

Holistic Art Education: Fostering Belonging, Self-Expression, and Social-Emotional Growth among Secondary Students in British Columbia

Jillian Pearson

Abstract

This literature review explores how holistic approaches to art education can foster belonging, self-expression, and social-emotional growth among secondary students in British Columbia. Drawing on research in art education, social-emotional learning, ethics of care, and Indigenous ways of knowing, this review examines how creative learning environments can support student wellbeing, identity development, and meaningful relationships. The findings here suggest that art education extends beyond technical skill development, offering valuable opportunities to cultivate inclusive and student-centred learning environments, while also identifying recommendations for educational practice and future research.

Introduction

Background

Secondary schools are increasingly expected to support students' social-emotional wellbeing alongside academic achievement. While art education is often viewed as a creative or elective subject, emerging research suggests it can also strengthen belonging, identity, wellbeing, and meaningful relationships. However, limited research has examined these outcomes collectively within British Columbia secondary school contexts.

Research Question

How can holistic approaches to art education foster belonging, self-expression, and social-emotional growth among secondary students in British Columbia?

Thesis Statement

This literature review argues that holistic approaches to art education fosters belonging, self-expression, and social-emotional growth by creating learning environments that value creativity, relationships, student voice, and multiple ways of knowing and being.

Literature Review: Key Findings

Identity, Self-Expression, and Student Voice

- Art provides opportunities for students to explore identity and communicate personal experiences (Eisner, 2002; Gude, 2009).
- Creative learning encourages agency, meaning-making, and authentic student voice (Irwin, 2004; Liu, 2026).

Social-Emotional Growth

- Arts-based learning supports confidence, resilience, empathy, and emotional wellbeing (Casel, 2024).
- Creative expression strengthens social-emotional competencies alongside academic learning (Noddings, 1995; Durlak et al., 2022).

Care, Belonging, and Relationships

- Caring relationships create safe learning environments where students feel valued and connected (Fraboni, 2025; Moar et al., 2024).
- Collaborative artistic experiences strengthen belonging within school communities.

Holistic and Indigenous Perspectives

- Holistic learning recognizes the interconnectedness of emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual development (FNESC, 2020).
- Indigenous perspectives emphasize relationships, storytelling, community, and multiple ways of knowing (Little Bear, 2000).

Reccomendations

Prioritize Creative Process

Emphasize reflection, storytelling, inquiry, and student voice over technical artistic outcomes in art classrooms.

Recognize Art as Essential

Position art education as a contributor to student wellbeing, belonging, and inclusive learning, rather than solely as an optional elective course.

Support Holistic Practice

Expand trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and Indigenous-informed approaches through professional learning and community partnerships across BC.

Conclusion

The literature consistently suggests that holistic art education contributes to belonging, identity development, self-expression, and social-emotional growth. When grounded in relationships, creativity, and multiple ways of knowing and being, art education becomes a meaningful contributor to inclusive and human-centred education.

Key Takeaway

Holistic art education develops much more than just artistic skills. It cultivates learning environments where students develop a stronger sense of belonging, confidently express themselves, and build meaningful connections with themselves, their peers, and their school communities.

Research Gaps & Future Directions

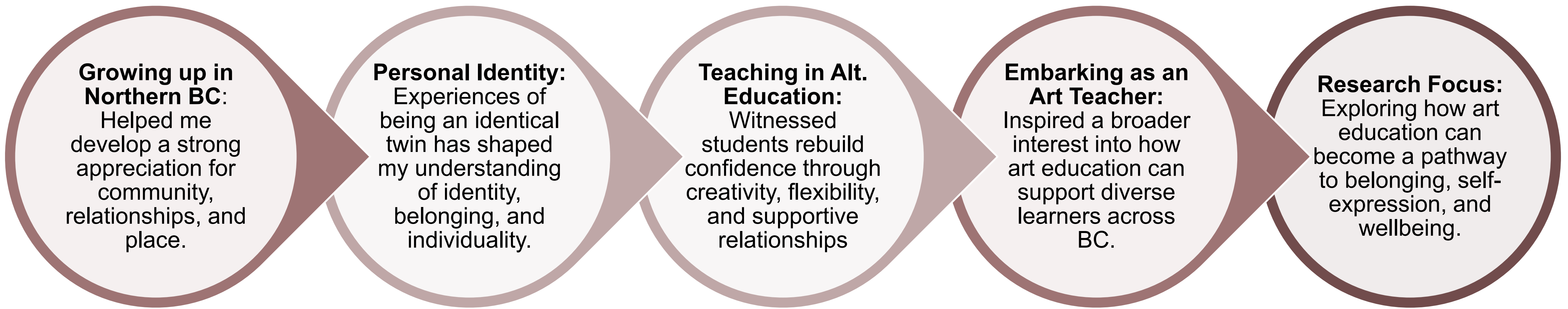
Research Gaps

- Existing research rarely examines belonging, self-expression, social-emotional learning, and holistic art education as interconnected outcomes within British Columbia secondary schools.
- Greater emphasis on secondary students' lived experiences and student voice is needed to better understand the impact of holistic art education.

Future Research

- Investigate the implementation of holistic art education across diverse BC secondary school contexts.
- Explore the experiences of rural, urban, Indigenous, and multicultural school communities.
- Conduct longitudinal research examining the long-term influence of arts education on belonging, identity development, and social-emotional wellbeing.
- Examine how educators implement holistic, culturally responsive, and Indigenous-informed practices in art education.

Researcher Positionality and Journey



References