

The Economic Rationale for Funding Experiential Arts Education through Student Murals in Utah

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Abstract

This paper explores the economic and social rationale for funding experiential arts education through student mural projects in Utah, with a focus on immigrant and minority communities. Drawing on the case study from a Park City school, the study illustrates how mural-making fosters creativity, inclusivity, and civic engagement among Latin American immigrant students while simultaneously enhancing community cohesion. The research integrates educational theory and economic analysis to demonstrate that arts education yields measurable long-term benefits, including workforce readiness, reduced inequality, and strengthened local economies. Evidence from international and domestic sources—such as the American Academy for Arts and Sciences and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—supports the assertion that art-driven programs contribute to both cognitive development and social capital formation. By merging creative expression with economic imperatives, this paper argues that investment in experiential arts is not merely cultural philanthropy but an economically sound strategy for community development, labor resilience, and sustainable regional growth.

Keywords

Arts Education, Experiential Learning, Murals, Utah, Creative Economy, Immigrant Students, Inclusivity, Community Engagement, Public Funding, Cultural Regeneration, Economic Development, Civic Participation

1. Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative case study approach on Park City, Utah. Data were collected through classroom observation notes, student mural documentation,

and school council budget reports from 2020-2023. The class consisted of 120 students aged 10 - 16, primarily Latin American immigrants. Supplemental data include national arts education funding reports and prior research on the economic impact of arts programs. These materials were analyzed thematically to link educational outcomes with economic and civic benefits.

2. Introduction

Arts education has become an integral part of the school curriculum in the United States (U.S.). The government has acknowledged the importance of art in education, but has failed to create consistent implementation of the curriculum. As an educator, I have recently engaged in virtual arts pedagogy in the state of Utah, where most of the students identify as immigrants from Latin American countries. I have noticed that the 120 learners have expressed positive reactions to the subject by engaging in the creation of a mural that highlights their meaning of “home”. Even though the learners have expressed interest in the arts, the Park City Education Council had to find creative ways to fund similar education programs due to the emphasis on the education’s output and importance to the region. The use of art-based methods may enhance students’ creativity and intellectual growth. The use of art pedagogy has displayed significant promise in transforming the lives of minorities. Despite concerns related to the relevance of experiential arts, it is our hope that the Park City local government can continue to increase art education funding for schools because it yields major educational and civil values for the local community that translate to economic benefits in the long term.

3. Literature Review

Arts education forms the basis of education equality and inclusivity as a human right. Ho (2010) indicates that the United Kingdom (UK) recognized the essence of mural arts due to its positive impact on children with disabilities. The researcher highlights that the integration of arts education enhances progressive achievement of equality. According to the author, art allows minorities such as those with disabilities to make connections between complex concepts and generate knowledge via artwork. Additionally, Ho (2010) indicates that the essence of inclusive education entails nurturing the strengths and abilities of participants who would otherwise struggle for opportunities with their peers. The study reflects that the use of art in the Park City community may enhance the economic chances of Latin immigrants who may struggle for resources in the country.

Research also reveals that mural art boosts collaborative learning that reflects the aspiration and spirit of specific communities. According to Ho (2010), murals stimulate community cohesiveness by encouraging collaborative work in the design and completion of artwork. The researcher notes that school activities that involve murals attract learners with different skills, ideas, and abilities who reflect their shared values and talents. For example, different students may participate in the layout process, design, and labelling roles. The approach allows learners to

create meaning through their experiences and practical experience (Anttila, 2018). Subsequently, the collaborative effort leads to artistic pieces that reflect their collective history, culture, and creativity.

4. Case Study: Park City, Utah

The experience with Utah students highlights the importance of art in community expression and knowledge-building among minority communities. As a teacher, I allowed the learners to express their “definition of home” or “what home means to them” through a mural painting. The process entailed collective work among the learners from different Latin American countries. The students relied on their basic knowledge of art and world outlook to formulate a piece of art that expresses their imaginations. Eventually, the students produced a remarkable piece of art that captivated public interest in Park City. The graffiti displayed their feelings as members of the community and showed how art may promote civic engagement and cultural regeneration (Image 1).



Note: [Untitled illustration of the Mural]. “What Home Means”.

Image 1. A Mural showing what home means to the park city students.

5. Economic Implications and Policy Context

The arts curriculum has experienced reduced funding from the government,

which has affected local funding for experiential art. [The American Academy for Arts and Sciences \(2021\)](#) indicates that by 2020, key stakeholders in the education sector raised concerns about dwindling funding of arts programs in schools despite the enactment of the ESSA. This may explain Utah's reluctance to fund experiential art in Park City schools. However, the institution reveals that part of the problem includes an underappreciation of the overall contributions of art education to society and the economy. The organization notes that arts education promotes a wider understanding of cultural diversity and history in the country. The society indicates that the curriculum fosters social and emotional development among the youth. Based on extensive studies, the American Academy for Arts and Sciences cites that art learning bolsters empathetic behavior, strengthens community engagement, and reduces intolerance. Subsequently, the organization highlights that education enhances the quality of life and career skills for young learners.

The findings reveal the social contributions of art in American society. The non-monetary gains have a considerable influence on how the economy works and influences civic behavior. A social survey conducted in the U.S. in 2014 affirms the results by showing the broader societal impact of art in the curriculum. The study sought to find the effect of arts participation on American adults. The findings showed that direct and indirect participants displayed better civic engagement, social tolerance, and expressed positive values. The research also found that participants reflected progressive political actions that entailed politeness, honesty, and integrity. Additionally, the study notes that individuals involved in community artistic expression learned public speaking and decision-making that form the foundation of community-based programs. Therefore, the findings underscore how art curriculum in schools may bolster a productive workforce that fosters community growth.

American legislation acknowledges the importance of art education in society. For example, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), enacted in 2015, treats art as equal to other subjects like math and science. The legislation resulted from years of economic considerations made by various policymakers. Based on the research, the policymakers noted that art forms the basis of several economic activities and influences labor trends in the country. As a result, the regulations reveal that state leaders should ensure adequate funding for art programs in K-12 schools instead of relying on neighborhood organizations for arts education. The legislation allows Congress to ensure that state governments offer enough support for creative arts in early childhood education. Based on ESSA, the federal government has set aside approximately \$1.6 billion for art education in the U.S. The insights show that policymakers have acknowledged that experiential art has an economic element that plays a key role in the nation's growth.

Evidence shows that art in the school curriculum supports cognitive growth and academic achievement. [Brown \(2020\)](#) indicates that aside from social benefits, artistic endeavors boost cognitive growth by stimulating imagination and prob-

lem-solving. The author reveals that students who participate in music or art in school have a high chance of succeeding academically compared to their counterparts. The research notes that learners with an interest in art have a higher probability of scoring better in SAT exams and other standardized tests. According to a Rand Corporation study, emphasis on art in the curriculum displays a positive correlation with economic development in a country. The organization reveals that problem-solving skills acquired from artistic engagement create creative workers who solve industrial problems and achieve success in entrepreneurship. The information highlights the long-term economic impact of integrating experiential art in schools with minorities who often experience marginalization.

The findings also show that art fosters social capital among communities, especially those populated by minorities. [Brown \(2020\)](#) indicates that artistic expression may stimulate community interest and participation in art. The approach creates a sense of belonging and unity in cities facing various challenges. The researcher cites that this may encourage lifelong participation in artistic endeavors, which promotes a local economy. For example, community members may engage in artistic exhibits that create employment and offer revenue to the local authorities ([Dwyer, 2011](#)). The evidence reflects that the funding of experiential art in Utah may stimulate the art ecosystem in the local area populated with immigrants from Latin America.

Art has the potential for creating cultural regeneration in the local community. Evidence from England suggests that artistic engagement boosts the quality of life and creates cultural democracy for minorities. For example, the Tate Modern Development targeting London minority residents highlighted that investments in art in 2005 would yield £100 million in economic benefit. The foundation noted that the program would create 3000 jobs for the local communities through art galleries and tourism. The Lowry project in Salford Quays also reveals that investment in art would create employment opportunities and generate approximately £50 million from visitors ([Gilmore, 2014](#)). The evidence denotes how cultural regeneration via murals and graffiti in Park City may have a significant economic boost for the local minorities in the long term.

The economic rationale of funding art hinges on the spillover effect of equipping learners with practical knowledge. [Rushton \(2022\)](#) indicates that public art funding promotes artistic works that have a value due to demand. The author notes that the use of public funds yields results by stimulating the creative economy and attracting consumer participation. For example, art galleries may attract tourists interested in particular preferences while creating indirect jobs for multiple members of a community. [Rosselli et al. \(2025\)](#) show that art may highlight the challenges facing marginalized groups. The research indicates that artistic expression among minorities encourages distinct architectural designs and paintings that reflect a community's identity. Thus, the current students may use their acquired knowledge for artistic activism that creates awareness of local challenges and attracts tourists to share in their heritage.

For instance, applying a conservative cost–benefit estimate based on [Gilmore \(2014\)](#), every \$1 invested in community arts initiatives can yield between \$4 and \$6 in local economic returns through tourism, employment, and civic engagement. Assuming Park City’s annual mural project budget of \$15,000, the projected long-term return could approach \$60,000 - \$90,000 in combined social and economic benefits over five years.

Despite concerns from Utah policymakers, art has a direct economic impact on the community. According to [Tugrul \(2014\)](#), art education contributed \$76 billion to the American GDP in 2013. The study indicates that art education resulted in the creation of over 18,000 jobs in the country. The statistics reflect similar findings from other nations that have approached art education as a value creation avenue. For instance, the Province of Ontario in Canada found that arts and culture created 252,000 jobs and resulted in \$1.87 billion in revenues collected. The findings highlight that engaging learners in experiential art yields economic gains by enhancing their imagination and creativity in the industry.

Lastly, the role of universities as patrons of art reflects the economic underpinnings of the subject in the curriculum. According to [Ashley and Durham \(2021\)](#), in 2013, American universities invested approximately \$5 billion in art education. The authors show that higher education institutions consider art as an essential discipline in the modern economy. The researchers note that art as a discipline has evolved to equip learners with inter-disciplinary skills and knowledge required in the dynamic labor market. For instance, surveys highlight that in 2010, citizens between 24 and 45 years would likely work in 11 to 15 different jobs in their lifetime. The information reveals that the creative economy acts as a fundamental factor in the economy. Since experiential art equips learners with creativity and resilience, this illustrates that Utah students will likely compete favorably in the labor market.

6. Discussions and Limitations

This research focuses on a single site—Park City, Utah, and relies primarily on secondary data and qualitative observations. As such, the findings should not be generalized to all communities in the U.S. Further research across multiple sites using longitudinal data could strengthen the causal link between arts education and measurable economic outcomes. Beyond measurable fiscal outcomes, civic engagement and inclusivity act as indirect economic multipliers. Students’ participation in collaborative murals strengthens social trust and intergenerational networks, which enhance community cohesion and productivity. These forms of social capital, while non-economic in nature, contribute to reduced turnover, volunteer retention, and overall labor stability in the region.

7. Conclusion

Therefore, funding experiential arts education through student murals in Utah will have long-term economic yields. The analysis indicates that the subject equips

learners with essential workforce skills of creativity and problem-solving. The findings show that students with artistic inclination may develop better civic engagement abilities that influence community development by limiting negative optics of the potential for crimes. Subsequently, the research illustrates how arts education promotes inclusivity while stimulating community artistic engagement that boosts tourism and the creative economy. Based on the findings, investments in art education will create intellectually astute individuals who display resilience in the labor market. The combination of the factors will have a direct impact on the economic growth of the local communities that share similar cultures.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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