appollo reported:

> [Before ASFA] I had only ever been to majority white or majority black schools. We can have these conversations [here] that students at my other schools couldn't have, like about immigration or racism or homophobia, and to be surrounded by people who have lived through these things and we get to have these conversations. You need to hear these other voices. We're good at including everyone. (1)

Isla described her experience in academic courses:

> At ASFA I got experience from diverse teachers from diverse students around me and every almost every single teacher. In history, English, even sciences, I always got the sort of "second opinion" or maybe the unheard opinion typically from a woman, a minority group, someone that typically was never in history able to speak up…I never got that in my elementary school and I'm confident I wouldn't have at the high school I was zoned to because my brother and sister can't really have these conversations with me and they're older than me. They went to a high school where almost everybody just falls in line and dresses alike so much it's like there's a school uniform when there's really not. Sorry, don't mean to go off like that but it's like, it goes back to what type of things we learned in classes where we were learning more than just the basics from a textbook, and I can sort of see how my family falls into like a structure of power that I would've never thought about. (1)

Sebastian reported how he could see the interconnections among his academic courses:

> Like with my English and history teachers mainly, I learned so much and I didn't really know, um, what it was all kind of, all coming together in a way, didn't see what they were all just building up to and really making us aware of how so much of what we know and see came to be these ways where, it's like it becomes so clear why way too many people don't have voices being heard, and telling their versions and stories are powerful. But, [the academic teachers] gave us tools in our thinking to look so deep into everyday things and see how things need attention and we have to stay aware. (1)

Cassandra described how she found her singing voice and her critical voice:

> You know my mom said I found my voice at ASFA, and she means me singing, being in, achieving so much in the voice studio, and yes, I'm so proud of that. But I've told her since then that I really, think it's so true, that I really found my voice also, maybe even more so, with my core [academic] teachers who really kind of led me to the light, truly. But, it's both, gotta say for real, it was both. My singing voice and my voice of feeling empowered and having teachers who showed me myself in their classes, like I could really see myself in a mirror, reflecting back and that's something that was such a precious gift. To speak up, don't be silent because that's what keeps you powerless and there'll be no changes. (2)

Talia shared that even one of her academic teachers routinely spoke of "critique":

> My [history] teacher told us all the time to break down, well to dig deeper and critique and not just accept everything she was saying. We got to where we knew exactly how to jump into action when she'd just yell out, she'd stop at places we didn't see coming and just push us onto taking it all apart, "Critique it!" (2)

Kleis reported gaining critical consciousness in places she would not have expected:

> I mean I never thought I'd be in a science class as a place where we'd get into stuff like the sketchiness behind why schools make you say The Pledge. Like we quit doing the lab we were in to research this history of The Pledge. I mean I expected that from classes where. I don't know if it was called a women and the media class? I never got to take that class but even through my friends I learned about media bias and the stuff that just gets…I learned to be just really picky about where I'm getting my information from. (1)

Participants also reported that academic faculty and the students shared a comfort level with discussing sensitive topics that many schools would avoid. Isla reported, "in class discussion people feel comfortable sharing maybe a little bit more about themselves that might be like touchy or sensitive" (1). Talia reported this was also true "especially when it comes to LGBTQ issues" (1) which were never spoken about in her previous schools and resulted in students "not embracing themselves" (1). Neena explained that the openness for approaching sensitive topics was linked to the education in critical consciousness:

> We discussed some very sensitive topics and school in Alabama is not the place people think you should talk about sensitive topics. Then we'd discuss why it was that everyone was so afraid of sensitive topics and sort of break that on down into parts. I think it this type of teaching to really look deeply and get at why things are the way they are, it really informed class discussion and then also like lunch table discussion. (1)

Even the cafeteria became a setting for experience and development of participants' critical skills. This critical disposition may have been most influenced by the mission and focus of immersive arts education, and it pervaded participants' entire experience.

Immersive Arts Education and the Critique Process

All participants reported that in their experiences the time devoted to critique in their artistic discipline was one of the most important and valuable aspects of ASFA's

arts curricula. Critique requires a significant amount of time, therefore, regular schools that provide any amount of arts education do not typically include critique as part of arts curriculum. Critique generally involves peer and professional feedback and constructive criticism on the work of individual artist-students. The exact nature of critique is different depending on the artistic discipline, but each of the five arts disciplines at ASFA employ critique as an integral part of their departmental curriculum. Sutton reported that as part of the theatre arts curriculum, critique

> [i]s really daunting… this type of focus and critique and attention…to do a monologue in front of your peers who'll you see everyday, all day, but it's a crucial factor in facilitating my introspection and self-esteem and it facilitated the sense of community and being able to be vulnerable to try new things…to exchange critique or analysis was really, really fundamental as a benefit of ASFA. I felt seen and aided by critique. (1)

Isla reported her similar experience in the dance curriculum but with an emphasis on the constancy of critique within her chosen discipline. Both participants who studied dance at ASFA also reported the need for faculty to be especially sensitive in their practice of critique. Isla explained in detail:

> [d]ance is different in the sense of every time you step into the studio you're, it's critique, it's time for that class is literally like an hour and a half of critique followed by another class of same length, then a shorter class. I think that that's kind of different than any other art form, or at least something like visual arts or creative writing where you kind of have your own time to get your thoughts out and then go into critique mode. So I think that in dance, you have to be really vulnerable to that, and you also have to be really, really careful on yourself because it has to do with your body, and I think that anything that has to do is your body is kind of automatically a sensitive subject, so you have to be super careful with how you interpret critique and how instructors present to critique. But I think that being vulnerable in the dance studio and understanding that critique doesn't mean, doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. I don't know if that makes sense, but critique when your teacher corrects you on technique or technical, something technical, it is a lot of times, having to do with pacing. Preservation of your body, you know if I'm doing a jump landing on my knees straight, but that's not going to you know be healthy to my body and posture you know, a creative body for the rest of my life and. So, critique in the form of dance

> is pretty much constant. It starts with technical skills, moves to complex skills. And what's so key is that, no you can't take it personally in that you want a healthy mind and body, but you actually sort of have to take it personally in one sense, in the sense that what you're presenting is so, so personal, like reaching deep into yourself and finding your self. You can't let yourself identify with the critique; you have to figure out how to step into your dancer body, like embody dance, and discover this connection with your body and mind and the floor and the entire space you're dancing in. (1)

Dancer participants emphasized the challenge of their critique process due to its potential to be experienced too personally, but Isla's articulation delved more deeply into the important distinction between over-identifying with the constant critiques one receives and the critique process' important role in helping dancers develop beyond technique towards artistry.

Talia also reported the critique process as a very personal experience in her visual arts studies at ASFA. Talia reported that the critique process opened her eyes to many important aspects of her own art and learned much from the critiques of others' work:

> [i]t was definitely a hard thing to learn, and I came in in eighth grade. I remember the first critique I had where I got critical feedback, not rude, it was never rude, but just critical feedback. Constructive I guess is the right word, feedback, and I just remember I took it very personally, because it was the first time that ever happened. And it was a very, it was like eye-opening and it was a kind of a tough learning curve, but I remember talking to my professors about it afterwards, and they were saying, No, we love your work, and we can see how much effort and like, and how much you care, and there's a lot of nice things, but we're saying these things so that you know you can improve and be better in the next project. And that you can see these important things in regards to visual arts and. But I think it's in and, as time went on it got better, and I became more I guess comfortable with separating myself from my work and my ideas from who I am. I mean, they can and can't be separated, but it's like what I create is what I create, but the I and the creation are two different things. They're connected. But not identical. Which is very hard, and I still struggle with to this day, but, I think, and it's definitely helped me with where I'm at now in architecture school because critique is still a huge part of that process, and I feel like my peers, who were coming from schools that didn't have critique involved in their art classes had very much a culture shock, where I was more, I guess, used to it. (1)

Like Isla, Talia articulated the similar mental process that played out over years through the ongoing critique process. Quentin reported the same crucial aspects of critique's role for him the visual arts curriculum:

> And so critique was this place where you would often get pushed in ways you usually don't see coming. Also for your process, I mean you could create something and it could get totally critiqued in a way that you had never anticipated. Which I do miss that, in a certain aspect, because I mean my [current college], they stay away from real critique. I think they're avoiding lawsuits, quite honestly, so like nothing bad ever gets said in critiques. All I get is like, Oh, I, like the color or something like that. (1)

Appollo reported that critique in the creative writing curriculum was an emotionally positive experience for him that has continued to impact his life:

> Like arts education gives you a thick skin early on in your like young working life, because you have to be ready to you know, create this thing, which is already not easy, creating something and then receive feedback on it. Yeah, I'm regularly doing that so often. For so long, um, it really built up my confidence, like realizing like I can take criticism, and I can apply it to make myself better because. It helps them to know, like everyone in this room is going to get criticized and praised, and both are equally valuable, you have to take them both like recognize for all of the notes, they gave you about what could be improved, they also gave you a lot of good things about it and. You need to, you know, internalize more of the positive really than the negative, the negative is just like you know what's necessary to make a story work that's just how writing works in all, in all walks of life. So it's good to learn that so young. In critique you develop thick skin because you are the direct subject seen through lenses. In academic criticism you turn the lens on the subject of the curriculum itself or the subject that the curriculum is focusing on. (1)

Appollo reported experiencing pride in himself and his work through the critique process while it also expanded the scope of his work as he learned from the creative work of peers. Importantly, Appollo identified a difference he experienced in critical thinking in an academic curriculum compared to critique in arts education. His explanation was so similar to the reports of other participants as it considered the extent to which young,

developing artists experienced connection, separation, or both with their creative work through the critique process. Graham reported similarly positive experiences with the critique process in creative writing:

> In critique, to an extreme that I haven't otherwise experienced, like you could tell who otherwise was your best friend. You could tell them like, you know I think this poem is not very effective, because you do this, maybe you should try using this. Instead, it became kind of like, I guess it kind of neutralized the social dimensions and dynamics of the classroom and allowed you to really interact with other people as artists. (1)

Graham seemed to have experienced the critique process with a clear awareness of himself and peers as artists. This will become more significant in its intersection with other findings documented in this chapter.

Participants who studied music at ASFA experienced critique as a constant aspect of rehearsals for large groups like orchestra and choir, smaller groups such as ensembles and chambers, as well as individual performances for recitals, outside competitions, and competitive placements within performance groups both in school and outside of school. Participants reported the need to receive challenging feedback from peers and faculty. In studio repertoire critique for solo instrumentalists or vocalists, students performed part of their current repertoire and received critique feedback from faculty and peers. Appollo reported an aspirational aspect to critique in creative writing because of the way he was inspired by the work of older, more experienced peer writers.

Music participants expressed the same dynamic of aspiration and inspiration and learned to look forward with anticipation to “getting pushed” (Cassandra, 2) by their peers to improve. Damion expressed it like this, “you better hear that from your peers now instead of later from the judges or your big audience who paid money for their seat”

(2). Quentin identified the critique process as being of special importance to the entire process of his experiences:

> To have so much time to work on your art and so young, and I can't even tell you how much I love the teachers and their classes, but it's like critique is like what just keeps driving that thing and going for me, just keeps me, you know, um, just creativity spinning like wheels. (2)

Artist Identity Development

The experience of research participants began with their driven determination to pursue a different educational experience, and that drive was something that became integral to their development of a group identity experienced and recognized early on in their process. Participants reported that the group identity solidified and grew as they participated increasingly in shared experiences with their peers through provocative academic curriculum, intensive arts courses and training, numerous performances, and ongoing critiques which demanded vulnerability and mutual support and yielded powerful social bonds among peers. Participants reported also that their sense of self-identity as artists developed as they moved from technical proficiency in their arts training to more mature artistry.

The development process research participants reported occurred within the time and space needed to accommodate it and under the guidance of artist-teachers whose impact on students developed complexity within these spaces. Therefore, it is important to understand and explore in the next few sections how immersive arts schools like ASFA structure time and space for its students and how it employs artist-teachers to guide and facilitate this development.

Inversion of the Curricular Focus

Immersive, secondary arts schools require extensive, focused time in arts instruction to allow for depth, exploration, and growth. At ASFA, since the grade levels span grades 7 through 12, there is ample time for a deliberate and immersive curriculum scope and sequence to be implemented patiently. This immersive arts curriculum ensures students are surrounded by time, space, opportunity, performances, and professional artist-teachers as well as academic faculty who integrate arts into their subject matter curriculum to enhance and expand the students' immersive experiences. This unique structuring of time and space also requires the inversion of traditional expectations and resources in regular public schools. Traditionally, educators use the term *extracurricular* to denote activities or courses that are marginalized due to the consuming focus on academic subject matters and are only added, when resources allow, in a supplementary way to the privileged curricular focus. In immersive, secondary arts schools, the extracurricular is the curricular.

The structure of the ASFA school day inverts the traditional focus of most regular public schools by taking what is traditionally treated as extracurricular and making it the focus of the overall curriculum. Traditional academic subjects required for a typical high school diploma and for college admission remain important but play a support role within ASFA's daily structure. Quentin reported:

> It was upside down from what you'd think about, like I mean in stereotypical high schools, middle schools. Because in normal public schools, the arts are an afterthought of education, they are supplemental to the academia of, just kind of a core sort of groups like math, science, literature, and history where everything that falls outside of that is kind of deemed unnecessary. (1)

Participants reported that arts education at ASFA was treated as or more important than traditional subjects, that the highest expectations were in the arts courses instead of academic courses, and that whereas any arts course at their previous schools was considered "the easy class where you just kind of show up and get an A," (Talia, 1) at ASFA they were the courses with the greatest challenges and requirements for students. Four participants reported that they did not know of any other schools that focused on a particular discipline in the arts like ASFA. Graham reported that ASFA gave him the opportunity to focus on writing creatively which was his passion. He was grateful and excited that ASFA structured his

> [e]xtracurricular interest in a systemized educational fashion, rather than me just having only Wikipedia or poets.org as resources to support this kind of extracurricular hobby of mine…I love the convergence of like school structure and extracurricular passion, even I though I went to a kind of alternative type school before ASFA, ASFA was still just such a different kind of approach to school. (1)

Even the extracurricular opportunities at the other schools previously attended by multiple participants were dominated by athletics instead of arts electives. One participant reported that his previous school only had one visual arts teacher but dozens of coaches and athletic support personnel. Arts education was marginalized even among most schools' extracurricular offerings. Damion reported that he came from a school where he played in the band "behind football teams at pep rallies…I'd always played in the background with the band. Here [at ASFA] I am on the mainstage and Recital Hall. I never thought I would be doing something like that in my life" (1).

Inversion of the Physical Structure of the Campus

The physical structure of the school is designed to privilege the arts disciplines with physical spaces that facilitate focused instruction and exploration. The structure's environment is strategically filled with art, arts-related materials, and arts activities. In addition to the large, professional visual arts gallery, most of the walls, hallways, and spaces exhibit paintings and sculptures. Hallways, corners, lobbies, and stairwells are curated like art galleries with exhibitions and installations. In classrooms used to teach traditional academic subjects, original artwork by students and faculty are displayed instead of informational or motivational posters. Participants reported their experiences of commonly seeing students practice instruments in stairwells or landings, actors running their lines in hallways, or visual artists sketching interiors in lobbies or common spaces. One participant reported her first impression of the campus interior:

> I remember walking around and just being just in awe of just the environment and, like the different studios and… the sculpture out in the courtyard, and I thought that was so cool… that's kind of what sparked my interest. (Talia, 1)

Sutton reported the common experience of never being surprised to see peers

> [m]aking really cool art or doing strange things in the middle of the hallway or like whatever it was. It was not uncommon to hear someone practicing in one stairway and go into the next and someone's rehearsing lines or doing some photography shoot. Music students preferred practicing their instruments sometimes on the huge stairwell landing areas, so I'd get a violin concert sometimes just in passing. I've seen people do really strange things, but that was, I think, part of the culture. (1)

The campus is located in downtown Birmingham and is part of the artistic and cultural district. Therefore, the structure of the daily schedule is intended to accommodate convenient access to the museum of fine arts, smaller professional art galleries, local professional and college theaters, and professional entertainment venues for music,

dance, and theater. Participants made numerous references to regular excursions to museums, plays, arts festivals, and arts galleries in close proximity to the campus.

The structure of ASFA's campus emphasizes spaces specifically dedicated to arts disciplines: large and small theaters, a venue for student readings, spacious dance studios, music practice rooms and rehearsal spaces, piano and percussion studios, recital halls, choir room, visual arts studios for classes and for individuals, visual arts exhibition galleries, costume and scene shops, theater tech booths, make-up rooms, dressing rooms, and arts critique spaces. Research participants referenced these types of spaces throughout their responses and referred to their previous schooling experiences not affording them arts education opportunities which necessitated seeking training with private instructors, private studios and facilities, and sometimes little or no training at all. Desmond reported that at ASFA he "got free private lessons from world class guitar teacher and access to facilities I wouldn't have had access to, and I got, you know, professional direction from actual working artists" (1).

The Impact of Extended, Focused Time to Immersive Arts Education

The school day at ASFA is structured to focus a large block of uninterrupted instructional time on arts education in one of five arts disciplines: creative writing, dance, music, theatre arts, and visual arts. Students attend academic courses for the morning and early afternoon and then attend arts courses for a minimum of three hours in the afternoon. Students in 11th and 12th grades increase the amount of focused arts time to closer to four or four-and-one-half hours as their requirements increase and senior mastery projects approach. All research participants identified this length of focused arts

instructional and arts creation time as a positive experience. Damion reported, "you get like 15 minutes or an hour in a normal high school" (1) for arts education, and "I wasn't growing, per se, and I wanted to be challenged" (1). Talia reported:

> [b]efore my time at ASFA I would have all these ideas and wanting to draw these things, but it was just kind of like sporadic and in the moment, but then having my time at ASFA and the visual arts department kind of really helped me focus those creative ideas into something where I was really working towards something instead of just throwing ideas around. (1)

Sutton reported that focused time created by "the [school's] structure facilitates intensity" (1). The block of focused time for arts instruction and exploration allowed students to have an immersive experience in arts education. Participants used the terms *deep*, *deep dive, intensive, extensive, immersive* to describe their experiences of having the extended time for their focus on arts. Participants reported that by the time they were seniors they had developed a greater appreciation for the length of dedicated time because it allowed for introspection and self-reflection which was highly valued in their artistic processes. Quentin reported:

> [b]ecause of how long my days were and how much time we would also spend in the studio every day, I mean my classes for studio classes at ASFA were like so long that it's almost intimidating at first, but then you quickly just dive into it. That was really great, and I mean…it did make going to college really actually kind of tough in the sense of that freedom suddenly got zapped um. I'm majoring in art, but my college, I became a little, honestly, a little resentful in college of some of those foundation level courses where you're just sitting there drawing an ugly still life. But I understand why those are necessary, but it did make me realize how special ASFA was. (1)

Damion reported that the extended, focused time "gave me this big frame of the day where I could be working on my music working on my craft" (1).

The Impact of ASFA's Arts Curriculum in Each Arts Department

All participants reported that the length of school days which accommodates the focused time for immersive arts curriculum was important and valuable to their experience and success as student-artists. The two participants who studied visual arts at ASFA, Quentin and Talia, reported that the visual arts curriculum's depth was important, especially with how it compared to their previous experiences in public schools that had only limited resources. Quentin reported this comparison:

> The AP art portfolio thing in public schools is horrible. I think people who don't go to ASFA don't realize how terrible things like that are…they focus on realism, and they don't really care about concept…and they only push heavy for this kind of technical finance, and technical prowess is prized over conceptual integrity. Whereas places like ASFA foreground growth as something that is complicated…you can't do that at a regular public school and for some people there's never that escape from the clutches of like expectation of art and that's just, it's very sad…ASFA models more that of college more than it does a high school where you build up something to then interrogate it later on. And it's really crazy, I mean just how much ASFA does. (1)

Talia reported that she was exposed to so many "eye-opening and inspiring" (1) experiences because of the diverse styles of the visual arts faculty, the frequent exposure to visiting guest artists, the visits to art galleries in the arts district of the city's urban center, and participation in and visits to local arts festivals. Talia had lived in a rural-suburban area before attending ASFA and reported that she would never have known about the arts community any other way: "I just, I didn't even know they existed. I think a lot of people aren't aware of it, because they don't have that connection" (1). Both participants reported the importance of having a large, full-time visual arts faculty. Quentin reported that students can be taught by artist-teachers who all have unique artistic philosophies and styles as opposed to only having "the one art teacher on staff"

(1) like at his previous school. Talia reported that this experience was a similar curricular focus as students got in regular schools for academics where there might be numerous teachers in the same academic department all who have different methodologies or areas of expertise.

The three participants who studied creative writing at ASFA, Graham, Neena, and Appollo, reported that the curricular immersion into their creative writing discipline was a positive and important experience. Graham reported:

> [w]hile you are at ASFA, school and your art become your life in a way that it doesn't in other schools, because of the very kind of rich curriculum of writing-related things, you know readings and critiques and authors coming in and things like that. And so you, you really become immersed in school and in your creative practice in general. (1)

Appollo reported that he was exposed to the type of writing that he would not otherwise have known about: "It wasn't like the best sellers; it was like the niche things and not just all the classics" (1). Appollo explained that most teenagers only ever read "popular stuff" but that it was the depth of exposure to other writers that influenced him, and "the writers I discovered in those classes, those are now my favorite writers today" (1). Similarly, Neena reported that ASFA's curriculum was modeling "MFA programs which is tremendously helpful" and that the curriculum embraces "literary fiction" as well as "commercial fiction" (1).

The two participants who studied theatre arts at ASFA, Sutton and Sebastian, both reported that curricular immersion into their theatre discipline was a positive and important experience. Both participants used the terms *vulnerability, responsibility, accountability*, and *sense of community* repeatedly to describe the ways the immersive experience impacted their experiences, especially in relation to the more collaborative

nature of their artistic discipline. Both reported that it was an important learning and growing experience to have young people so dependent on one another to achieve group successes and accomplishments and that the pressure that came with so many relying on the quality and readiness of your contribution made them the reliable people they are now. Both participants reported recognizing the professionalism they learned at such a young age. Both participants also reported that the depth of focus on the process aspects of the curriculum was an important part of their experiences that was emphasized as much as the final products.

The three participants who studied music at ASFA, Damion, Cassandra, and Desmond, each reported that curricular immersion into their music discipline was a positive and important experience. Each participant reported the importance of the focused time and the large amount of time to study music as exceptional to their experience. The immersive curriculum required focus on one instrument. Damion reported that he never thought such focused time was possible since his trombone "is not a popular instrument, I said I don't know how that will work" (1). Damion reported that he never thought it was possible for his instrument to be accompanied by a piano for a formal recital, but that ASFA required that and devoted focused time for it. Cassandra reported that she is now a confident person who speaks her mind because she was able to spend so much focused time working on her music as a vocalist at ASFA. At previous schools, her experience was that the only vocalist opportunities were in large choirs with no individual focus. Desmond reported:

> [t]o have a place where I could actually focus on the instrument was great. I mean that's for a public school, I mean that's pretty impressive, like that's a pretty cool thing, And I think a lot of people feel that at ASFA too, because many bands and stuff like that don't feature strings even at the middle school level or feature piano

> players or singers or anything like that. But to have that sort of specialized focus was a dream. (1)

All three music graduates also reported the expansive of exposure to so many aspects of music. Damion reported the importance of playing in a full orchestra, studying composers and composition, studying and performing jazz and improvisation, performing formal recitals, and having private lessons from "a teacher who plays in the Alabama Symphony Orchestra" (1) as positive experiences and that having all of these resources "right there with ASFA is just a wonderful thing" (1). Cassandra reported the importance of courses in advanced music theory, aural awareness, and ear training made her understand how deeply one could go into a discipline about which they were passionate.

The two participants who studied dance at ASFA, Isla and Kleis, both reported that curricular immersion into their artistic discipline was a positive and important experience. Both participants reported the importance of being able to have extensive, focused instructional time during the school day. Both participants expressed how difficult it had been before they were at ASFA to end a school day, travel to a dance studio, dance in small, overcrowded studios, and receive instruction often from instructors who did not have substantial professional dance experience. At ASFA they were able focus so much time, every day, to dance instruction (four hours daily for most grades and five hours for juniors and seniors). Both participants also reported the importance of ongoing exposure to visiting guest artists and choreographers.

The Impact of Employing Artist-Teachers

ASFA's structure is designed to support the employment of full-time faculty for the instruction of academic subjects that are required by the state department of education

for high school graduation as well as full-time faculty in each fine and performing arts department. ASFA is enabled by legislation to employ professional artists as educators who have not earned degrees in education and therefore do not have teaching certificates that are ordinarily required for employment at a public school funded by the state. ASFA's structure intends to provide arts students with professional artists who have the ability and desire to teach young artists. In some cases, some artist-teachers are employed without a terminal degree in their field or a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree because they have alternative qualifications through their careers as artists who have been in professional dance or theatre companies, recording artists, or published authors. All research participants reported that this unique part of ASFA's structure was a positive and important aspect of their experience as art students. Participants reported that having professional artists instruct them was critical to the quality of their experiences and to instructors' success in educating young artists. Sutton reported that artist-teachers "know what they are talking about" and their professional experience and practice as an artist "contributed to a sense of authority and respect" in the opinion of students (1). Sutton reported that if a teacher "had never jumped through the hoops of living in New York or auditioning or rejection or career development" they would not be able to earn the same respect from students (1). Desmond reported that students understood that their artist-teachers had committed as artists to a life that "is an important way to live…a hard way to live" and that commitment earned respect from students (1). Desmond explained the following regarding his artist-teachers:

> [t]hey have like a very grounded realistic view of like what goes into actually being professional artists, which I think is really important when talking about art just because art can seem like this very Romantic sort of theatrical way of living and stuff like that, when, in reality, but… I got such an important emphasis on

> like professional practices and an emphasis on actually how to go about doing the thing that you want to do [as an artist] in a realistic effective way. (1)

Kleis reported her experience with artist-teachers whose professional experience earned students' respect compared to one whose lack of substantial professional experience made it difficult to effectively teach. Kleis described one artist-teacher:

> [who] had like studied in the Paris opera which is prestigious and that totally shifts the [teacher-student] dynamic…it's experience that you can really like get wide-eyed about. It was like, oh, we [students] really better get it together…but it was easy to really kind of shrug off the professional experience [another artist-teacher] had as unimportant, certainly unexciting… it was a pretty limited engagement for a professional career. (1)

Other participants reported that when artist-teachers had substantial professional experience in their field students "couldn't really call them on any type of BS… having them be professional artists gave them the ability to speak the way that they did" (Cassandra, 1). Isla reported that students knew their artist-teachers were not "talking nonsense, these are people are actively involved in the field, they know exactly what's what" (1). One participant described the artist-teachers as "practitioners…who are active in the [arts] scene" as being "tremendously useful" (Neena, 1). Graham reported:

> [t]hey were able to pass on a lot of practical knowledge, in addition to the theoretical knowledge…they also were practicing writers that were in this sphere that many of us wanted to enter and could therefore help us navigate that sphere. (1)

Because the structure of ASFA accommodates students for four to six years for most students, there is time for important relationship dynamics to grow and evolve between artist-teachers and student-artists. Talia reported that this evolving relationship was "pretty important because the more they know you, the more they know your art…understand your art and can therefore instruct you more effectively" (1).

Having a school structure that supports the employment of artist-teachers was also critical in the provision of professional guidance and networking connections for aspiring student-artists. Most participants reported having benefitted directly from the professional connections they accessed through their artist-teacher faculty. These connections were reported by participants to include learning about local and regional professional art galleries and studios; earning placements in prestigious festivals and intensives; understanding submissions, agents, and publishing protocols; recommendations for conservatory, college, university, and professional company placements and admissions; recommendations for employment; exposure and introductions to numerous guest artists engaged in visits, residencies, performances, workshops, masterclasses, short-courses, or lectureships in their departments at ASFA; and professional advice and advocacy. This network of professional support helps students "get to the next spot in [their] careers" (Appollo, 1) and always "come back to you" (Damion, 1).

Taking Ownership of Creative Work

Most participants reported that the immersive and advanced arts curriculum at ASFA gave them opportunities and requirements to create their own original work and that these experiences were valuable and meaningful for them. Participants used phrases such as *from start to finish* and *from scratch* to report about the benefits of the entire and lengthy process of creating their own work. Visual arts participants included the requirements to build their own frames, stretch their canvasses, create a large portfolio of paintings, sculptures, installation pieces, author an artist statement, present before panelists, installing their own exhibits, and presenting artist talks for audiences.

Theatre arts participants used the same phrasings to describe their requirements to select or write plays and scripts, secure performance rights, audition their own casts and publish cast lists, produce sets, props, and costuming, design sound and lighting plans, create rehearsal schedules and coordinate actors, stage managers, and technicians, run rehearsals, direct a show, design and publish programs, and manage the audience and box office. Dance participants used similar phrases to describe their requirements to design original choreography, audition dancers, create and publish cast lists, run rehearsals, design costuming, select music, and design sound and lighting plans.

Creative writing participants reported that their curriculum requires them to create original works in numerous genres, implement peer-review processes, submit, select, and edit collections of their own and peers' work, publish class anthologies, and submit works to journals for publication. Music participants reported their curriculum required them to prepare for pre-hearings, hearings, and re-hearings for recital repertoire, compose and arrange scores for ensembles, and research, design, and publish their own recital programs with extensive program notes on all pieces and composers. Sebastian reported that "being able to produce our own work is scary but so rewarding" (1). Talia reported that "being able to showcase my own work in a powerful way is rewarding" (1). Damion described his experience:

> [y]ou get inspired to present your own lens, the school gave me that opportunity to bring my own art to the platform to create songs…a platform for your own work, and your ownership of it and people saying that it is your work and they asked for you, because of what you display. Your own work. (1)

Isla shared that "it is a big deal and it's not many teenagers that get to say that they start-to-finish created a work for their peers, and that's a really special thing that every ASFA

student goes through" (1). Kleis described the experience as important knowing that "your art that will be classified as your work, your art, your expression" (1).

Another aspect of the requirement for students to create and own their original work were the opportunities for monetization. Participants reported receiving remuneration for their work. Two participants reported numerous live music events for which they had been hired outside of school. One participant reported being paid for original compositions and arrangements. Two participants reported having sold more than half of the works they had exhibited in their student arts exhibits. Though Graham did not report receiving payment for any of his work in creative writing, he reported with pride several prestigious, national-level honors he had earned. Graham reported that he experienced pride in ownership of his original, creative work and how that made him different from many of his current peers in college who did not feel ownership for the traditional academic work they produced for class assignments. Graham explained that he noticed a

> [m]arkedly different approach from a lot of my peers, who go into it with that kind of tokenized or transactional sort of mindset. And they really kind of only put in the effort that's necessary. They'll be like, why? Why are you working so far in advance of a due date, and it's because I learned to have that feeling of ownership over what I'm creating that makes me, you know, want to care about what I'm saying for its own sake, rather than for the grade. (5)

Quentin reported that his entire school experience before ASFA had been "alienating" due to the social dynamics and the limited visual arts curriculum (1). Quentin explained that ASFA's focused time to grow and create "shifted my approach to art and to myself, because art became a lot more personal and what like over four years those things just merged" (1). Quentin seemed to experience a feeling of wholeness through this process in which his creative work and his sense of self merged.

From Group Identity to Artist Identity

Participants spoke of their earliest experiences at ASFA in terms of their joy in discovering other students like them, the immense delight in forging a group identity that was empowering and validating, and the satisfaction of being allowed to spend so much time in their arts areas. However, as participants described their progression over time, their vocabulary became more about their individual experiences that became increasingly reflective and introspective. Participants reported that their experiences of the immersive and advanced arts curriculum at ASFA had an impact that made them take themselves seriously as artists. Graham explained that he and peers at ASFA discussed their experiences at previous schools and recognized how many students at regular schools functioned out of a sense of obligation to go to school and that things they felt passion for were outside of school. Damion reported that his experience at previous schools was for his peers "about going through the motions" but that ASFA for him was a "serious place" for students who knew that their artistic discipline "is what I want to do for the rest of my life" (1). Cassandra reported that her experience with the curriculum at ASFA made her realize that her previous school had been just a "placeholder, a place to be because I had to be somewhere" (1). At ASFA, participants reported a change in their perception of themselves as they began identifying as artists. Quentin reported that ASFA's artist-teachers

> [r]eally tried hard to further that idea of concept in your art. They really push you to talk about your art. Really deeply talk about it, and so…you opened up so much in gradually, then just as a way of being, that it became very personal and the environment became very intimate very quickly in my last two years. But also, it really pushed that idea of concept as a sort of necessity to art making. Which. was really impactful for me in my really feeling like I had become an artist. (1)

Graham expressed that at ASFA he experienced "a much greater degree of identification with the given art form" (1). Graham reported:

> I saw myself as a writer at ASFA and that became and remained an integral part of my identity. Seeing myself as a writer as a way of responding to the world. ASFA created this by throwing me out into the world of creativity and treating me as a writer, you know as a real writer with like a workshop system and writer among writers…it forces or creates the conditions in which you take yourself seriously and to take what you have to say seriously. It was a really interesting sphere where you and your classmates stop acting like classmates and view each other as artists, instead. (1)

Desmond reported that as he progressed through his years at ASFA he gradually became aware that the experience "makes you realize, like, I need to step up, and what I'm doing is important. I've got obligations to my creative work that I need to live up to" (1). Quentin articulated a similar experience and process, "By the time I was a senior, I felt like I was talking to other artists, not even really talking to teachers necessarily" (1). Most participants reported that attending school at ASFA over the course of several years, sometimes as many as five or six years for those who entered in middle school grades, allowed them to fully participate in a process of increasingly taking themselves seriously as artists. Talia reported:

> [e]specially in terms of the way the ASFA did its visual arts department, by the time you're a senior you're just kind of an independent studio artist and so your studio is this really kind of reflective place and this kind of dominant place because it's such a gift, and I mean even as a senior at ASFA, but you do realize that this is really special thing. (1)

As participants matured in age, ability, and artistic experiences, their identity as artists intensified and solidified until they began identifying with their professional artist-teachers as much as with their artist-student peers. Kleis reported she began to see her artist-teachers more as people and even colleagues than the "larger than life figures" (2)

she had seen them as initially as a first-year student. She explained that this began when she and her peers were required to start choreographing their own compositions and cast them. Quentin reported that after five years he had "developed really intimate connections with them to the point where they were more people than they were idols" (1).

It is significant to note that the powerful group identity that began to develop so early in the process for research participants and was clearly a powerful and indelible social bonding experience, was not something that some participants took for granted. Some participants reported that their peers would speak often about the fact that sometimes students would not take their work and development as artists as seriously as the school expected them to or as much as peers wanted them to. This recognition of some peers who were not working as hard as others and who seemed less impassioned about their artistic development was significant to some participants and they struggled as students whether or not to encourage their teachers and administrators to remove such students from the program. Quentin reported:

> There was always a few students who just didn't get it, or want to get it anyway. The older I got the less patience I'd have for anyone like that, I mean, what's the point? Why are you there when, um, I'm sure some other kid would like your spot in the studio, right? My friends would joke sometime about the sign over the lobby with PASSION in like all caps just hanging there like a pep rally sign or something. I mean, who, like, how is that going to help anyone have passion? If you don't have it that sign won't help. But, I sort of liked it. Maybe it was more like a reminder to some kids who need it. The culture majors who were just hanging on. (2)

When asked to explain the phrase *culture major*, Quentin described students who cared more about the school culture in its diversity and acceptance than they did about their art. As Quentin developed more as an artist, it seemed that development was more important

to him than the group identity. It also underscored how integral the common denominator that helped create cohesion and identity was to participants as a group, and as individual artists.

Results of the Immersive, Secondary Arts School Experience

To establish some contextual dynamics to the experience of recent graduates from an immersive, secondary arts school, an important interview question prompted research participants to report what their previous schooling experiences had been like by comparison. Although I did not ask participants specifically how their experiences directly impacted their current experiences, participants described much of their experiences also in terms of their present experiences in postsecondary institutions. All participants were currently in colleges, universities, or conservatories. There are several significant findings reported by participants that were direct results of their experiences at ASFA and which are continuing to define their experiences beyond those already reported in this chapter.

Learning to Love the Work: Self-Discipline Skills and Preparation for Anything

All participants reported that their experiences in an immersive, secondary arts school at ASFA forced them at a young age to learn personal self-discipline skills that demanded excellent time management and organization, an intense work ethic, personal accountability, and adaptability in applying these skills to anything. Participants emphasized not only their own preparation for postsecondary pursuits but how

advantageous that was in comparison to their current peers. Cassandra regarded herself as:

> [a] completely different person because of ASFA …it really taught me how to work. …growing up in that prepared me for anything…where I'm like, if I can get through that I can get through anything…where things outside of the scope of ASFA were just so much more attainable because I had done something like that before, I had wanted something and gotten something and made it through before, so I can do it again. (1)

Appollo reported the demands on him at ASFA "establishes accountability" (1) and "it pretty much shaped my experience by how the world should work and how I should work in the world" (Appollo, 2). Most participants reported the same experience of learning *how to work*. Graham described it as a result of the immersive arts education's

> [e]mphasis on process over product. Well, at least process being as important as product anyway. You don't get to read your work to an audience every day, that's not real. What's real is that you write and revise every day. And if you don't find some sort of peace and joy in that then you'll never publish anything. (2)

Others described learning personal accountability, and Isla reported that she has a "stronger work ethic and passion that's ingrained in her from ASFA" (1). Three participants reported that ASFA's curriculum taught them *how to work*. Four participants reported learning the type of self-discipline that they have carried forward into higher education and professional pursuits. Isla reported, "it's the discipline, the time management, punctuality, I'm terrified of being late now…I love the structure of it and that's what I learned so much more so than just being able to say oh now I'm a professional dancer" (1). Desmond reported that he is

> [t]rying to keep all these ducks in a row nowadays…I had four years of experience before college of figuring that stuff out. …I find myself like better being able to manage my work and my art…Any student you would talk to would also agree it is an abnormal way of going to school…there's not a lot of people that are doing that. (1)

Sebastian reported that no matter what challenges he now encounters, his experience at ASFA "forces you to like deal with it" (1).

> I think my time management skills were particularly in use throughout all of my time at ASFA, and the curriculum and the administrators and the teachers really struck the importance of properly managing your time, I think I have, being in college, it adopting to college time management was, I don't wanna say easy, because it's not like it's easy but understanding that when I get a piece of work assigned you do it immediately you go you sit down you take this time anytime you have free time during the day to go and you're working towards that. I got that perspective of work ethic and work management because of my ASFA experience. And that work ethic was influenced by…everyone around me being passionate about what they were doing so it kind of, we were all kind of pushing each other…you don't really get it often that you can be so immersed in something you're so passionate about in high school, that's typically something that people pay for in college and because I had that experience in high school, this isn't necessarily a shock to me. (1)

Neena reported, "Not only do I find myself having more developed time management skills, but I also tend to dive deeper into content and my interest and curiosity about what I am learning is heightened compared to my current classmates" (2). Quentin also reported the importance of these skills he learned in preparation:

> My time became very dedicated to my practice and also my academia, which I think it did have some pretty severe positives for me in the ways that, I have a lot of I guess personal discipline, because at college now, I know a lot of people get to college and it ends up they derail themselves academically because of how much emphasis there is on your own personal accountability and choices for how you spend your time. (1)

Some participants reported that their current peers struggle to accept criticism of their work whereas they learned at ASFA to offer and receive criticism. Participants described observing their current college peers struggling to adjust to the long hours necessary for their heavy workloads. Cassandra described how the lack of a heavy workload and less structured and lengthy school days has impacted her experiences currently:

> I didn't have that as an automatic structure to my day so I was bored. I was like okay, I finished all of my work because I'm used to doing my work at a certain point in a day now. Now what? And I think it's only just now starting to pick up now that I'm in law school, because I have just so much to do that is like okay I'm always doing something like I had learned to do at ASFA. (1)

Cassandra also reported that her confidence to get into law school at a prestigious program emerged from her experiences at ASFA. Desmond reported that the drive he had to have at ASFA is still what allows him to "keep his ducks in a row" (1) whether he is applying it to his musicianship or any other pursuits.

Fearlessness and Risk-taking

All participants reported that ASFA's culture emphasizes fearless exploration and self-expression. Some participants reported their inability to fit in at previous schools and their resistance to compromising themselves to conform in expected ways. Desmond reported that at his previous school there were no spaces for being oneself and that "people are trying to force themselves into boxes as viciously as they possibly can" (1). In contrast to the pressures of conformity, participants reported that ASFA's culture applied a pressure for students to express themselves. Sutton reported that "going to ASFA, there was an expectation that you were allowed to express yourself and that was also the norm, so the conformity pressures change from being the same to, pressure to explore yourself and express yourself." (1)

Participants repeatedly used these terms to describe this expectation of self-expression: *push*, *grow*, and *stretch*. Sutton reported that most young people do not feel comfortable exploring themselves and so her experience at ASFA was exceptional in that way. Quentin reported his experience as

> [p]ressure, but in a good way, to kind of push yourself artistically. I was kind of pushed out of that bubble and to explore as not only a necessity for art making but as a personal tool of growth, and through my art I've changed more as a person than any other sort of outside impact in my life. (1)

Talia reported the same "pressure in a good way" (1) for exploring, expressing, and showcasing herself through her artwork. Damion reported being pushed in ways he did not know he needed to get to the place as an artist where he is now, and Isla reported that she and her peers "were all kind of pushing each other" (1). Several participants used the word *freeing* to describe the experience of being able to express themselves socially and artistically, and Desmond reported discovering aspects of himself that he had "denied for a long time" (1).

The school culture's pressure to self-explore and self-express was not immediately easy for all students because it often involved potential risks of moving away from students' zones of comfort personally and artistically. Initially, ASFA's school culture can be experienced as a "place of kind of upheaval" (Quentin, 1). Cassandra reported that she "was scared because I didn't want to really put myself out there and be rejected" (1). Participants repeatedly used the words *vulnerable* and *vulnerability* to report both the benefit of the school culture as well its initial challenge to students' adjustment periods. Sutton reported taking longer than some students to adjust to this aspect of the school culture and considered returning to a previous school but explained that she knew that at other schools she would not be "invited in the same way, to be vulnerable, so I saw it as an investment in myself to stay. And I saw it as the best route to facilitate my own growth" (1). Most participants reported the importance of being challenged to leave their comfort zones either socially or artistically or both and identified it as an important and positive aspect of the school culture.

ASFA's school culture encourages risk-taking which resulted in the building of self-confidence and courage in students. Participants reported experiencing in themselves or others various demonstrations of fearlessness for taking risks socially, creatively, or artistically. Talia reported that in her previous school experiences and current school experiences in college, the risk-taking environment does not exist:

> At my previous school no one really wanted to risk being that person that took a risk or stood out in some way. But, people just really went all out and were fearless in expressing themselves [at ASFA]. And I've realized now at college how special that was because I feel like there's kind of, I don't know if it's a fear, but it's people just aren't as I guess they're not as fearless to kind of go all out or like express themselves in that way, and I think that that really affected my time in the ASFA community and I really do miss that. Just like the fearlessness that people have in just like expressing themselves and in taking on things that I guess might be seen as, I don't know, cliche or, not cliche but like embarrassing. Like in the public world, but it just made it to be a really enjoyable fun time and I miss that a lot…a lot of that has to do with just the makeup of the student body in general…I feel like there was a very, it was a very judgment-free zone. (1)

Sutton reported the attitude among students that "mistakes are okay" (2). Participants reported fearlessness among students whether it was attempting something daring in their artistic discipline, dying one's hair different colors, or cross-dressing. Participants referred to their own confidence or self-esteem as having grown significantly because of the comfort they enjoyed in taking risks. Damion reported that being surrounded by risk-takers helped him "take that step forward" (1) that he needed in his music, and it gave him

> [t]he overall confidence to be very, very bold in what I have and know that I have because I've experienced that I already know it, I got this, I got it. ASFA prepared me for this, I've been in this moment… And I'm like yeah, I got it because I've done this already, I've done it already, ASFA provided me that opportunity to take that step and I've already been down that road before, been down that path. (1)

This emboldening aspect of the school culture was experienced by some participants as helping them to greater achievement. Appollo reported that it made him "aim higher for myself…to outdo myself" (1), and Talia reported creative activity on a level that she would not have otherwise achieved.

Gratitude

All participants reported gratitude for their overall experiences at ASFA even if all experiences were not positive. While there was no question asked specifically that would elicit such responses, participants' gratitude during interviews seemed to manifest itself at times in attempts to fully articulate what participants felt was the specialness of the school, or to grapple for just the right phrasings to capture the school's essence and their meaningful experiences of it. Here are some of the participants' most illuminating descriptions: "Magical" and "life-affirming" (Sutton, 1); "a gift, such a gift, a huge gift" (Quentin, 1); "a wonderful thing" and "a beautiful path" (Damion, 1); "a not-boarding school boarding school" (Neena, 1); "a bunch of weird people who are dangerously smart and hyper-focused" and "a better example of what people would want the world to look like" (Cassandra, 1); "a more complex experience of schooling" (Graham, 1); "there's nothing like this, it feels like true joy" (Kleis, 1); "an abnormal way of going to school" , "an important way to live," and "the weirdness I was looking for" (Desmond, 1).

Summary

While there were some variations in participants' specific experiences of ASFA as an immersive, secondary arts school, each of the 12 participants seemed to view their

individual experience of the immersive arts schooling process in very similar ways. The conceptual model described in this chapter represents the overall process of individual participant experiences as perceived by the study participants. The six main categories presented in the model included: (a) contextual factors of recent graduates' previous schooling experiences before discovering an immersive, secondary arts school, (b) the role of being driven towards something, (c) group identity development, (d) the role and interplay of critique consciousness and critical consciousness, (e) artist identity development, and (f) results of recent graduate's experiences at an immersive, secondary arts school.

As seen in Figure 2, prior to attending an immersive, secondary arts school at ASFA, each participant described several factors influencing their experiences of schooling, including the type of previous schools each had attended, the extent of diversity at previous schools attended, the alienating and marginalizing experiences within cultural values of previous schools attended, negative treatment because of personal difference and inability to fit in, and the lack of arts education curriculum, opportunities and experiences provided by previous schools. Each of these factors seemed to impact the participant's initial assessments of the overall perception and experiences at ASFA and the cultural, structural, and curricular differences of an immersive, secondary arts school.

Participants described the school culture as playing an important role in their experiences at ASFA. They seemed to describe it in endearing terms with great fondness and enthusiasm and repeated terms of affection and endearment for the appreciation and admiration for the shared values of school's culture. The permeating school culture

seemed to be the most influential first impression that participants expressed in describing their experiences. It was clear that the school culture played an essential role in creating positive experiences.

In describing the school structure, participants initially were reluctant to express much about their experiences in relation to their concept of structure. In contrast to their descriptions of school culture, it seemed as if the school structure were something they had not reflected on as much, as if the structure were taken for granted, and conversely as if the school culture had been something unexpected that they cherished then and now. However, participants began focusing on what their experiences of the school's structure had been and began responding in greater depth as if they were discovering new connections about what made their experiences significant.

When participants described their experiences of the school curriculum, it too was something they seemed to take for granted more than the school culture. However, once they began to reflect, participants began describing the curriculum in impressively detailed ways that seemed to emerge from satisfying introspection as they were given the space and time to reflect patiently. Overall, it seemed participants initially perceived school structure and curriculum as familiar products and school culture as an unexpected byproduct. As participant interviews progressed, however, their descriptions of experiences of the school structure and curriculum emerged as the most insightful, illuminating, and grateful.

All 12 participants experienced positive results or benefits from attending ASFA. These outcomes included psychosocial benefits through social bonding and cohesion, the development of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-identity as artists, behavioral and

attitudinal benefits including the development of a sense of purpose and motivation, well-being through social acceptance and introspection, an enhanced sense of belonging, and the development of self-discipline skills. Participants seemed to enjoy expressing their gratitude in numerous expressions of the delight they experienced at ASFA.

As previously mentioned, two participants, Sutton and Kleis, shared some negative experiences at ASFA. Most of their reported experiences were very positive, and their specific negative experiences illustrated the mirror or image counterpoint of the conceptual model categories. Their experiences highlighted the important role that artist-teachers' professional artistic experiences played in the dynamic between artist-teachers and artist-students as well as attention that arts educators must pay to the potential for students to struggle with coping mechanisms for anxiety.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Despite the substantial evidence about the positive impact arts education has on students at all levels of formal schooling including primary, secondary, and higher education, there has been limited research conducted to describe the experience of students who attend secondary arts school that provide an immersive, intensive training through arts education. Moreover, little is known about how students experience such immersive experiences compared to their experiences of regular, traditional schools. The purpose of this study was to explore how recent graduates from an immersive, secondary arts school described their experiences in such schools. Gaining an understanding of the aspects of their immersive arts school experiences that such students perceived to be positive or negative, helpful or unhelpful can increase school leaders' knowledge about the conditions necessary to design schools that best support the needs of students experiencing the marginalizing and alienating effects that can occur for students whose creative gifts and talents are not well supported, cultivated, or encouraged in the traditional and common structure and curriculum of most schools.

Understanding of these students' experiences can also result in more effective teacher and administrator training to best serve this gifted and talented population as well as providing implications for future research, theory development, and educator training. More specifically, the researcher sought to answer one central question and five

subquestions (SQ): (Central question) What is the educational process that students experience within an immersive, secondary arts school, and how do they describe it?; (SQ1) How is the process impacted by the student population?; (SQ2) How is the process impacted by the structure of the school?; (SQ3) How is the process impacted by the curricular focus of the school's specialty programs?; (SQ4) How is the process impacted by the professional faculty of artist-teachers?; (SQ5) How is the process impacted by the school culture?

To address these questions, 12 recent graduates from an immersive, secondary arts school in Birmingham, Alabama, the Alabama School of Fine Arts, were recruited. The Alabama School of Fine Arts (ASFA) is a partially residential, competitively admitted, public school dedicated to providing gifted and talented middle and high school students immersive instruction in one of six dedicated arts areas: creative writing, dance, music, theatre arts, and visual arts. Students also receive college-prep instruction in academic core subjects.

Recruited participants were alumni who had recently graduated from the school from one of the five arts specialty areas. Analyses of these interviews revealed that while there were some slight variations in participants' specific experiences with immersive, secondary arts education, each of these 12 participants seemed to view their individual experiences in very similar ways. The conceptual model described in the previous chapter depicts the experiences reported by the study participants. The six main categories included: (a) contextual factors of recent graduates' previous schooling experiences before discovering an immersive, secondary arts school, (b) the role of being driven towards something, (c) group identity development, (d) the role and interplay of critique

consciousness and critical consciousness, (e) artist identity development, and (f) results of recent graduate's experiences at an immersive, secondary arts school.

Preliminary Contextual Factors

Prior to researching ASFA, completing and application, earning selection for a live audition, being invited to matriculate, and successfully completing all requirements to graduate, each participant described several factors that influenced their initial interest in pursuing the school and potentially their thinking, attitude, and experiences as a student. First, participants' previous experiences at varying types of schools with different types of demographic regions informed their understandings. These school types and demographics included well-funded, suburban, schools with predominantly White populations whose socioeconomic indicators (parental education attainment, parental occupational status, household or family income, family's economic access to income, social position in relation to others) are high (one participant); suburban schools with majority White populations whose socioeconomic indicators are middle to high (two participants); suburban schools with majority White populations whose socioeconomic indicators are middle (three participants) suburban schools with majority Black populations whose socioeconomic indicators are middle to low (1 participant); rural suburban schools with majority White populations whose socioeconomic indicators are middle (two participants); rural schools, with diverse but majority of White populations whose socioeconomic indicators are middle to low (two participants); and urban schools with predominantly Black populations whose socioeconomic indicators are low (one participant). Some participants reported a desire to attend what they perceived to be a

better school generally as part of their interest in ASFA. However, all participants reported that their primary interest was due to the special talents they possessed that were recognized by themselves and others.

Existing literature and current research suggest that individuals from families whose socioeconomic status is low are subject to the transmission of differential advantages among classes (Lareau, 2011). Therefore, in most groups of research participants there will be fewer whose background is from disadvantaged families or schools. It also suggests there are fewer potential applicants who pursue selection at institutions like ASFA due to what Lareau (2011) called a sense of constraint in interactions with institutions whereas the opposite is true of those potential applicants whose socioeconomic advantages provide them with a sense of entitlement. Fear of various risks with interactions with institutions causes families of low socioeconomic status to conceal and constrain their family status from outside institutions (Fong, 2019). The preliminary contextual factors described by participants in this study, as well as the possible dynamics informing family decisions about schooling, illustrated a way some school populations were impacted.

A second factor concerned the fact that participants' experiences with schooling in elementary school and middle schools up to the point of applying to ASFA were mostly negative. These experiences included academic boredom, inability to fit in socially with dominant social groups and cliques, feelings of alienation, ostracism, discrimination, bullying, dissatisfaction with extracurricular offerings, and the disproportionate focus on some extracurricular activities over the limited or absence of focus on arts education, opportunities, and experiences.

Existing literature confirms that the ongoing struggle for arts education advocates to increase the role and status of arts education in American schools has not been a success (Heilig et al., 2010; Rabkin & Hedberg 2011). Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners increasingly express concerns about the declining status of arts education in the United States (Sabol, 2013). Though there was a time when it was perceived that even in the poorest school districts children had access to music education, this is not the case ("Arts education in America: What the declines mean for arts participation," 2010). The findings of this study are consistent with this literature. Each participant, no matter how well-funded of a school or school district they had experienced, reported limited arts education curriculum, opportunities, or activities.

A third factor concerned the fears and anxieties that some participants expressed in relation to applying and auditioning for ASFA since it is a selective school. Several participants reported anxiety, stress, fear of failure, and insecurities about their previous arts training as not adequate for being selected by an arts school. Since most participants did not come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, some of these fears may have existed due to lack of knowledge about ASFA's mission to both accept students with developed talent as well as those with undeveloped gifts. The smaller percentage of students who applied to ASFA who did come from disadvantaged backgrounds had potentially a more complex intersection of fears and anxieties, and there may be those who never applied due to additional fears that constrained them from making any effort. Regardless, the existing literature is consistent with this preliminary factor of concern. The lack of access to more and better art education opportunities is exacerbated by the obstacles that lower-income youth encounter while pursuing artistic study (Oreck et al.,

1999). These hindrances include family circumstances, safety concerns, lack of affordable or appropriate instructional opportunities, peer resentment and social stigma, and personal dreams versus practical realities. “Why We Need Arts Education in Urban Schools”, published by the Rossiere School of Education at the University of Southern California (2016), provides an excellent overview of the positive role arts education plays in K-12 public education and the need for more arts education in disadvantaged urban areas.

Participants’ Experiences of Awareness and Discovery of ASFA

Each of these preliminary contextual factors seemed to impact participants’ initial awareness and perception of ASFA and their pre-engagement with ASFA. Some participants reported knowing of ASFA through siblings, parents, or friends and benefitted from their familiarity. Other participants described only knowing that the school existed from having seen the building as they passed by from a nearby interstate or on a city street as their family spent time in the city’s urban center and cultural and entertainment district. Having context in these ways seemed to establish some level of familiarity. Other participants reported an influential teacher had recommended they apply to the school. Each of these modes of awareness were reported as very positive connections.

Existing literature indicates that when families have an opportunity for school choice which includes a magnet school, families with a substantially high level of education and other socioeconomic indicators elect to pursue opportunities more often than less educated families with lower socioeconomic indicators who tend to make

decisions based on cultural familiarity (Berends, 2009). For example, disadvantaged Black and Latino males were found to limit their efforts to pursue additional resources through a magnet school even when presented with the opportunity due to the limitations associated with the tendency to apply bounded rationality (Griffin et al., 2007). However, researchers concluded that school counselors sometimes played important roles in supplementing the limited social capital of disadvantaged students in their efforts to better educational resources (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006).

Some participants' initial positive interest but uncertainty changed to a certain desire to attend ASFA when they had an experience to engage with the school. Participants who attended open house events, a community engagement performance on a school field trip to ASFA, or "shadowed" a current student for an entire school day all had very positive experiences which created or enhanced their desire to apply and audition. Such engagements clearly established a level of familiarity that impacted students' decisions to apply. Participants were impressed by the welcoming and inviting environment whenever they were on campus and in the case of one participant was the pivotal experience for him to decide to pursue the resources there that impressed him. Existing literature suggests that when elementary school students are exposed to substantial arts education experiences available through school-community engagements and partnerships with local arts organizations, cultural institutions, and arts educators, they positively and significantly impact academic and social development (Bowen & Kisida, 2019). This study's findings indicate such engagement can also lead to superior arts education resources and opportunities and should encourage immersive arts schools to engage with young students on the community level more often.

Participants also described anxiety and uncertainties about their audition experiences at ASFA. Most participants had established some connection to the school prior to audition which helped to lessen some of their anxiety about whether they would be able to demonstrate their artistic talent in such a way they would be selected for admission. All participants were selected for admission and later graduated from ASFA. Participants shared fond memories of when they learned of their acceptance via letter and the experience made a lasting impression that seemed to become part of a series of positive successes at ASFA that positively impacted their confidence and self-esteem.

For auditions to cause some stress is not a negative impact by itself. One participant was stressed by the high level of expectations indicated by the audition materials, but they made him more determined about pursuing the school as the school he needed for his desired future career. However, there are no data on how many prospective applicants never complete applications due to stress caused by reviewing published audition materials and requirements. Students with limited arts training are selected annually based on other factors such as demonstrated potential. As previously discussed, existing literature and current research suggest that individuals from families whose socioeconomic status is low are subject to the transmission of differential advantages between classes (Lareau, 2011). As Lareau (2011) explained, middle class families' lives are hectic with extracurricular pursuits, filled with conversations with parents and other adults. The dialogues are usually the sort of mutual exchanges and inquiries that lead to linguistic confidence and polish which will aid them in their pursuits of the best opportunities. Conversely, poor, working-class families' daily lives lack as much structured time but are filled with independent leisure pursuits in the absence of resources

to pursue cost-prohibitive extracurricular engagements. Despite this leisure time, linguistic interaction with adults is limited in time and substance as the speech of parents typically yields only no-reply-needed directives aimed only at enforcing compliance to parents' orders. This summarizes the findings that result in the conclusion that privileged parents exercise a sense of entitlement in pursuing the best institutions for their children while underprivileged parents exercise a sense of constraint (Fong, 2019; Lareau, 2011). Immersive arts schools like ASFA should explore more paths to access for more populations who are constrained in their interactions to the point of not pursuing opportunities that are available.

Characteristics and Impacts of Immersive, Secondary Arts School Culture

Participants described specific characteristics and impacts of ASFA's school culture when asked about their experiences. Participants described a school culture in which misfits found an easier fit socially in contrast to their previous, sometimes very negative school experiences. Participants reported a strong sense of community which felt like a family, a tight-knit team of like-minded peers who surrounded you in a welcoming and inviting way. A shared passion for artistic pursuits drove and united participants with their peers across grades, ages, and departments, and diverse differences were accepted as assets instead of deficits as previous school cultures had sometimes treated them or made them feel.

Participants reported that their shared values about the importance and worth of artistic pursuits combined with alienating experiences at previous schools resulted in substantial social bonding and social cohesion among peers. Social dynamics seemed free

from the dominance of cliques they had experienced at previous schools. To help with the language of identifying and analyzing intrinsic benefits that emerged through the participant experiences shared at ASFA as an immersive, secondary arts school, McCarthy (2004) recommended a vocabulary that includes the terms social bonding and communal meanings. McCarthy (2004) defined the "creation of social bonds" as

> When people share the experience of works of art, either by discussing them or by communally experiencing them, one of the intrinsic benefits is the social bonds that are created. This benefit is different from the instrumental social benefits that the arts offer. (p. xvi)

Participants clearly experienced the intrinsic value of social bonding and the feelings of trust and community they engendered in addition to the agency provided by social capital. McCarthy (2004) elaborated on this expression of communal meanings:

> Intrinsic benefits accrue to the public sphere when works of art convey what whole communities of people yearn to express. Examples of what can produce these benefits are art that commemorates events significant to…a community's identity, art that provides a voice to communities the culture at large has largely ignored, and art that critiques the culture for the express purpose of changing people's views (p. xvi)

Participants attempted to articulate their communal experience with terms like *camaraderie* and *being on the same page* while recognizing that their experience was unique within the state of Alabama and that others were not able to experience the bond they shared through their artistic experiences together.

Participants described a fearlessness that is associated with the encouragement and support to take risks as a characteristic of ASFA school culture that was common to their experiences. This included the school culture's pressure that encouraged self-expression, exploration, personal and artistic growth, and pushes students out of their comfort zones towards vulnerability and embracing the possibilities of making mistakes. These

characteristics of ASFA's school culture aligned with aspects of the theoretical framework employed in this research study. The work of Hetland (2013), Winner (2000, 2013, 2019), and Sheridan (2013) developed a framework of habits of mind that emerged from analysis of the arts training and practice observed in visual arts classrooms as aspects of the classroom and school structure, school culture, and school arts curriculum. These habits of mind include developing craft, engaging and persisting, expressing (finding meaning), stretching and exploring (taking a leap). The experiences of participants mirrored these habits of mind that began to develop for students as they explored the meanings and benefits of ASFA's school culture.

Characteristics and Impacts of Immersive, Secondary Arts School Structure

Participants described characteristics and impacts of ASFA's school structure in very positive ways. Participants identified the unusually large age range among students created by the structure of combining middle school grades with high school grades as being significant in its positive impact on young, still developing minds, especially as it related to the profoundly diverse student population. Participants reported that among the benefits of the diversity was the influence it had on the cognitive development of students as young as 12 and 13 because of its potential for a lasting, life-long impact on their world view. McCarthy's (2004) vocabulary for expressing and documenting intrinsic benefits of arts education aligne with these findings. McCarthy (2004) denoted this term:

> Expanded capacity for empathy: The arts expand individuals' capacities for empathy by drawing them into the experiences of people vastly different from them and cultures vastly different from their own. These experiences give individuals new references that can make them more receptive to unfamiliar people, attitudes, and cultures. (xvi)

One participant reported their belief that having diverse populations in schools is the best way to "combat racism…that has been institutionalized for so long…and ingrained into society" (Isla, 1). Participants also reported that this experience of diverse populations would not have been possible at their previous schools.

ASFA's structure is designed to accommodate numerous and ongoing student performances that peers attend and view. Participants used positive phrases like "life-affirming" (Sutton, 1), seeing peers "in their essence, in their own bliss, their own style, their own thing" (Damion, 1), "really valuable" (Neena, 1), "powerful showcase for my peers" (Talia, 1), "so proud of fellow students" (Isla, 1), and "really excited to see what our friends had made" (Appollo, 1) to report their experiences. These findings are supported by McCarthy's intrinsic benefits vocabulary. McCarthy (2004) denoted these terms:

> Cognitive growth: …intrinsic benefits…have cognitive dimensions. When individuals focus their attention on a work of art, they are "invited" to make sense of what is before them. Because meanings are embedded in the experience rather than explicitly stated, the individual can gain an entirely new perspective on the world and how he or she perceives it.
>
> Captivation: The initial response of rapt absorption, or captivation, to a work of art can briefly but powerfully move the individual away from habitual, everyday reality and into a state of focused attention. This reaction to a work of art can connect people more deeply to the world and open them to new ways of seeing and experiencing the world.
>
> Pleasure: The artist provides individuals with an imaginative experience that is often a more intense, revealing, and meaningful version of actual experience. Such an experience can produce pleasure in the sense of deep satisfaction, a category that includes the satisfaction associated with works of art the individual finds deeply unsettling, disorienting, or tragic. (xvi)

As one participant reported, these school-day performances was where she could

> [f]eel like true joy… being able to show people I loved what I was capable of. That felt really powerful and incredibly cool. To be able to witness that, from my

> peers, … these kind of big collaborative 'show and tell' type moments. Yeah, I loved it. (Kleis, 1)

Participants reported that these in-school performances afforded them the only opportunities they had ever had to view dance performances, literary readings, or styles of music performances like jazz or classical. One participant reported that "beautiful music like that gives you chill bumps and rocks you to your core" (Desmond, 1).

Participants described their surprise at how much they enjoyed modern and contemporary dance performances and reported that exposure to so many performances inspired and expanded their creative process in their own artistic discipline. Hetland (2013), Winner (2000, 2013, 2019), and Sheridan (2013) identified habits of mind that mirrored these findings also: evaluating, stretching and exploring (taking a leap), and understanding art worlds. The opportunity to see and hear performances, readings, and exhibits allowed students to evaluate, re-evaluate, and stretch their own imaginations in ways that inspired their own artistic creations, and informed their expanded understanding of the diversity of art forms as ways of interpreting and responding to the world.

Characteristics and Impacts of the Immersive, Secondary Arts School Curriculum

The in-depth, immersive arts curricula in each specialty department at ASFA is extraordinary for a secondary school, and each is sequenced much like college-level progressions from foundational and technical skills to conceptual and artistic demonstrations of mastery. The curricular sequences span from two to six years depending on when a student enters the school. One constant within each arts department's curriculum for students of every age and grade are forms of a critique

process. Critique requires a significant amount of time, patience, and attention, therefore, regular schools that provide any amount of arts education do not typically include critique as part of an arts curriculum.

Critique generally involves peer and professional feedback and constructive criticism on the work of individual student-artists. Participants spent much time in interviews discussing the intensity and importance of their experiences in critique. All 12 participants had positive experiences in critiques, but two also described negative experiences. Participants reported that it took a while for new students to acclimate to the process and described it as a sometimes-daunting learning curve that required individual students to embrace the vulnerability required to share very personal creations with peers at an age when most adolescents are already insecure and self-conscious. Participants reported that it required maturity, seriousness, sensitivity, trust, while also developing thick skin for everyone. Participants described critique as process which was a gateway that opened individual student-artists up to taking their work seriously as young artists while teaching them the practice and necessity of introspection and reflection.

The habits of mind framework and the intrinsic benefits vocabulary framework are mirrored precisely in the reported experiences of participants' critique experiences. In critique, students developed habits of mind (Hetland, 2013; Winner, 2000, 2013, 2019; Sheridan, 2013) through professional and peer feedback which allowed them to develop their craft, engage in their own work and their peers' and persist in pushing the boundaries of their work, envision (think in images) for themselves and their peers, express (find meaning) to assist their peers and understand their own work through the lenses of their peers, observe (really see, not just look) at their work and themselves, to

reflect (question and explain) their creative process and others', to evaluate so routinely that they are stretched to places of risky exploration (taking a leap), and to places of new understanding of the art worlds they inhabit.

The critique process and its results for participants was the essence of what Winner (2013) meant when stating, "the how of studio teaching" leads to "a dispositional view of what the arts teach" (p. 15, 41). The impact of critique as part of an immersive arts curriculum yielded substantial intrinsic benefits for participants (McCarthy, 2004) that included captivation in sharing creative work which created conditions for focused and supportive attention; pleasure in seeing how one's creative work moved others and how other's work moved them; cognitive growth through intense focus on works of art and the invitation to make sense and meaning and embrace different perspectives; empathic capacity to make the unfamiliar familiar; and social bonding and the expression of communal meanings through the discussion of and collective experience of works of art.

Limitations

There were several limitations inherent in the design and implementation of this study. First, the broad nature of arts education in secondary education made it difficult to precisely define what is meant by arts education in any instance of its use in educational practice or research. This study established a working definition of *immersive arts education* in contrast to other documented definitions of arts education, and the working definition was informed additionally by the substantial professional experience of the researcher's work in a school that immerses its students in a culture, structure, and

curriculum that accommodate in-depth, intensive arts education. Though this working definition is representative of the schools identified within that working definition (see Table 1), it may or may not represent the range of immersive, secondary arts schools that exist in the United States and are available to students.

Second, a standardized definition of artistic disciplines that encompasses arts education was unavailable. Designations and distinctions among names of artistic disciplines varied from school to school and were static and not fixed by agreed upon definitions or standards. For example, designations may have included fine arts, performing arts, digital arts, folk arts, and an ever-expanding inclusion of art forms under the name of new media arts. Furthermore, within any one artistic discipline there are multiple styles and genres. For example, one participant was a theatre arts major at ASFA who focused primarily on theatre tech and costuming while another focused on acting for stage. One participant was a musician who focused mostly on jazz while many of his peers focused on classical music performance.

A third limitation of this study was the homogeneity of the sample in one aspect. While this study's participants represented some diversity in sex, race, and probably socioeconomic backgrounds, this study recruited recent graduates of ASFA. ASFA has an excellent student retention rate, and most immersive arts schools the researcher works with professionally do as well. Immersive, secondary arts schools have the benefit of student populations who generally possess passion for their artistic studies and pursuits. However, graduates are more likely than not to have had positive experiences during their time in middle school and high school grades.

For example, eight of the 12 participants had continued in their artistic field of study post-graduation, and the three participants who were pursuing non-arts-related fields still practiced their art in some capacity. While all 12 participants reported mostly positive experiences, two participants included some negative experiences additionally. While these two participants' negative experiences seemed to fit the merging conceptual model as a mirror image or a counterpoint, more research is needed to fully understand the experiences of students who do not believe that immersive arts education is helpful or meaningful generally or in specific aspects. Since the purpose of this study was not to specifically understand what aspects of immersive arts education are not useful to students, I decided that it was not necessary to recruit additional participants to explore those specific viewpoints. That all participants were graduates provided a deeper understanding of the particular context of this study.

A fourth limitation of this study was the possibility that participants' remarkably similar experiences at an immersive, secondary arts school was an inherited or learned narrative as the result of the small size of the student population. That is, it is possible that in a Durkheimian way, students who graduate from such a school inherit and share a collective consciousness about aspects and characteristics of their particular cultural. Participants therefore could have shared a vocabulary about their experiences that limited the potential depth and richness of individual experience and interpretation. If so, this could have impacted my likelihood of practicing humpty-dumptyism in both creating certainty about the meanings and interpretations of data as well the findings.

A fifth limitation of this study was the possible presence of selection effect in several ways. All participants had very positive experiences to report and describe. It is

possible that participants elected to participate because they had positive experiences to share and recognized the opportunity as an enjoyable one. Potential participants who had negative experiences might have been less likely to elect to participate. It is further possible that the population at immersive, secondary arts schools tend to be more likely to be made up of students predisposed to have positive experiences because of their passion and enjoyment of the arts. However, this study was not intended to focus specifically on positive or negative experiences but to build theory based on whatever experiences participants reported.

A sixth limitation of this study was the positionality of the researcher to the subject matter and research site. Although this issue was addressed at length in several chapters of this study, the intensity of the researcher's commitment to a theory, explanation, or interpretation can also have the effect of instilling a certainty about various types of evidence that exists in support of the subject. That is, one aspect of confirmation bias identified by researchers includes the tendency to imagine that there is or will be more evidence to support one's research and findings if and when it becomes the subject of anyone's research study. While this may not directly impact this current study in a significant way, or at all, it is possible for it to impact that level of presumption or certainty with which a researcher conducts and engages with participants and data.

A final limitation of this study was the inherent bias of the researcher. As part of a constructivist grounded theory study, I was an active participant throughout the data collection and data analysis process. I recognized that I was not completely objective about the variables being explored in this study; however, the design of the study included several criteria for evaluation that addressed potential limitations related to me

as the researcher. These criteria evaluated the study for credibility, resonance, usefulness/transferability, and confirmability. Additionally, my viewpoint and biases were disclosed in the subjectivity statement included in the methodology section of this study and re-examined in detail in discussion of data analysis and coding phases. My role as a former teacher and current administrator at the same school from which all participants had graduated and from whom data were collected did not seem to influence participants' descriptions of their experiences. A final researcher limitation is the use of the habits of mind and the intrinsic benefits vocabulary models as a sensitizing topic for this study. Although steps were taken to ensure the conceptual model emerged directly from the collected data, my own familiarity with the existing terminology in the models may have influenced the interpretation of results.

Implications

Implications for Theory

The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical literature on the experiences and impacts of arts education for students in immersive, secondary arts schools. There is no prevailing model for understanding arts education experiences and impacts generally or specifically within such schools. However, more recent research has attempted to focus on methods for articulating findings that go beyond identifying correlations between arts education and academic achievement. The theoretical concepts informing the theoretical framework for this study were the studio habits of mind model which identifies eight habits of mind found to be developed through the culture, structure, and curriculum in visual arts classrooms: developing craft, engaging and persisting,

envisioning (thinking in images), expressing (finding meaning), observing (really seeing, not just looking), reflecting (questioning and explaining), evaluating, stretching and exploring (taking a leap), understanding art worlds (Hetland et al., 2013); however, the model does not describe the outcomes of arts education beyond the classroom experience, especially within the unique context of schools which devote so much focused time to arts training with support from the overall school structure and curriculum, and the impacts these have on the development of school culture.

The other approach that established the theoretical framework of this current study, the intrinsic benefits vocabulary model (McCarthy, 2014), identified useful terms (captivation, pleasure, expanded capacity for empathy, cognitive growth, creation of social bonds, and expression of communal meanings) and elaborated on expansive definitions of what the terms can denote and connote. These theoretical concepts were used individually and conjointly to orient me to the research topic and articulate findings of the process of student experiences in an immersive, secondary arts school. The new conceptual model described in this study illustrates how these areas of impact progress and may interact with one another at various points in a student's experience over two to six years and focuses on experiences of students in schools which are exceptional in the degree to which arts training and arts making are privileged and supported. This theoretical model may assist researchers in future studies of immersive, secondary arts schools.

Implications for Training and Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of recent graduates of an immersive, secondary arts school. Gaining an understanding of the aspects of their school experiences that such participants identified as helpful or unhelpful can increase knowledge about the role of arts education generally, and as experienced in an immersive, secondary arts school specifically. These findings have implications for both training and practice for arts educators, arts administrators, academic educators, arts advocates, and policymakers who can influence decisions impacting the support and funding for more arts schools like ASFA and more inclusion of arts education in all types of schools.

Diverse Populations, Social Bonding and Cohesion, Student Age

The findings of this study illustrate how an immersive, secondary arts school attracts and engages an incredibly diverse population of students. Despite numerous differences in race, ethnicity, age, SES levels, sexual orientation, and gender identities, students in the school formed deep and tight-knit social bonds which yielded significant social and developmental benefits for students. Immersive, secondary arts schools' structures facilitate a superordinate classification for students. According to Banks (2006):

> [r]esearch indicates that creating or making salient superordinate and cross-cutting group memberships improve intergroup relations… research and theory indicate that when students from diverse cultural, racial, and language groups share a superordinate identity…cultural boundaries weaken…Extra-curricular activities, such as the drama club…and the school chorus, create rich possibilities for structuring superordinate groups and cross-cutting memberships. (p. 14)

Research and practice confirm that intergroup contact works to reduce all types of prejudice and promotes feelings of equal status especially when group members share a common goal (Pettigrew & Troop 2006; Wong et al., 2020). The earlier young students have these experiences the more indelible their social bonding experiences are likely to be.

It is important that arts schools increase in number at all levels of compulsory schooling, and there are clear benefits for substantial social benefits when student groups are especially young. Arts schools are exceptionally situated to meet the needs of the intensifying culture wars in America by bringing together diverse populations around common goals. It is vital that arts schools provide as much arts curriculum as possible in addition to arts integration teaching approaches.

Importance of School Size

The participants in this study reported positive experiences in association with attending school where the size of the student population was smaller than previously schools they had attended. In addition to more focused and individualized instructional attention from faculty, participants emphasized the small school size of the student population also created a level of intimacy and familiarity among students. Participants reported their ability to know most or all students in their grade level and department which spanned all grade levels. Existing literature confirms the benefits of smaller school populations.

Bahns and colleagues (2012) established that larger groups (large colleges vs. small colleges) tended to make people select dyads that are more similar to self. In

smaller groups, selection was less similar since fewer choices exist and the dyad relationships are much closer. Therefore, they found that larger populations may lead to more similarity in relationships. The researchers considered how this could be the result of larger populations having a surplus of similar people in their immediate social networks with whom they could form relationships if a current relationship was found to need dissolution. It is important that student populations are diverse even if very small. If a school is small but homogenous, the positive benefits will be diminished. The concept of homophily (meaning "love of sameness") limits people's social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience. Homophily in race and ethnicity creates the strongest divides in our personal environments, with age, religion, education, occupation, and gender following in roughly that order. Students cannot experience difference in the most substantial ways if small groups remain homogenous (McPherson et al., Cook, 2001).

Student Performances

An area that study participants reported about most substantially and exuberantly was student performances. ASFA's immersive structure and curriculum create the conditions for a near-constant staging of events: creating, anticipating, working towards, and participating in and fulfilling events. Sidorkin (2004) made an important application of Bakhtin's belief humans suffer alienation "as a result of disconnection from the eventness of Being; thus de-alienation requires that we re-discover this eventness" (p. 259). Morson (1993) argued that creativity is always in danger of being over-theorized so

that when "theoretism is applied, the result will be to remove 'eventness' and the possibility of surprise from the creative act" (p. 1074). Sidorkin (2004) suggested, "In the present form, schools suffer from what I call 'event deficiency'…" (p. 260).

In practice, students benefit when schools support students to create, produce, make, present, and perform. Students experienced cognitive growth, captivation, pleasure, risk-taking leaps, and expanded understandings of the art word's forms. One participant reported the importance of events as "show and tell type moments" (Kleis, 1). Teachers would benefit from training that prepares them to incorporate performance environments in their methodology and pedagogy (Colbert et al., 2008; Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). Students benefit when school administrators structure school calendars and instructional time to accommodate students to perform frequently for audiences of peers, faculty, and parents.

Student Ownership of Creative Work

When students create and perform, they have a greater opportunity to experience feelings of ownership of their efforts and work. Students in an immersive, secondary arts school environment experienced feelings of de-alienation and described feelings of wholeness as if their self sometimes merged with their creations. In a criticism of traditional educational practice, Sidorkin (2004) asked, "if we create ourselves through producing things, what sort of self can be created by producing useless things?" (p. 254). In this current study, students reported powerfully positive experiences with creating original work, anticipating its presentation to peers, confidence-building self-fulfillment, and feelings of weightiness and importance were attached because they recognized their

ownership and the accountability that goes with it. This process established a motivating relevancy to student process and product.

Existing literature confirms the need for educators to be trained in practices that center curricular relevancy in pedagogical and methodological approaches (Hu et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2014). Student behavior is sometimes regulated in schools by token-economy approaches receiving a grade for an assignment completed. These traditional approaches can be enhanced pedagogically by allowing students to participate within classroom and school structures that facilitate more ownership of their learning and achievement. This practice can also help students increase their intrinsic motivations and experiences while decreasing risk-averse behaviors and attitudes (Self-Brown & Matthews, 2003).

Artist-Teachers' Role in Creating Student Agency

Study participants identified the importance of working with teachers who were professional, practicing artists in their artistic disciplines. Participants described the empowerment they realized through their teachers' professional expertise and the opportunities to see their teachers create art with them in studios and classrooms. Participants also benefitted from the proximity artist-teachers gave to important professional networks in their art form.

Most schools that offer arts as curriculum employ arts education specialists who do not have the same professional arts training and experience as artist-teachers, but schools should embrace the possibilities of employing artist-teachers in more full-time positions or engagements and the benefits this makes possible for students (Anderson,

1981; Booth, 2015). When students who have serious aspirations as artists spend more time surrounded by artist-teachers, the experience can be transformative. Often, students develop social capital when their "field" changes to the supportive, opportunity-rich landscape of immersive arts schools where their talents and specialized vocabulary are privileged. Students' "habitus" becomes its own commodity as students acquire ways of knowing and acting (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 76). *Habitus* refers to "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 86). These "internalised structures" and "schemes of perception" structure the students' newly shared worldview and understanding of arts worlds and their "apperception" of the world in which they now inhabit (p. 86). Artist-teachers need increased time and spaces within school structures and curricula to affect and empower more gifted and talented students.

The Impact of Switching from Academics to Arts during the School Day

Findings from the current study reveal that the positive impact of ASFA's school structure is significant. The structure of ASFA's school day separates academic courses into the first part of the day and a consolidated block of arts instructional time in the second part. Participants used similar terms to describe the phenomenon they experienced by this structural division: *switching mindset, separated, compartmentalized, switching my brain,* and *switching to the creative processing part of the brain*. Damion reported he could "switch your mindset off from academic and start focusing on what you love" (1) and that he could not focus his creativity at his previous schools because "you get like 15 minutes or an hour…I wasn't growing" (1). Talia reported:

> [b]efore my time at ASFA I would have all these ideas and wanting to draw these things, but it was just kind of like sporadic and in the moment, but then having my time at ASFA and the visual arts department kind of really helped me focus those creative ideas into something where I was really working towards something instead of just throwing ideas around. (1)

Participants' descriptions aligned with research that suggests that the mind has cognitive modes separated into being and doing and that mindfulness occurs most effectively when one has the time and focus for present-centered attention and awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Quaglia et al., 2015). Participants' descriptions suggest that the separation helps with the dissonance in mind modes. Traditional academic subjects in secondary schools might engage the doing mode of students' minds more than the being mode. Latta (2015) has called for the enactment of mindfulness curriculum in arts education as a pedagogical commitment. Arts education has benefits, but immersive arts education in which time is structured for extended focus has potential for significantly greater benefits.

Critical Consciousness and School Culture

The experiences of participants in academic courses at ASFA were reported as positive especially in the faculty's recognition of their diverse student population within an arts school. Participants described teachers' practice of presenting multiple lenses in curricular and instructional practices, embracing difficult topics and current events issues that are avoided as too sensitive in most school settings, and integrating diverse art and artists into their curricula. In practice, teachers need to embody the role of "cultural accommodator and mediator as fundamental in promoting student learning" (Nieto, 2010; p. 154). When cultural differences are only a focus in isolated parts of a school's

curriculum and culture then the benefits enhanced learning and empowerment are lost (Nieto, 2010). The use of counter-narratives to center traditionally marginalized and silenced narratives helps students feel seen and experience a sense of belonging as they develop greater agency and meaning in their schooling environment (Ender, 2021; Zamudio et al., 2011). Pedagogical practices that engage students in critical consciousness that allows the opportunity to engage with the inherent contradictions and inequities of their world challenges students to deeper understandings that can enable and empower them toward socially conscious actions (Herbele et al., 2020; Olle et al., 2017).

Critique Process and Peer Review

Findings from the current study identified the importance of the critique process in immersive, secondary arts schools like ASFA. Participants described the challenges and significant benefits that included the development of abilities to accept constructive criticism and separate self from work when necessary for artistic growth, learning how to positively impact peers, and the practice of stepping out of comfort zones and learning the value of vulnerability in personal growth.

For practice in immersive, secondary arts schools, critique processes are an indispensable element of the curricula. In practice, student engagement and participation in this way yields benefits, even if critiques take the form of more traditional classroom peer-review sessions in which students offer feedback on each other's artistic or academic work in pairs or small groups (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, the current study also found that intensive and ongoing critique processes can also be the source of anxiety of which teachers must remain aware. Two study participants shared

negative experiences in which they did not feel supported in a productive way. One participant described experiences with anxiety which led to some attendance issues. The negative psychosocial impacts can be lessened or avoided through better practices that establish trust and safety of students. Strategies that engender trusting relationships and dynamics between teachers and students and among peers has been called "wise feedback" in some educational contexts (Yaeger et al., 2013). Practitioners need training and experience to be sensitized to how students within the same group or different groups can perceive critical feedback differently which can also create barriers to social and cognitive well-being and foreclose on learning opportunities.

Artistic Collaborations

Immersive, secondary arts schools like ASFA devote extended amounts of time to in-depth and focused instruction and practice. School days are lengthened by this structural commitment to providing deep dives into the art forms students are passionate about. Artistic collaborations become a challenge. In regular schools the same challenges exist as the traditional focus on academics is greater and centered in curriculum. Participants in the current study described positive experiences whenever they had the opportunity to collaborate formally or informally with artist-students from other artistic disciplines. Participants reported expansive growth and learning when exposed to and collaborating outside their discipline.

Arts educators need to challenge themselves to coordinate more collaborative opportunities for their students. It may require sacrifices of instructional time which can impact curricular depth and focus, but the benefits might be of equal or greater value.

Practitioners need encouragement and support to sometimes move beyond the "silos" of their traditional conservatory-model praxis and allow themselves and their students to engage in artmaking with students from other disciplines (Anderson & Gibson, 2004). Detels (1999) argued for the need to discover the "soft boundaries" among these silos as entry points into collaborations (1999).

Participant Suggestion for Training and Practice

One participant shared her own suggestion for training and practice needs. Sutton suggested:

> [t]here are positives for developing such commitment and responsibility. My friends and I have discussed in length how ASFA has trained us to be critical thinkers, dedicated workers, outspoken, and overall good people. But, stress management should be a priority at ASFA to try to balance the benefits and consequences of trying to mold young minds to be dedicated, educated, artists through such a rigorous and time-committed education. (2)

Sutton's suggestion illustrates one of the limitations of this study identified in this chapter. Participants were graduates who were more likely than not to have had positive experiences during their time in middle school and high school grades. They were also more likely to ascribe positive associations with stress management issues when viewed through a reflective lens a few years removed from what was overall a very successful experience. School counselors need additional training in responding appropriately to student experiences with stress and anxiety. However, counselors cannot carry that burden alone within a school community. Schools need to embrace curricular strategies and student support services that facilitate social and emotional learning (SEL) objectives through which students can learn to not only cope with stress in healthy ways but also to advocate for themselves when they are struggling to manage stress. In this way,

counselors, teachers, and administrators can create stronger support systems for students whose learning benefits are being negated by emotional detriments.

Recommendations for Future Research

In addition to implications for training and practice, this study highlights the need for future research related to the experiences of students in an immersive, secondary arts school and the studio habits of mind and intrinsic benefits vocabulary frameworks. This study adds to the existing literature on the process students experience as they pursue, attend, and graduate from an immersive, secondary arts school; however, more research is needed in immersive arts education and its network of schools.

Revaluation, Not Devaluation

The American painter Mark Rothko explained, "A painting is not a picture of an experience. It is an experience" (Seiberling, 1959, p.82). The time has come to reverse the direction of the prolonged and tiresome devaluation of arts education to the revaluation of arts education in American public schools until there is the proliferation of specialty schools that immerse students in arts education. Every state needs to have a state supported and funded school for the arts with a system of satellite arts schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas. As Gardener (1999) stated, "most cultures, and certainly those that consider themselves to be highly civilized, do not need special arguments for including the arts in their schools. In the United States however, such automatic allegiance to the arts does not exist" (p. 4). However, until that time comes, when there is an allegiance that pervades all aspects of American culture, there must be inspired research ongoing that attempts to transform the landscape of American schooling through

socially committed literature that moves beyond instrumental reasoning and destabilizes the school model structure and focus that constrain what schools can be.

Immersive, Secondary Arts Schools

The need for research on the process students at an immersive, secondary arts school experience exists because little research has explored these schools. There is a need for more research on such schools and their benefits to students. These schools share many distinct characteristics that make them fertile ground for comparative research. The possible and likely similarities, which is evidenced by the experience of numerous arts education leaders, educators, and advocates who maintain a close and active network, has potential to present important and transferable findings and contribute significantly to the development of theory. Research into these schools' similar or contrasting histories, missions, and values could be beneficial to the body of existing research literature on arts education and for influencing arts education advocacy for more immersive arts curriculum in more immersive arts schools. Furthermore, more research must be conducted to investigate if the grounded theory findings in this study can be empirically replicated at other immersive, secondary arts schools or conceptually replicated by implementing procedures from a previous study on the same population in this study.

Intrinsic Benefits Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual frameworks utilized in this study are useful to arts education researchers and need to be expanded and validated through additional use in more

research frameworks. Arts education research would benefit from the studio habits of mind framework being employed in more studies of different arts disciplines to continue to expand its already significant use in research studies conducted through Harvard's Project Zero. McCarthy's (2004) intrinsic benefits vocabulary needs to be employed in more research designs also so that the vocabulary can become more recognizable in scholarly discourse as well as public and private sector discourse. The findings in this study yielded useful language from participant experiences that resonate well with the essential qualities and objectives of McCarthy's small but useful lexicon.

Indexing Arts Education in American Public Schools

In addition, more research is needed to document more precisely and accurately where, how, and to what extent arts education occurs in American schools. As reviewed in Chapter 2, there are numerous types of arts education in numerous types of schools. However, policymakers do not understand those distinctions or the facts about access. In fact, the term *arts-rich* is used so inconsistently in existing literature that it carries no fixed meaning or reliable data support. Thomas (2014) recommended the creation of an "index that combines course offerings and student participation rates into a single measure of access" to facilitate a "dialogue about what defines an arts-rich school based on the data elements commonly found in state education databases" (p. 83) in the absence of a standard definition. While this study contributes to existing literature a definition of what immersive means about some secondary arts schools, that definition can gain more clarity as the understanding of other education indicators are made more definitive through research.

Intrinsic Justifications

Qualitative research designs are needed to explore and theorize about the role of intrinsic benefits to all arts education, but not limited to arts education. Expanding the field of research that embraces intrinsic benefits only strengthens and validates the small amount of research that is already done in the name of arts education. Researchers need to employ vocabulary that applies terms like captivation, pleasure, empathy, cognition, social bonds, and communal expression and meanings. The devotion to quantitative research designs in arts education in search of the instrumental justifications which will unlock local, state, and federal funding have not proven successful. Because researchers cannot infer causality from correlation, the state of such research is not likely to improve. Researchers should not continue to implement research designs that attempt to establish correlation and which, ironically, perpetuate the privileged position of dynamic power for traditional subjects in education. Instead, research needs to study not how the development of arts skills transfer near or far to more commonly valued skills, but the full depth, breadth, and meaning of the intrinsic benefits of arts education.

Creative Sector and Creative Economy

Many decades of arts education research attempting to establish the near or far transfer of skills enhanced by arts education or arts participation are ultimately about economics, about “forcing of all experience into instrumentality ('utility'), and of all things into commodities (Williams, 2016, p. 151). Research on arts education could benefit from moving its economic concerns and aspirations towards more study of the steady growth of creative sector industries in the United States and global economies.

While research in this area risks blurring the lines between various definitions of art, it is important to acknowledge that those lines have already been blurred. Research in this area could also bring clarity to where art begins and ends relative to the wide umbrella of industries included in the expansion of what is included in the creative economy of the creative sector. This expansion appears to be mirrored by higher education arts programs and offerings as well as those in secondary programs. Research into these changes could yield significant insight into the future of arts education.

Misperceptions as Barriers to Access

Research is needed to help dispel some misperceptions about immersive, secondary arts schools that might create barriers to students wishing to attend such schools while also perpetuating issues of accessibility. Such schools are sometimes assumed to be private institutions where attendance for most families is cost prohibitive. Some of these schools are private, but many are public, tuition-free schools like ASFA. It is possible that a sense of constraint creates a barrier to learning opportunities. Another misconception involves assumptions made about what magnet schools are. Some immersive, secondary arts schools are magnet schools serving their school districts. They are often excellent schools which serve a diverse student population equitably. However, stigmas may exist about magnet schools because of their historical association with coming into existence as responses to desegregation orders in the 1970s (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002). More research is needed to help understand public perception of immersive, secondary arts schools and its impact.

This study adds to the existing literature on the positive benefits for students in diverse populations, especially when the populations represent a superordinate group with some shared values. However, more research needs to be conducted on whether educators and school leaders fail to see and unconsciously deny inequities and discrimination that still exists. Research suggests that peer cultures even within a diverse student population can experience marginalization and that institutional and communal ideologies may impact different racial and cultural populations differently. (Pollock, 2010), and that some groups of students use communal forms to resist their school's expectations and which can be misperceived to be a lack of ability (Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1991). More research is needed on how these structural and social dynamics currently manifest themselves in immersive, secondary arts schools where cultural reproductions of inequity may persist.

Conclusions

While each participant had a unique perspective on their experiences in attending an immersive, secondary arts school, common themes emerged in the descriptions of the individual experiences of the participants. These themes, depicted in the model, were as follows: (a) contextual factors of recent graduates' previous schooling experiences before discovering an immersive, secondary arts school, (b) the role of being driven towards something, (c) group identity development, (d) the role and interplay of critique consciousness and critical consciousness, (e) artist identity development, and (f) results of recent graduates' experiences at an immersive, secondary arts school.

Each participant attended and graduated from ASFA, but their experiences were contextualized by their previous school experiences and by their current experiences in higher education pursuits. Participants drew on these pre- and post-experiences as a basis for judging, assessing, and describing their experiences during their years at ASFA. In this study, participants reported that the school culture, structure, and curriculum had significant and positive benefits and impacts on them that continue to define their current experiences of higher education in addition to their current attitudes and values. Two participants, Sutton and Kleis, who had very positive overall experiences but shared some negative experiences and outcomes, fit the emerging conceptual model by offering a counterpoint or mirror image experience of each element.

The findings of this study have implications for arts education, training, practice, and research. The emerging conceptual model illustrates how the participants in this study conceptualized the process of pursuing, auditioning, attending, graduating from, and experiencing an immersive, secondary arts school in very similar ways and as described by studio habits of mind and intrinsic benefits vocabulary researchers. The subjective experience of the participants should be used to inform how immersive, secondary arts schools support the needs of their students and to implement training to improve some aspects of students' experiences. Further research is needed to continue to develop an understanding of the experience of students in immersive, secondary arts schools.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- Did you read the information sheet? Do you consent to this interview?
- Name:
- Age:
- Specialty Department while you attended the arts school:
- Gender:
- Race:
- What type/s of school did you attend previously before arts school?
- What was the experience at previous schools like for you?
- How did the experience in an immersive arts school compare to your experience in your previous schools?
- How did the structure of the immersive arts school impact you?
    - Probe: Bell schedule, amounts of instructional time, focus creating art and/or performing?
- Describe this school's culture?
    - Probe: What was different/same about the culture than previous school/s you attended?
- What was your experience of this school's culture?
- How did this school's culture impact you artistically, socially?
- What was your experience like of this school's diversity and student population?
- What was your experience like of this school's faculty?

    Probe: arts faculty? Academic faculty?
- What was the application experience like for you?
- What was the audition experience like for you?

APPENDIX B

INFORMATION SHEET TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Research:	A Grounded Theory Study of the Secondary, Immersive Arts School Experience
IRB Protocol #:	IRB-300007942
Principal Investigator:	Douglas Bradford Hill
Sponsor:	UAB Department of Education

You are being asked to take part in a research study because you graduated from an arts school for students in grades seven through twelve. The purpose of this research study is to explore your experience in an arts school and to determine what patterns of experience might exist that are common among arts school graduates. Most research on arts education focuses on how taking arts classes can improve success in academic classes. In most schools, arts classes are not the focus of study. However, I hope to learn what patterns of experience might exist for students in schools that put a focus arts education. I also hope to identify if there is a process that students go through in arts schools that is unique because of the way the school structures its time, uses special classes, and employs teachers who are professional artists.

If you agree to join the study, you will be asked to complete a 1-hour, virtual interview regarding your experience during your years at an arts school for grades seven through twelve. This interview will have questions about your experience as a student, your opinions about the unique school structure and special classes, the professional faculty, the application and audition process, the school culture and student population, and how your experiences compare to other schools you have attended. The interview will take place through a video conference at your convenience or over the phone if you prefer. I will audio-record the interview and then write it down, word-for-word, at a later date. I may call you back once I've done that to clarify a few items, but this should only take 10-20 minutes.

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary, and you can end the interview at any time. Although I will know your identity and contact information, I will keep this information separate from your interview responses and will destroy this information as soon as it is no longer needed. Your data will be kept confidential; however, the organization involved in the project directly (the UAB Department of Education) or those organizations involved the oversight of research (the UAB Institutional Review Board, The Office for Human Research Protections) may have access to identifiable information about you.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact the Principal Investigator, Douglas Bradford Hill, at (XXX) XXX-XXXX. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the UAB Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (205) 934-3789 or toll free at 1-855-860-3789. Regular hours for the OIRB are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday.

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER OF APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM
Office of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use

470 Administration Building
701 20th Street South
Birmingham, AL 35294-0104
205.934.3789 | Fax 205.934.1301 |
irb@uab.edu

APPROVAL LETTER

TO: Hill, Douglas Bradford

FROM: University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board
Federalwide Assurance # FWA00005960
IORG Registration # IRB00000196 (IRB 01)
IORG Registration # IRB00000726 (IRB 02)
IORG Registration # IRB00012550 (IRB 03)

DATE: 29-Sep-2021

RE: IRB-300007942
IRB-300007942-002
A Grounded Theory Study of the Secondary, Immersive Arts School Experience

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The IRB reviewed and approved the Initial Application submitted on 29-Sep-2021 for the above referenced project. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Type of Review:	Exempt
Exempt Categories:	2
Determination:	Exempt
Approval Date:	29-Sep-2021
Approval Period:	No Continuing Review

Documents Included in Review:

- IRB EPORTFOLIO
- IRB PERSONNEL EFORM

To access stamped consent/assent forms (full and expedited protocols only) and/or other approved documents:
1. Open your protocol in IRAP.
2. On the Submissions page, open the submission corresponding to this approval letter. NOTE: The Determination for the submission will be "Approved."
3. In the list of documents, select and download the desired approved documents. The stamped consent/assent form(s) will be listed with a category of Consent/Assent Document