Can arts education be used as a vehicle for students to develop the social-emotional factors that are foundational to success in young adulthood?

Researchers from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and Ingenuity, Inc. conducted an extensive research project designed to explore what we know—and what we think we know—about the ways that arts education can contribute to social-emotional development.

A theory of action articulates how arts instruction can affect social-emotional development (SED), and what about an arts education facilitates this development. The theory of action can be a roadmap for arts educators, as well as an advocacy tool pointing to how arts education can positively affect student outcomes. But the teacher is the key ingredient.

Teachers can consider how they can incorporate SED as instructional goals, alongside mastery goals, to positively contribute to students’ development.

Intentional
Be intentional about integrating social and emotional growth into an academic discipline. How an instructor teaches often matters more than what they teach.

Safe
Create safe spaces in which students feel comfortable taking productive risks, opening up to expose their own vulnerabilities, and being challenged.

Action & Reflection
Provide opportunities for students to engage in cycles of action (encountering, tinkering, choosing, practicing, and contributing) and reflection (describing, evaluating, connecting, envisioning, and integrating).
The Theory of Action

**EACH ART PRACTICE HAS SOCIAL-MOTIONAL COMPONENT(S)**
Any individual art practice may afford opportunities to work on several social-emotional components, depending on the circumstances and the way that art practice is framed by the arts instructor or understood by the student. And, as with the art practices themselves, the connected social-emotional components also depend in part on the age of the learners.

**ART EDUCATION PROCESSES ARE COMPRISSED OF MULTIPLE ART PRACTICES**
Each large-scale art education process—creating a mural, staging a play, performing a dance piece—is made up of many small-scale art practices. Thus we would use “art education process” to describe the full arc of working with a group of students on the planning and executing of a school mural project or the choreography, practicing, and performing of a new dance program.

**CULTURAL BELIEFS INFLUENCE THE ARTS EDUCATION PROCESS**
The dynamic relationship between arts education and social-emotional development described in this theory of action doesn’t happen in a vacuum; the cultural beliefs students, instructors, and others bring to particular learning settings influence every aspect of the process, from the social-emotional components that are the most likely complements to particular art practices, to the art practices that are likely to comprise an art education process, to the meaning that arts instructors or learners ascribe to their arts experiences. Such cultural beliefs both shape and are shaped by the larger community and social contexts in which arts education happens.