

IDENTITY, CREATIVITY AND WELL-BEING IN GERMAN SCHOOLS OF THE ARTS

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Abstract— Success in education does not only mean to accumulate knowledge in different subject areas. It also means having the ability to creatively deal with knowledge, to transform it, to communicate it, and co-construct it. To achieve this, students have to be socially, emotionally, and physically engaged to learn and re-learn. Traditional learning settings often do not consider the power of these soft skills that influence learning processes deeply. Some schools take them as a starting point to transform learning processes and to invest in comprehensive school development. This research focuses on the first emerging schools of the arts in the German state Baden-Wuerttemberg. It asks how students perceive their school and themselves at school apart from subject-based learning processes. And it considers if the perception is different if schools approach learning in and through the arts in their school development in different intensity. Research is based on a quantitative questionnaire that was statistically analyzed. Main findings indicate that students seem to feel noticed at school and strengthened in their identity, creativity, and well-being. Cluster analysis showed one group of students feeling well, perceiving creative learning methods, having self-esteem, and identifying themselves with the school. Another group of students reports having a considerably weaker connection to their school and to learning. School development does not seem to make a difference. To reach all students it seems necessary that schools start talking to both groups of students about their learning processes and what they need to be connected more deeply to their learning.

Keywords— Schools of Arts, Perception of Schools, Identity, Creativity, Well-Being, School Development, Cross-Curricular Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, no prototype school has been able to be copied to initiate successful educational processes and prepare learners perfectly for their future professional life. Nevertheless, different approaches are internationally considered successful in initiating learning processes that prepare students for their adult life. These approaches acknowledge that a focus on cognitive and technical learning alone is not sufficient to initiate a comprehensive educational process. Learning can only succeed if students are perceived individually and if their specific needs are considered. These might range from the need for breakfast at school, to the feeling of being able to learn without fear, to the consideration of previous experience and knowledge. At the same time, schools must not be seen as the only place of learning - children and adolescents also learn outside of school and take these learning experiences back with them to school.

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This article highlights schools in Germany that have taken up the challenge of setting a focus that includes cross-curricular learning and non-cognitive aspects as a valuable part of in-school learning. They focus on learning in and through the arts and are named ‘schools of the arts’ (Kulturschulen). In Germany, schools of the arts are a relatively new phenomenon emerging in the last decade. They arose as an answer to large scale studies like PISA or TIMSS. These studies showed that the German education system is highly selective. In no other country is educational success so less dependent on individual potential and so much on the social, economic, and intellectual status of parents.

The traditional way of schooling did not seem to balance these background factors and to support learning for everyone. Hence, school types were established that approach learning processes more holistically, like schools of the arts do. Though there is no clear definition of how these schools work and what exactly their way of proceeding is, a school of the arts can be described as a school that is designed as a space of culturally aesthetic experience for both teachers and students (*e.g.*, [1]).

In Kant’s [2] words, it is not about the world or the objective that forms a subject, it is rather subjects who constitute their worlds and realities based on the capacities and forces available to them. On an interdisciplinary level, these capacities include creativity, imagination, critical and divergent thinking. They are usually identified as engendered in arts learning while being also widely held to characterize thinking in other subject domains (*e.g.*, [3]).

To enable the acquisition and experience of these interdisciplinary skills, schools create learning environments where students feel comfortable and supported. Connections between the cognitive and the affective, the short-term and the long-term, and the individual and the social” [4] have to be made. Integrating the arts into traditional education can propel these multifaceted approaches on many levels. Students can learn to express themselves in different ways, they learn to approach knowledge and learning through different perspectives, and they work together co-constructively to create meaning. The research question in this article asks whether students in these schools perceive their learning environment and themselves in positive ways and if school development on different stages makes a difference. It is one of the first studies in Germany relating school development with education in and through the arts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning in and through the arts is said to be very effective for a student’s personality development, to develop the own identity, and to be creative. Different approaches to different topics and subjects enable a shift of perspectives and lead to new ways of learning [5]. However, most of the texts on the effects of the arts and education in Germany are normative. There are only a few empirical studies in schools that have a focus on arts education – most of these studies are initiated by network funding foundations. Many of them focus on one specific program, like dancing as an expression of creativity, building student’s own arts objectives as an aesthetic experience, or playing music to express emotions.

Research on schools that have arts as an “educational concept that focuses on productive creative activity, relates people to different artists and creates new possibilities for shaping reality through cultural participation” [6] is less common.

Following research that links strong performance and creativity and shows they both are embedded in a positive learning environment [7], more and more schools have begun integrating arts programs.

In schools, there are different ways of including the arts: on an organizational level, on a staff level, and on a classroom level. On an organizational level, there might be additional classes in the afternoon or school trips to museums, theaters, or performances of classical music. Some schools integrate arts by having their staff and external arts

providers such as artists and performers work together [8]. On the classroom level, there are schools with arts instruction, schools that integrate the arts into the academic curriculum, and schools that teach arts as separate disciplines for example (*e.g.*, [9]). According to the different ways of dealing with the arts, school development leading to a holistic way of integrating arts in everyday learning can lead to different action:

- a) There are schools with a variety of extracurricular activities.
- b) There are schools with teachers, working on joint projects and the integration of artistic approaches into their teaching.
- c) There are schools changing most of their regular teaching towards culturally-aesthetic and artistic approaches.

These three ways of dealing with arts are interconnected. They form a step-model with processes that build on each other and lead their way to comprehensive school development. It starts with changing schools on an organisational level (above mentioned a) extracurricular activities), adding personal development (b) working together and starting to change teaching occasionally) and curriculum development (c) changing teaching in different subjects) [10].

Schools on step one can be described as ‘arts-interested schools.’ Students can approach different arts voluntarily. Schools on step two are ‘arts-applying schools.’ Students encounter arts in their schools and their classrooms. However, arts are still connected with single projects or with single teachers and particular topics. Schools on the third level are ‘arts-integrating schools.’ These schools perform learning in and through the arts in their classrooms almost every day and throughout the whole school year (*e.g.*, [11]).

3. METHODOLOGY

Following the research on the implementation of education in and through the arts in the context of school development, this paper goes one step further. It does not ask school leaders or teachers how to approach the arts at school. It asks students how they feel a change at school and in class.

It is a logical next step to look at students' perceptions after having learnt about the way schools develop and implement a focus. Perceptions influence and shape the learning processes in a professional, social and personal way. School development can only be regarded as completed when students experience a changed way of teaching and learning. One focus schools of the arts have is the development of each student's personality. Schools cannot wait and see if their students really develop a sense of identity and connected attitudes and behaviors, they have to actively support their students in doing so.

Research questions therefore were:

- A) How do students perceive their school and themselves at school?
- B) Is there a connection between perception and intensity of school development?

The study used a sample of six secondary schools in Southern Germany. All of them were in a model project supported by the Ministry of Education Baden-Wuerttemberg and Karl Schlecht Foundation. The project aim was to focus on school development over five years, from 2015 to 2020, on arts education – the manner of how to do so and identifying more precise objectives to be followed was left to the schools and their individual needs. 1084 students took part in the survey. However, participation rates of students within their schools differed between 3% to 86%. Findings from schools with very low participation rates have to be interpreted rather carefully. It is likely that these schools did not spread the questionnaire widely and only had “model students” take part.

All students were asked to fill out an online questionnaire with quantitative items. There were different statements in the categories “me and school,” “my learning,” and “my teachers.” All statements had to be rated on a Likert-like interval scale (see Appendix A).

The first two parts of the questionnaire were analyzed according to structural equation modeling, namely an explorative factor analysis. All scales were reliable as can be seen in the following subchapter. Next to the factor analysis, a cluster analysis was made to see whether different types of students appear in different schools.

Items that were not part of the factor and cluster analyzes (“my teachers” part) were additionally looked at in interaction with the clusters.

4. FINDINGS

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed to extract the most important independent factors. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .937, representing a marvelous factor analysis, and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), indicating that correlations between items were sufficiently large for performing a PCA. Only factors with eigenvalues ≥ 1 were considered (e.g., [12]).

Examination of Kaiser’s criteria and the scree-plot yielded empirical justification for retaining four factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1 which accounted for 58% of the total variances. Among the factor solutions, the varimax-rotated four-factor solution produced the most interpretable solution, and most items loaded highly on only one of the four factors.

The first factor (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.874$) can be described as *personality-based identification with the school*. Identification represents here “the ties [...] that may be formed between an individual and an institution, such as school” [13]. This attachment can lead to a feeling of belongingness, i.e., that one is an important part of the school environment and that school is an important element in one’s experiences (e.g., [14]).

Sample items of this scale are:

- I see myself as part of the school.
- I am involved in school activities.
- My personality development is supported in class.

The second factor (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.769$) describes *self-esteem*. Self-esteem is defined here as a person’s subjective evaluation of his or her worth as a person (e.g., [15]). In this scale, students describe their confidence and their independence.

Sample items are:

- I trust myself with new things.
- If I can do something, I dare to do something more difficult.

The third factor (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.847$) includes items that are about *well-being*. Well-being can be described as a sustainable situation of positive “mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction” [16] with oneself, relationships, and experiences at school.

Items in this scale describe a positive feeling towards the school and the learning within:

- I like going to school.
- I am motivated to learn new things.
- I think it is great what we do at school.

The fourth factor (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.736$) is about *creativity* in learning processes. Creativity means that students are able to act or to make something within the domain. They use their imagination and critical thinking to create new and meaningful ideas. They

take risks, are independent and flexible in their approaches towards a domain, and grow that way (e.g., [17]).

This scale represents the positive influence of creativity for learning processes:

- I am more motivated when I can be creative.
- Through artistic approaches, I have received new learning access.
- I am more motivated to learn if I can shape the learning process myself.

In five of six schools, creativity, well-being, and personality-based identification with the school are more intensively perceived by girls than by boys. Only self-esteem is stronger amongst boys.

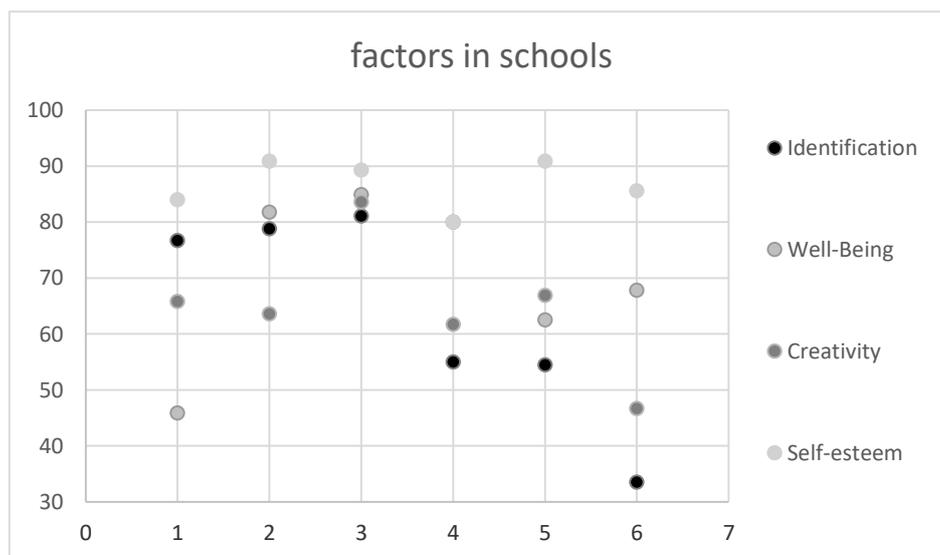


Fig. 1 Factors in Schools

In all six schools, all factors are pronounced differently (see Fig. 1). However, self-esteem is always strongest. Identification with school is weakest in four schools. Creativity is the second weakest or weakest in five of the six schools.

In between the scales, there are different correlations. The strongest correlations, that are highly significant, are between the personality-based identification with the school and well-being ($r=0.585^{**}$). Identification with the school also correlates with student's self-esteem ($r=0.406^{**}$). Well-being is connected to creativity ($r=0.338^{**}$). Only self-esteem and creativity have a rather small connection ($r=0.263^{**}$).

Based on the factor analysis, an additional cluster analysis was performed. The cluster analysis revealed two clusters. Both are almost equally distributed across students and genders (Cluster 1: $N=515$, 57% female, 43% male; Cluster 2: $N=569$, 48% female, 52% male). There are two schools that have a clear focus in Cluster 1, and three schools that are mainly in Cluster 2. Taking into consideration the weak numbers of participation in three of the schools, it might be adequate to say that one school has its students clearly in Cluster 1 and one school has the majority of its students in Cluster 2.

The first cluster shows a strong expression in all four factors. 87% of students stress that creativity is important to them and the same number of students say that they are self-confident. 80% of students report feelings of well-being in their school and 79% show personality-based identification with the school.

The second cluster has a focus on self-esteem. However, all factors are altogether rather weakly pronounced. 51% of the students in this cluster affirm self-esteem. Creativity is an important part of learning for a third of the students (37%). Overall

identification with school exists for 20% and a feeling of well-being is described by 18% of these students.

Looking at the students' and their agreement on statements concerning the lessons there are clear tendencies (see Table I). Active participation in class is highest in both clusters with the least difference in percentage points. The biggest difference is in the perception of creativity in learning methods and the consideration of student's interests.

Table I. Learning and Clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2
I feel appreciation from my teachers.	79%	52%
Learning methods are aimed at creativity.	68%	25%
I am allowed to make decisions in class.	57%	34%
The interests of the learners are considered.	56%	27%
I must actively participate in class.	85%	73%

Students in Cluster 2 seem to feel much more passively involved in learning than students in Cluster 1 do.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The first research question asked how students perceive their school and themselves at school. Overall, four different factors could be revealed: personality-based identification with school, self-esteem, well-being, and creativity.

The first two factors can be described as parts of identity. Identity as a multifaceted construct, which is difficult to conclusively define (*e.g.*, [18]), is seen here as “the individual’s dynamic self-understandings and self-definitions used to structure, direct, give meaning to and present the self.” [19]. A healthy adjustment to school is likely to encourage successful school experiences such as academic achievement and persistence.

Self-esteem as a part of identity is strongest in all schools. Identification with school is weakest in four schools. This might lead to the assumption that students do not feel connected to the school and they do not perceive school as a positive part of their life. However, the emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning are inextricably entwined [20] (Boerkaerts 2010). It is therefore important to understand not just learners’ cognitive development but their motivations and emotional characteristics as well. In the described schools a weak identification with school might lead to a weaker connection to learning processes and less motivation and effort for learning.

In terms of gender, it was noticed that boys have stronger self-esteem than girls. This goes along with other studies that tested gender differences in self-esteem (*e.g.*, [21]). Stronger identification with school, well-being, and creativity amongst girls are also not very surprising. Research confirms that girls develop more school-adaptive attitudes and behaviors, primarily on a motivational and volitional basis (*e.g.*, [22]). Girls emphasize more often than boys that they have good social experiences at school, and they praise more strongly the good quality of teaching and the learning opportunities at school.

Creativity is the second weakest or weakest in five of six schools. The approval rate is between 46% and 85% in the different schools. Taking out all schools with a very low level of participation does not change this result. This finding is quite interesting as schools that actively promote learning in and through the arts are including many creative and artistic methods in theory. Schools within this sample should focus their students on being more active in their own learning processes. Surprisingly, creativity seems to have no influence on self-esteem or on well-being. This might be because schools do not

promote creativity so much that students realize it as a feature of their learning. Or self-esteem and well-being do not relate to creativity because students have other ways to express their self-confidence and feel comfortable.

In terms of the clusters, we can see that students either respond well to all factors or they do not perceive them very intensively. This is especially the case for well-being and identification with the school. This means that schools will lose a certain number of students who cannot make any connection to the learning environment. Within the sample, there is only one school that manages to keep three-quarters of all students connected and in Cluster 1. The other two schools that have good participation rates in our research have a balanced number of students in both clusters.

To see whether it is desirable to have more students in Cluster 1 and if so to enhance the number of students in Cluster 1, it might be helpful to have a look at the connection to behavior in class that is shown in Table 1. Almost 80% of students in Cluster 1 feel appreciated in class, more than half have the feeling that they can make their own decisions and that their interests are considered. In Cluster 2, only half of the students feel appreciated and around 30% are allowed to make decisions or feel that their interests are considered. The biggest difference is in the perception of creative learning methods. In Cluster 2 only one-fourth of the students agree on creativity in classrooms whereas in Cluster 1 two-thirds of them agree.

Student Agency, *i.e.*, the capacity to set own personal goals, reflect and act responsibly to affect change, should be strengthened in all schools to get Cluster 2 students to be more involved and more engaged. This would mean that students get the opportunity to influence the way they are taught, to create meaning for the things they are supposed to learn, and to connect their learning to the world outside school [23].

The second research question asked whether there is a connection between the perception of students and the intensity of school development. This can be negated.

No matter how education in and through the art is defined or lived, we can see a particular pattern in the students' answers. All schools have different features in the factors and a certain spreading width according to the agreeing percentages. The only school that is outstanding is school 3 (see figure 1) with all factors being agreed on between 81% and 89%. This school could already be classified as an 'arts-integrating school' (step three, see above), that assimilates learning in and through the arts in many different aspects. The one other school on the same developmental level is school 5. Students at that school are a lot more reluctant in their assessments of the school. However, creativity, being rather low in other schools, is the second strongest factor in that school. Schools that do care about their lesson and teaching development seem to make a difference in creativity. Schools on level one ('arts-interested') and two ('arts-applying') do not have any noticeable distinctions here. This affirms that regular lessons do not seem to be a part of their development. However, it is interesting that students do not seem to feel creativity and its benefit to learning processes when they experience it through additional courses or single projects.

In summary, it is surprising that schools that are actively working on the integration of arts in their teaching and student's learning do not reach an overwhelming part of their students. There seems to be a big gap between the schools' programs and the way teachers think they implement a new approach to learning and to perceiving the world on the one side and the student's perception of this "changing normal" on the other side.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study is one of the first German studies on school development in schools that focus learning in and through the arts. It gains first insight into students' perceptions in schools that focus arts on different levels. A limitation of the study is the number of

schools that have been part of the research project. Only three of them have a high number of students participating in the research. This leads to first impressions of how schools of the arts affect their students. Future research should use a larger number of students and schools to verify if the results of this sample remain valid. Additionally, it seems important to do qualitative research studies on the students' perceptions to get a clearer picture of how they can be supported better in their learning and how to feel more connected to the school. From a school development research perspective, it seems important that self-evaluation of the school's learning environment takes place that includes all teachers. Only if all teachers and students start working mutually on learning processes will they be successful in a whole school setting.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings show that even with one common developmental focus there is no such thing as a classical school of the arts or one classical way to get to a pervasive implementation of a particular focus. This research project is the first study in German schools of the arts that puts together the perception of students and the changes on an organizational level in terms of school development. Even if there are students who respond to the offers of the respective school, who have a positive feeling towards school and the learning processes, there are also students who do not feel integrated. They do not manage to enter into a common resonance space with the school. These students are more likely to feel rejected, ignored, and indifferent to the learning environment.

These findings show the importance of integrating students into their learning and at the same time into school development to create a "new normal" that reaches out to include everyone at school. School development in schools of the arts has to be very aware of the importance of having students not only receiving learning opportunities but also being active creators of their own learning.

APPENDIX A

Me and School

	Strongly agree	Agree	Rather not agree	Don't agree
I like going to school.				
I see myself as part of the school.				
I think it is great what we do at school.				
I feel comfortable at school.				
School promotes my motivation.				
It touches me in my heart what we do at school.				
By participating in the school my independence has changed.				
My personality development is in the foreground.				
My personality development is supported in class.				
At school, I learn to have confidence in my abilities.				
The school ensures that I have many positive experiences.				
I am involved in school activities.				
My willingness to perform increases by feeling good at school.				

My learning

	Strongly agree	Agree	Rather not agree	Don't agree
I am motivated to learn new things.				
I am more motivated when I can be creative.				
I am more motivated to learn when I can shape the learning process myself.				
The presentation of my work makes me self-confident.				
I am confident.				
I trust myself with new things.				
I am independent.				
I show a lot of initiative and take things into my own hands.				
I can learn better when I can be artistically active.				
Through artistic approaches, I have received new learning access.				
If I can do something, I dare to do something more difficult.				
I am not ashamed to speak in front of a group.				

Me in class

	Always	Oftentimes	Rarely	Never
I feel appreciation from my teachers.				
Learning methods are aimed at creativity.				
The interests of the learners are considered.				
I must actively participate in class.				

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