

20 YEARS OF ARTISTIC LEGACY: A TRACER STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF THE SPECIAL PROGRAM FOR THE ARTS AT MANDAUE CITY SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS

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Abstract:

A tracer study is a type of research that tracks the post-graduation outcomes of students to evaluate the long-term effectiveness and relevance of educational programs. This study focused on the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) at Mandaue City School for the Arts (MCSFA), assessing its impact on graduates from 2004 to 2024. Using a convergent parallel mixed methods design, the research analyzed both quantitative data from structured surveys and qualitative insights from open-ended responses. Findings revealed that SPA graduates have ventured into diverse career fields, including education, business process outsourcing, and health services, with only a minority directly employed in arts-related professions. However, high school competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving—cultivated through the SPA curriculum—were deemed highly valuable in their current jobs. Alumni feedback underscored the need for improvements in mentorship, exposure to real-world experiences, and updated facilities. The study concludes that the SPA program effectively instills transferable life and career skills, while also nurturing artistic talents. Recommendations include curriculum enhancement, faculty development, resource upgrades, and stronger alumni engagement. These measures aim to reinforce the program's relevance and sustainability in preparing students for professional success and cultural contribution. Ultimately, this tracer study highlights the significant role of specialized arts education in shaping well-rounded, employable, and culturally aware individuals.

Keywords: Special Program in the Arts (SPA), tracer study, arts education, MCSFA alumni, curriculum relevance

Introduction:

The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines established the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) to nurture and develop the artistic talents of students who demonstrate exceptional potential in various creative fields. Introduced in 2000, SPA is a specialized curriculum designed to provide learners with opportunities to enhance their skills in disciplines such as Visual Arts, Music, Theater Arts, Dance, Media Arts, and Creative Writing.

This program is guided by the vision of producing young artists with aesthetic potential who can contribute to preserving and enriching Filipino culture and heritage. It aligns with DepEd's broader goal of fostering globally competitive learners equipped with 21st-century skills while instilling desirable values and a strong sense of national identity. SPA emphasizes the importance of arts education as a vital component of a balanced curriculum, offering students a pathway to pursue careers in creative industries or further studies in higher education. SPA addresses the need for specialized education that recognizes and nurtures multiple intelligences, particularly artistic abilities. By offering focused training in creative fields, the program provides students with avenues for self-expression, confidence-building, and skill development. It also serves as a platform for promoting Filipino cultural heritage through art forms that reflect the nation's identity.

Furthermore, SPA contributes to national development by preparing students for roles in creative industries, which are increasingly recognized as significant drivers of economic growth. The program equips learners with technical expertise and cultural awareness, enabling them to become leaders in preserving Filipino traditions while adapting to global trends. With its emphasis on excellence and innovation, SPA ensures that students not only excel artistically but also gain a firm academic foundation for sustainable careers.

The Special Program for the Arts (SPA) at Mandaue City School for the Arts (MCSFA) has been instrumental in nurturing artistic talents and fostering cultural development since its beginning in 1998. Over the past two decades, the program has provided students with opportunities to develop their creative abilities while equipping them with academic skills to succeed in their careers and contribute meaningfully to society. Despite its long-standing legacy, there is limited research that evaluates the long-term impact of the SPA on its graduates and its broader contributions to arts and culture.

Arts education has been recognized globally for its role in enhancing intellectual, emotional, and social development. Studies have shown that learning in the arts positively impacts academic success, personal growth, and community engagement, particularly for artistically inclined students. However, further research is needed to explore how specialized arts programs like SPA interact with other disciplines and influence students' lives beyond school. Currently, there are limited specific studies directly focused on a tracer study of the Department of Education's (DepEd) Special Program in the Arts (SPA). This study addresses this gap by tracing the experiences of SPA graduates from MCSFA, assessing their career trajectories, challenges faced, and contributions to cultural development.

By conducting this tracer study, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of SPA in shaping artistic competencies and fostering cultural enrichment. It also seeks to identify areas for improvement in curriculum design and alumni support networks. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of specialized arts education as a vital dimension of comprehensive learning and cultural advancement.

Literature Review

Arts education has been widely recognized as a transformative tool for fostering creativity, academic achievement, and social development. Studies have demonstrated that participation in arts-based programs significantly enhances students' academic performance, creativity, and emotional intelligence. For instance, a quasi-experimental study revealed that high school students participating in art workshops showed improved grades across subjects, including language and mathematics, alongside enhanced creative problem-solving skills. Similarly, systematic reviews highlight the positive effects of arts education on competencies such as speech processing, arithmetic abilities, and interpersonal skills. Art programs also play a pivotal role in cultivating cultural appreciation and awareness. Research on Philippine culture and arts indicates that exposure to artistic experiences fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of local heritage, countering colonial mentality and promoting national identity. This aligns with the mission of institutions like the Mandaue City School for the Arts (MCSFA), which aims to nurture both academic and artistic capabilities among students, especially those from less affluent backgrounds.

Tracer studies are essential tools for assessing the long-term impact of educational programs. They provide insights into graduates' employment conditions, skill application, and relevance of acquired competencies in the labor market. For example, tracer studies conducted on education graduates revealed that most alumni successfully applied their learned skills in professional settings, validating the effectiveness of their training programs. Such methodologies are increasingly popular in technical and vocational education as they help measure program outcomes and address skills mismatches.

The Mandaue City School for the Arts has established itself as a significant contributor to arts education since its inception in 1998. The school provides specialized instruction to children with artistic talents, supported by government entities and non-government organizations. Over two decades, it has expanded its facilities and curriculum to include secondary education, producing graduates equipped to compete globally with both academic and artistic skills. The school's emphasis on integrating arts into basic education aligns with findings that arts education enhances school engagement, empathy, and aspirations for higher education.

International studies further corroborate the benefits of arts programs. For instance, Houston's Arts Access Initiative demonstrated that increased exposure to arts education reduced disciplinary infractions while improving writing achievement and fostering empathy among students. These findings suggest that arts education not only supports academic success but also contributes to holistic personal development.

Statement of the Problem

The study aimed to determine the profile and whereabouts of the graduates of the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) of Mandaue City School for the Arts from 2006 to 2016.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What was the demographic and professional profile of SPA graduates in terms of:
 - 1.1 Gender;
 - 1.2 Place of Origin; and
 - 1.3 Year Graduated?
2. How relevant was the SPA curriculum in equipping graduates with skills and competencies for their chosen careers?
3. What high school competencies acquired through the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) at MCSFA are perceived by graduates as most valuable in their current employment?
4. What recommendations can be made to improve the program based on alumni feedback?

Research Method:

Design

This study used a Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design to better understand how the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) at MCSFA has helped its graduates in their careers. In this design, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time, analyzed separately, and then compared to provide a complete picture of the graduates' experiences.

The quantitative part of the study answered the first three research questions. It looked at the graduates' profile—such as gender, place of origin, and year graduated—and how useful they found the skills they learned from the SPA program. Data were collected using a structured survey with closed-ended questions and were analyzed using basic statistics like percentages and frequencies.

The qualitative part focused on the fourth research question, which asked graduates to give suggestions on how to improve the SPA program. Their responses were gathered through an open-ended question in the survey and analyzed by looking for common themes or ideas.

By combining the results from both types of data, the study was able to give a deeper and more balanced view of how the SPA program supports its graduates. This approach follows the guidance of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), who recommend mixing methods to strengthen the overall findings of a study.

Sampling

The respondents are all graduates of the SPA program at Mandaue City School For The Arts from 2004 to 2024. The study relies on voluntary participation from graduates, which may result in a limited sample size due to challenges in locating alumni or obtaining their consent to participate.

Data Collection

Structured questionnaires will be distributed to SPA graduates via email or social media. The survey will cover demographic information, professional profile of SPA graduates, competencies acquired through the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) at MCSFA perceived by graduates as most valuable in their current employment and overall satisfaction with the SPA program.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study will employ both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to assess the impact of the Special Program for the Arts at Mandaue City School for the Arts over its 20-year history. After the thorough data collection process, the researcher subjected the data gathered to statistical analysis.

Ethical Considerations,

The researchers have abided with all the requirements in the conduct of the entire study as by virtue of the guidelines followed suggestion by the research committee. Prior to it, the study had undergone ethical review as well as approval of the ethics committee. Innately, each respondents' contribution is unpaid but voluntary. They have the free will to withdraw their consent to not partake and disengage to take part of this study anytime. Likewise, there is no penalty in any way if they choose not to partake. Furthermore, the respondents will be informed that the research is conducted solely for academic purposes and the data gathered from them shall be exclusively used for such purpose. Until it is accomplished and analyzed, respondents' data is kept with confidentiality. They will do everything to safeguard their privacy such as: The names of the respondents will be replaced by codes. The sheet containing the name of the respondents shall be removed and be kept or destroyed when no longer needed for the research. The researchers shall have the sole access to the code's master list. Files containing research data shall be password protected and encrypted to keep the data safe.

Findings and Discussion:

The findings of the study based on the data gathered from SPA graduates of MCSFA. The results are organized according to the research questions and are interpreted to highlight key patterns, trends, and insights. Graphs, tables, and narratives are utilized to support the analysis and to provide a clear understanding of how the Special Program in the Arts has influenced the academic and professional outcomes of its alumni. Relevant literature and contextual reflections are also incorporated to enrich the discussion.

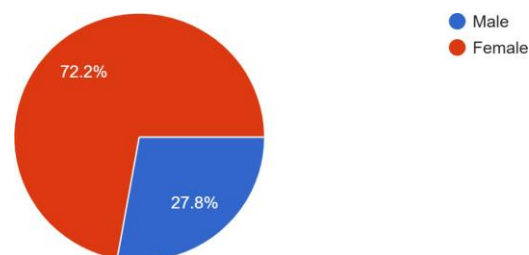


Figure 1: Demographic Profile: Gender

The graph showed that the majority of the alumni respondents are males that covers 72.2% while females covers 27.8% of the pie graph. Profile of SPA graduates shows a balanced representation in gender, with a predominance of female graduates.

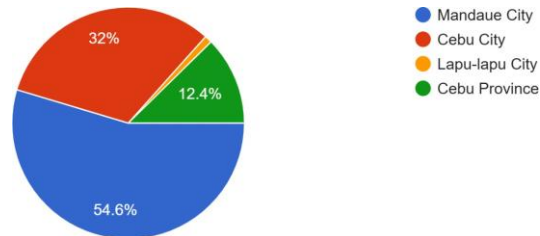


Figure 2: Place of Origin

The graph showed that the majority of the alumni respondents are from Mandaue City which covers 54.6% followed by Cebu City at 32%, Cebu Province around 12.4% and Lapu-lapu City with 1% of the pie graph. The majority of respondents hail from local areas surrounding Mandaue City, indicating the school's strong community reach.

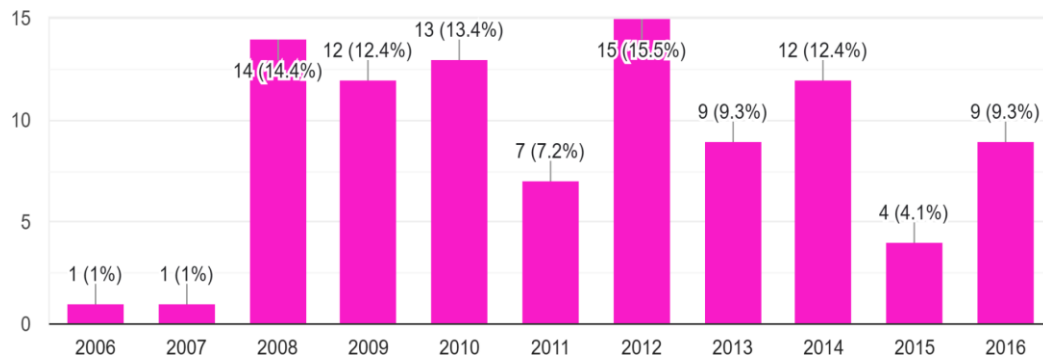


Figure 3: Year Graduated

The data presented in the bar chart highlights the distribution of graduates or respondents of the survey from Mandaue City School for the Arts (MCSFA-HS) over the years 2006 to 2016. The year 2012 recorded the highest number of respondents, with 15 graduates, accounting for 15.5% of the total responses. This indicates a peak in participation of the survey. Year 2006 and 2007 has the lowest number of participation while graduates from 2008 to 2010 with percentages ranging 12.4% to 14.4% of participation, for year 2011 with 7.2%, year 2013 and 2014 with 9.13% and 12.4% respectively, 2015 with 4.1% and 2016 with 9.3%.

SPA Curriculum Relevance

The relevance of the SPA curriculum is assessed by examining how well it prepared graduates for their current careers. This section explores the alignment between the skills and competencies acquired during high school and the demands of the professional fields in which the graduates are now engaged. Insights from alumni responses provide valuable perspectives on the practical application of the SPA training across various industries.

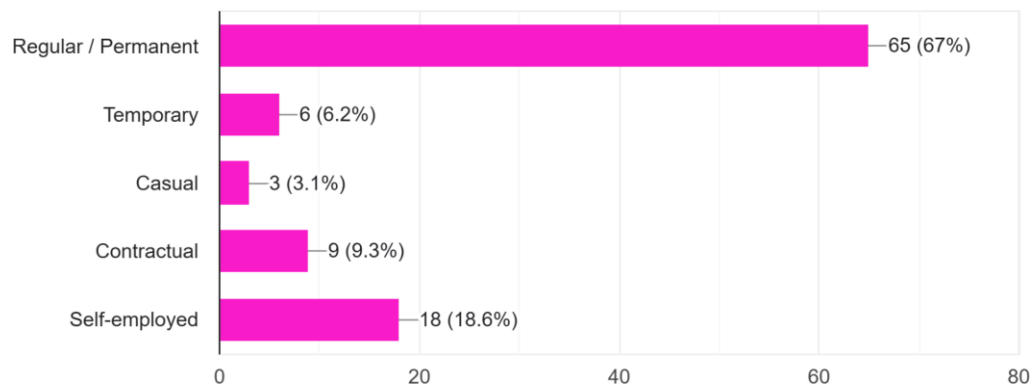


Figure 4: *Employment Status*

In terms of employment status, 67% of SPA graduates hold regular or permanent positions, 18.6% are in temporary, casual, or contractual employment, and another 18.6% are self-employed. This distribution suggests that a significant proportion of graduates are gainfully and stably employed, with some venturing into entrepreneurial or freelance work—an encouraging sign of the program’s capacity to support both traditional employment and self-driven career paths.

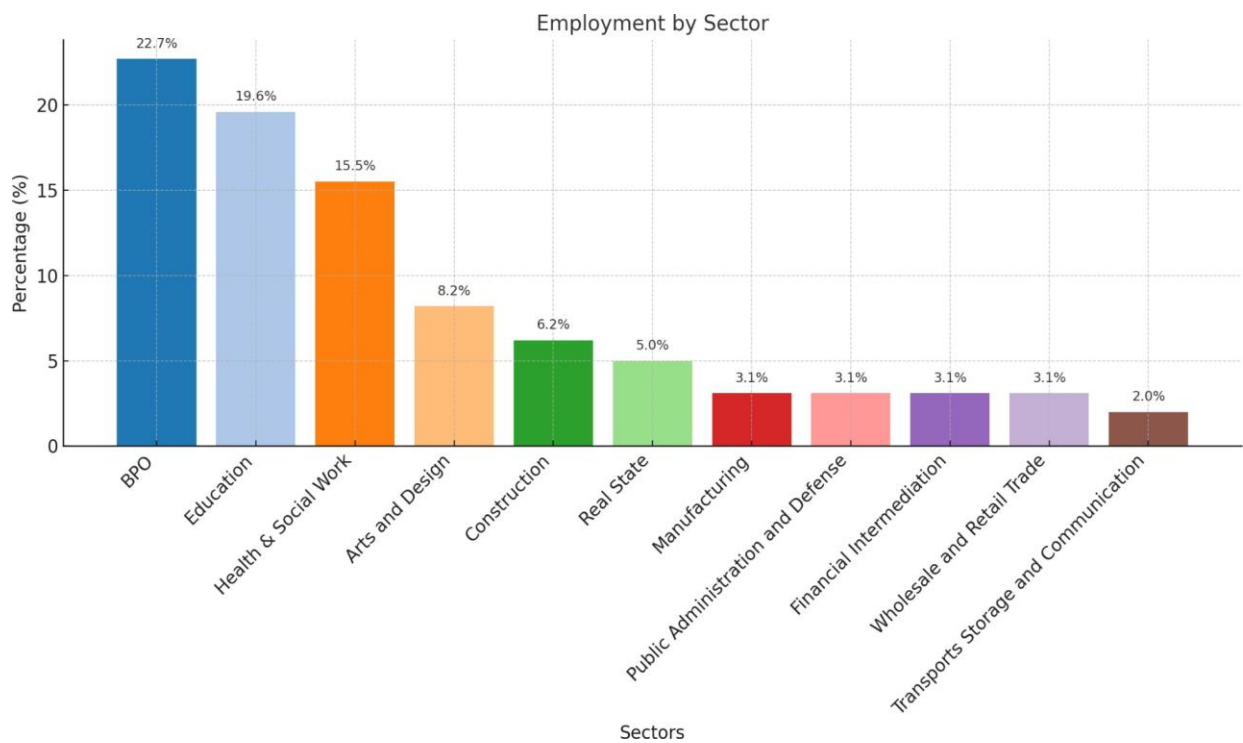


Figure 5: Employment by sector

The findings of the study reveal that SPA graduates from MCSFA have diversified career trajectories, with significant employment in sectors such as Business Process Outsourcing (22.7%), Education (19.6%), and Health & Social Work (15.5%). This distribution suggests that while a portion of graduates remain within arts-related fields such as education and cultural work, many have successfully transitioned to broader service-oriented industries. The 8.2% employment in Arts and Design specifically affirms that the SPA curriculum retains direct relevance for a subset of graduates pursuing creative professions.

The SPA curriculum was found to be moderately to highly relevant in preparing graduates for their careers. While only 8.2% are directly employed in the Arts and Design sector, a significant number are thriving in industries such as BPO (22.7%), Education (19.6%), and Health & Social Work (15.5%). This indicates that competencies acquired in the SPA program—such as communication, creativity, performance, collaboration, and critical thinking—are transferable and marketable across diverse career paths. Graduates acknowledged the program's role in building confidence and discipline, which are essential in any professional setting.

What competencies learned in high school did you find very useful in your job? (You may check more than one answer.)

97 responses

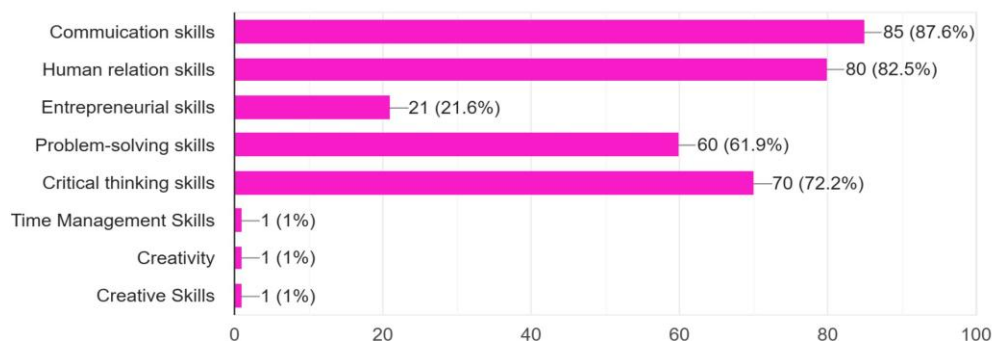


Figure 6: Competencies acquired in SPA

Graduates identified several high school competencies acquired through the Special Program in the Arts (SPA) at MCSFA as highly valuable in their current employment. Foremost among these is communication skills—both oral and written—which was acknowledged by 87.6% of the participants. These skills developed through performance arts, media arts, and creative writing, are instrumental in enabling graduates to articulate ideas clearly and interact effectively in various professional settings. Critical thinking was also highlighted by 72.2% of respondents, emphasizing the SPA program's strength in cultivating analytical and reflective capacities necessary for solving complex problems and making sound decisions in the workplace. Problem-solving skills followed, with 62.9% of graduates identifying this competency as essential in navigating challenges and producing solutions, especially in dynamic job environments. Human relations skills were cited by 21.6% of graduates, reflecting the program's success in fostering teamwork, collaboration, and emotional intelligence through ensemble work and inter-arts projects. Interestingly, only 2% of respondents emphasized creativity and innovation, and just 1% highlighted time management. Although these were less frequently mentioned, they remain inherent to the arts-based curriculum and contribute significantly to the professional discipline and adaptability of SPA graduates.

The responses reflect that SPA graduates value competencies that go beyond artistic expression—particularly those that enhance workplace performance across diverse industries. The results affirm the holistic impact of the SPA

curriculum in equipping students not only with artistic talents but also with essential life and career skills that transcend the boundaries of the arts.

MCSFA ART: Alumni-Inspired Recommendations for SPA Program Improvement

To enhance the Special Program in the Arts (SPA), alumni were asked to share insights based on their educational experiences. Their responses revealed common aspirations and concerns that point to areas for growth and innovation within the program. These have been synthesized into eight key themes, summarized through the mnemonic “MCSFA ART” representing core areas such as mentorship, real-world experience, curriculum development, and institutional excellence. Each theme reflects a call to action for a more relevant, responsive, and empowering arts education.

Theme 1: Mentorship and Career Guidance

Students benefit from structured career consultations and guidance to make informed decisions about their future in the arts or related fields.

"There should have been career consultations during the 4th year of high school, especially for those who want to proceed with the arts."

"When we graduated, we had very little preparation for what careers were suited for us."

"Better orientation/education on college courses/major options." "Better guidance/education on career path possibilities."

Gibbons and Borders (2010) found that effective career guidance during adolescence significantly enhances students' decision-making confidence and post-secondary success, especially in creative fields where pathways may not be linear.

Theme 2: Community Engagement

Arts education should also cultivate social responsibility and community awareness through outreach and involvement activities.

"Attend programs that touch on social and community involvement."

Dewey (1934) emphasized that the arts should not be isolated from community life. Booth & Rowsell (2007) note that community-based learning in arts education fosters civic awareness and social empathy.

Theme 3: Skill-Based Curriculum

Modern arts education must go beyond traditional training by incorporating practical and entrepreneurial skills.

"Include financial literacy."

"Financial education and real-life skills."

"Technological skills."

"Art skills to be used in the business world."

"Analytical and problem-solving skills."

"In my time, it would be better if students were offered some technical skills in case students will focus on technology when they graduate."

The 21st Century Skills Framework (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009) emphasizes integrating life and career skills into education, especially in fields blending creativity and technology.

Theme 4: Faculty Development

Teacher effectiveness is essential. Professional growth opportunities ensure teachers are updated with best practices in arts education.

"Qualified teachers, especially in arts." "Attend seminars/webinars."

"Continue masteral program to develop curriculum, instruction and innovation skills."

"Monitored attendance of arts teachers during Arts Day."

Darling-Hammond (2000) states that professional development is critical in ensuring teacher competence, especially in specialized programs like the arts.

Theme 5: Artistic Exposure

Exposure to various art forms—through concerts, exhibits, and cultural programs—broadens students' perspectives.

"Exposure to orchestra."

"Exposure to all kinds of art exhibits/concerts."

"Explore students to art programs and exhibits local and abroad."

Winner and Hetland (2000) found that arts exposure enhances creativity and cultural competence, increasing students' expressive capacity.

Theme 6: Authentic Experience

Learning should simulate real-life situations to prepare students for professional artistic careers and practical realities.

"Real-life immersions."

"More real-life challenges to simulate real work experiences."

"Expose students to real-life situations that may apply once they'll enter the working industry."

"More hands-on training."

"More in-depth study and practical experience." "Be realistic rather than idealistic."

"Engage more on the building technology subjects and professional practice."

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) supports integrating real-life simulations in education. Learning is more effective when students engage in meaningful contexts.

Theme 7: Resources and Facilities

Up-to-date tools and facilities support creativity and effective learning in arts education.

"It would be great if the school was provided with more equipment so that the students would have more avenues for learning."

The OECD (2005) states that adequate learning resources positively impact student outcomes, particularly in hands-on programs like the arts.

Theme 8: Tradition of Excellence

Maintaining high standards and preserving the school's reputation motivates students to uphold the legacy and quality of the program.

"I wish the school would be more exclusive in accepting new students. I really love how prestigious the reputation of the school was during our time..."

Walker (2012) found that program prestige and selective admissions in arts schools correlate with student motivation and alumni success.

The mnemonic "MCSFA ART" encapsulates the key recommendations from SPA alumni. Incorporating these themes can enhance the program's relevance, sustainability, and effectiveness in nurturing future artists and professionals.

Conclusion

The 20-year legacy of the SPA at MCSFA illustrates its significant role in shaping artists who are not only skilled but also equipped to navigate the complexities of modern careers. The findings from this tracer study affirm the program's success while providing a roadmap for future enhancements that will ensure its continued relevance and impact in nurturing artistic talent. By addressing identified challenges and leveraging alumni insights, MCSFA can further solidify its position as a cornerstone of arts education in Mandaue City and beyond.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the tracer study on the Special Program for the Arts (SPA) at Mandaue City School for the Arts (MCSFA), several recommendations are proposed to enhance the program. Firstly, it is crucial to update the curriculum regularly to align with contemporary arts practices and industry demands. This could involve integrating digital arts and technology to prepare students for evolving career landscapes. Additionally, improving facilities and resources, such as laboratories for music and theater, would significantly enhance the learning environment. Regular professional development workshops for teachers should be prioritized to ensure they remain adept at teaching various art disciplines. Strengthening alumni networks and community engagement through collaborative projects can also provide students with practical experience and industry connections. Lastly, securing consistent support from local government units and stakeholders is essential for sustaining the program's high standards and addressing challenges such as faculty turnover and resource sustainability.

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