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Arts Integration and Belonging: Supporting English Language Learners Through a Critical Community of Practice

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Abstract

This study investigates how educators and teaching artists, participating in a critical community practice model centered on arts integration, support high school English Language Learners (ELLs), particularly recently displaced students seeking humanitarian protection in the United States, to develop a sense of belonging and amplify their voices. Classroom educators and teaching artists collaborated to design and implement arts-based projects for students in grades 9 -12 inviting them to communicate their personal stories and connect with one another, as many of the students had experienced disconnection and loss upon their arrival to the United States. Using a qualitative approach this study draws on existing data including district and student demographics, prior surveys, and arts integration project plans, combined with newly collected semi-structured interviews with a classroom educator, teaching artists, and a school administrator. A thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified eight recurring categories, four on educator practice, and four on student outcomes, revealing how this collaborative model shaped participants' work. The findings highlight how the critical community of practice model supported students' social-emotional development and cultural identity, with educators and teachings artists describing continued use of arts integration strategies in their practice. This study contributes to the discourse on how critical communities of practice grounded in arts integration, prepare educators to support diverse learners.

Keywords: Arts Integration, Community of Practice, Student Voice, Culturally Responsive, English Language Learners (ELLs)