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## Positive Art Therapy and Well-Being in Urban US Schools: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Positive Art Therapy and Well-Being in Urban US Schools

A Critical Review of the Literature

Capstone Thesis

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Art Therapy

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### Abstract

The integration of positive art therapy into urban school systems holds great promise in increasing the general well-being of adolescents at a systemic level. Urban school systems tend to have a diverse ethnic population as well as students of low socioeconomic status. Adolescents in urban schools often face difficulties that stretch beyond academics such as poverty and racism. It is argued that there should be a method developed to diminish the growing rate of mental health issues within this demographic. Treating symptoms of mental health difficulties is important but looking at what makes people happy should not be ignored. What well-being is and how it is achieved is a growing concept that must be explored in the school setting for the success of students. Well-being is difficult to define because it can vary greatly between individuals and cultures. This paper explores the literature regarding the concept of well-being as it pertains to adolescents, the urban school setting, and art therapy. Martin Seligman's definition of well-being is used to relate the well-being of urban students to the benefits of positive art therapy. Studies that focus on aspects of Seligman's definition of well-being using art therapy in urban schools are provided as reference. The intersection of positive art therapy and well-being is discussed to understand how it may be useful in urban school settings, its limitations, and recommendations for the future integration of positive art therapy into urban school settings.

**Keywords:** well-being, positive art therapy, urban schools, PERMA, adolescents

## Positive Art Therapy and Well-Being in Urban US Schools

### **Introduction**

Adolescence can be a difficult time for many because of the drastic physiological and social changes that occur during this developmental period (Rich, 2012). Adolescents living in urban areas may face additional risks based on environmental, economic, and cultural challenges. For adolescents who face additional stressors, the mental health of the individual can be at risk. At-risk youth may need a variety of interventions in order to regain and maintain stability (Camilleri, 2007). The research in the field of mental health on this transitional period has mostly focused on correcting the behavioral problems and the negative emotions associated with youth (Rich, 2012). However, focusing on strengthening the positive can offer great benefits as well, and must not be ignored.

Positive psychology is a movement that has brought attention to the need to focus on positive emotions rather than treating symptoms. Focusing on strengths and positive aspects of life is a technique which can both combat and prevent mental health difficulties (Rich, 2012). Well-being, or the scientific term for the happiness of an individual, is not only the absence of negative emotions, but also the presence of positive emotions; and therefore, this part of psychotherapy is an important part of treatment that must not be ignored (Huebner, Lewis, Reschly, & Valois, 2009). Because adolescence is an especially sensitive period when well-being may be challenged, looking to increase well-being on a systemic level may lead to the decrease in the mental health difficulties of this population. In school systems, well-being is integral to academic functioning and an increase in well-being is thought to produce a greater ability to learn (Ernst, Gillham, Linkins, Reivich, & Seligman, 2009). When schools focus on only academic achievement, this important aspect of health may be overlooked (Ernst et al., 2009).

Implementing interventions that enhance well-being in the school setting is imperative for the success of students who are facing factors that inhibit their well-being. School systems also provide a promising setting to collectively enhance the well-being of adolescents on a large scale.

Art therapy is the creation of art with the aid of an art therapist that allows for healing and growth through the process of creating and the exploration of the creative product (Camilleri, 2007). Art therapy allows for positive change of an individual in many ways and provides the opportunity to create a strong connection with the therapist (Camilleri, 2007; Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). A new approach to art therapy is positive art therapy, which is being brought to the attention of the field of mental health by Chilton and Wilkinson, who merged art therapy with positive psychology. Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) stated that art therapy has much to bring to the enhancement of well-being. They argued that art therapy can enhance aspects of well-being such as increasing positive emotions, creating strong relationships, and finding meaning in life. They stated that the act of being creative alone can engage and relax the mind, generate new ideas, motivate, and bring a sense of pride and accomplishment. Although the field of positive psychology is well known, positive art therapy is not as well researched. Searching the term positive art therapy in the Lesley University Library database and Google Scholar only brought up literature by Chilton and Wilkinson.

The implementation of positive art therapy within urban school systems may be a successful way to collectively enhance the well-being of underprivileged students across the United States. This literature review seeks to answer the question: What does well-being mean for underprivileged adolescents in urban schools in the United States and how can it be enhanced through school-based positive art therapy? I will first give examples of art therapy programs in

major cities in the United States and how they have been beneficial. I will then discuss the definition of well-being and explore the hardships that adolescents who come from difficult environments may face to strengthening their well-being in the school setting. Positive art therapy and its potential to help combat these difficulties will then be discussed and examples from the literature of how art therapy programs have enhanced well-being in the adolescents of urban school settings will be provided. I will then argue that implementing positive art therapy in urban school settings has a promising future because of its ability to positively impact the well-being of adolescents.

### **Literature Review**

In this paper, I use a literature review to integrate the unique needs of students in urban schools in the United States, the emerging field of positive art therapy, and the research conducted on art therapy in urban school systems in order to call for the implementation of positive art therapy into US school systems to strengthen adolescents' well-being at a collective level. The search terms used on the Lesley University Library database and Google Scholar were *positive psychology, positive art therapy, art therapy in schools, adolescents, urban schools, creative arts therapies, positive education, power and oppression, well-being, and subjective well-being*. The questions that were explored are: What is well-being and how is it defined in the literature? How can well-being be strengthened in adolescents? What are the specific challenges to underprivileged adolescents' well-being? What does well-being mean for adolescents in urban school systems? How has increasing well-being been addressed in urban schools? What is positive art therapy? Can positive art therapy be an effective tool for strengthening the specific needs of the well-being of adolescent students in urban schools? I then compared and critiqued the information I discovered and discussed how it can be meaningful for the future.

### **Art Therapy in Urban US Schools**

Adolescence (defined in this paper as ages 12 to 18) is a time when youth begin to develop their sense of identity, consider the meaning of life, and contemplate their goals for the future (Choi & Jang, 2012). Many changes occur during adolescence, such as physical, emotional, and psychological changes, which can cause great stress to an individual (Choi & Jang, 2012). Outside of the home, adolescents spend most of their time in the school; and therefore, much of their perception of society and how they will be treated by society is learned in the school setting (Camilleri, 2007). Thus, it is extremely important that students have positive interactions at their schools (Camilleri, 2007). Adolescents coming from inner cities often are ethnically diverse or of low socio-economic status families and this may cause or increase academic, emotional, and cognitive difficulties (Camilleri, 2007). Racism and discrimination can lead to many mental health difficulties including depression, anxiety, and a heightened level of stress (Davis & McAdam, 2019). The study of difficulties surrounding adolescents living in urban areas and the school environment can create knowledge on how these problems can be countered to increase students' well-being. When traditional school interventions do not work with the current student body, school systems look for alternative interventions (Heather Harris, personal communication, February 27, 2020). Art therapy has been integrated into school systems throughout the world to help support students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs and has been shown to provide many benefits.

**Benefits of art therapy in school settings.** Art therapy in a school setting can help provide underprivileged families access to therapy (Grima-Farrell, Hannigan, & Wardman, 2019; Alkara et al., 2016; Green-Orlovich, Regev, & Snir, 2015). Oftentimes, adolescents who would benefit from art therapy the most come from underprivileged families or families who may be

neglectful, and therefore may not have the option of art therapy due to finances (Alkara et al., 2016). When art therapy is offered in a school setting, it is free for all youth, not just for those who can afford therapy (Grima-Farrell, et al., 2019; Alkara et al., 2016). It can also be difficult for working caretakers, especially those of low socio-economic status, to find a therapist who is available, find transportation, and set up an initial meeting (Alkara et al., 2016). Making the initial decision to place their child in therapy or being aware of the option of therapy may prove a challenge because of the stigma surrounding this concept (Green-Orlovich et al., 2015). Having art therapy an option in the school system is a solution to these difficulties.

Green-Orlovich et al. (2015) described the school setting as “a meeting point of three central systems: the educational system, the personality of the child, and the child’s family,” (p.47). They explained that when art therapy is provided in the school curriculum, it gives the art therapist the ability to work within these systems. The art therapist can obtain a fuller view of who the child is and what their struggles are which helps in creating and achieving therapy goals. The open communication between the three systems also helps teachers to better understand their students and thus be able to work more effectively with them. Green-Orlovich et al. also stated that art therapists can obtain valuable information from the student when they are observed in informal environments, such as at lunch or during breaks.

There are many benefits to having art therapy implemented in a school setting. Art therapy programs in schools are becoming continuously more common in the United States. The following sections outlines several of the more researched art therapy programs in urban districts in the United States and the benefits they bring.

**Miami-Dade.** The Miami-Dade County public schools, one of the largest school systems in the United States, began a pilot program for art therapy in schools in 1979 (Bush, Isis Siegel,



& Ventura, 2010). Bush et al. (2010) provided a thorough overview of how art therapy transformed in the Miami-Dade schools and became an essential part of the educational community. The Miami-Dade district, one of the most demographically diverse districts in the nation, began implementing art therapy programs in grades K-12. The program began as a way of offering services to those with special educational needs such as: “children with autism, children with profound cognitive disabilities, emotionally disabled children, and children with physical disabilities” (p. 57) in order to better service their needs and keep them in the public school system. After a pilot program during the 1979 to 1980 school year, teachers found that students who were typically difficult to work with were more successful during art therapy, and the program was expanded. By the year 1999, 21 full-time art therapists were employed in the district. The art therapy department offers students both individual and group therapy sessions which focus on social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive needs. Along with helping students reach educational goals, the program has also decreased drop-out rates, lowered student anxiety during standardized testing, and increased the community involvement of students.

Although this report highlights many important changes made, the authors did not discuss the issue of power dynamics and cultural differences between the students and therapists in the art therapy program of such a diverse school system. Because the field of art therapy originated from and still consists of a majority of white art therapists, understanding and working through this power dynamic when implementing art therapy with ethnic minorities is important and it is unknown whether this issue has been addressed in the Miami-Dade art therapy program.

**Chicago inner city schools.** In 2002, Chicago inner city schools recognized that there was a lack of mental health support for the students in their system and began a non-profit art therapy program called the Art Therapy Connection (ATC) for students from grades 3 through

12 who were at risk of failing (Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman, 2010). The organization's purpose, with full time and part time art therapists and graduate student interns, was to keep students in school and encourage improvement in social, emotional, and academic areas through creativity and therapy (Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman, 2010). There is a high percentage of African Americans in Chicago public schools, some making up 100 percent of the school population, while other schools have a mix of Hispanic, African American, Caucasian, and Asian American students (Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman, 2010). The ATC program recognized that because most of the art therapists are white, dynamics of power and oppression and cultural differences within the therapy setting must be sensitively considered and addressed (Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman, 2010). This was accomplished by allowing students the freedom to openly express themselves and having the therapist witness and validate their perspective of the world (Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman, 2010). One of the goals of the program is "for students to learn to come together in a group, to cooperate, and to create new meaning for their lives without sacrificing their uniqueness as individuals...As the students and therapists learn to understand each other, distrust and resentment are minimized and cultural exchange is possible," (Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman, 2010, p. 70). True progress cannot be made in the therapeutic relationship without an understanding and respect of cultural differences.

**Jersey City Public Schools.** Jersey City Public Schools, a school system made up of over 27,000 students in elementary, middle, and high school settings have integrated creative arts therapy into their school system. The students in this school system are mostly of low socioeconomic status and about 13 percent have special needs (Nelson, 2010). The student population of pre-K through grade 12 is diverse, as of 2010, "38 percent of the students are Hispanic, 34 percent are African American, 11 percent are Caucasian, and the remaining 17

percent represent a broad range of ethnicities and cultures including Asian American, Haitian, Native American, and Egyptian” (Nelson, 2010, p. 62). Although Nelson (2010) addressed the demographics of the students, the ethnicities of the therapists were not mentioned and the issues of power and oppression that the student population may face from having therapists of different cultures or ethnicities were not stated. However, Nelson argued that art therapy in Jersey City public schools provides a space where the therapist can offer a curious and non-judgmental source of comfort so students can feel safe to be themselves and explore their difficulties. She stated that the Jersey City public school system has incorporated a number of creative arts therapy programs including academics therapy, community engagement art program, technology-based art therapy, a program for students who have difficulty with problem-solving behaviors and violate school rules, and a program for students who have a history of violence (Nelson, 2010).

Students in school-based art therapy programs across the United States have benefited from art therapy that is focused on using creativity to build strengths and improve life within the school system. Positive art therapy is an emerging type of art therapy termed by Chilton and Wilkinson (2009, 2018). The focus of positive art therapy is to strengthen well-being through creativity, artmaking, and the therapeutic process. Positive education programs have been developed throughout the world to enhance the well-being of students (Ernst et al., 2009). However, these rely heavily on verbal and written activities, whereas positive art therapy adds a level of creative expression that can connect students who benefit more from non-traditional forms of learning. Therefore, implementing positive art therapy in urban school settings may be a useful way of enhancing the well-being of students. However, in order to successfully do so,

what well-being is and the factors that enhance and challenge the well-being of students in urban schools must be explored.

### **Well-Being**

The term well-being came into popularity in the United States with the Positive Psychology movement (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). Before World War II, psychology was focused on the study of “curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent” (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000, p. 6). After the war, there was a shift in focus and psychologists were more concerned with assessing and curing people with mental illnesses, while the other important aspects of psychology were forgotten (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). Pathology overshadowed the study of positive emotions and treatment was focused on negative symptoms and ignored the importance of strengthening the positive (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). In the early twenty-first century, a shift in psychology to a more positive approach began with Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Brownell, Schrank, Slade, & Tylee, 2014, p. 96). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a Hungarian-American psychologist, is best known for his contribution to well-being with the term flow, which is described as “a state of optimal engagement characterized by the experience of timelessness, loss of self-consciousness, and complete absorption in the task at hand” (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2013, p. 7). Martin Seligman, the president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, further popularized the concept of positive psychology when he dedicated his term as president to shifting the focus of psychology from curing mental illness to identifying people’s strengths and helping people lead successful lives (Brownell, et al., 2014, p.95). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) defined positive psychology as:

at the subjective level it is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (p. 5)

Since then, the positive psychology field has broadened, with an increasing number of definitions. In a systematic review that was made in 2011 on the definitions of positive psychology, 53 published definitions were grouped into six categories: “(i) virtues and character strengths, (ii) happiness, (iii) growth, fulfilment of capacities, development of highest self, (iv) good life, (v) thriving and flourishing, and (vi) positive functioning under conditions of stress” (Brownell, et al., 2014, p. 96). This shows that the term well-being is subjective depending on the individual. In order to provide appropriate interventions that strengthen well-being, it is important to understand what well-being is for the individual and for the culture of the individual.

Although there are many different forms of well-being, the most commonly used in the literature are psychological well-being and subjective well-being (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Psychological well-being (PWB) is achieved when challenges in life are overcome, a person finds meaning and purpose for a fulfilling life, and full potential is reached (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Subjective well-being (SWB) was first defined by Ed Diener who described it as the study of what makes life pleasant (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Subjective well-being is

when positive emotions outweigh negative emotions, and it can be also described as felt happiness (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). According to Diener,

the field of subjective well-being comprises the scientific analysis of how people evaluate their lives—both at the moment and for longer periods such as for the past year. These evaluations include people’s emotional reactions to events, their moods, and judgments they form about their life satisfaction, fulfillment, and satisfaction with domains such as marriage and work. Thus, SWB concerns the study of what lay people might call happiness or satisfaction. (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2003, p. 404)

Diener also claims that two factors that significantly influence SWB are personality and culture, both factors that are influenced by each other as well. Therefore, what influences subjective well-being can vary greatly between cultures as well as between individuals of the same culture.

Seligman and his colleagues researched well-being in the culture of the educational setting (Ernst et al., 2009). They argued that an increase in well-being can create an increase in learning and “a positive mood produces broader attention and more holistic thinking in contrast to negative mood which produces narrower attention, more critical thinking, and more analytic thinking” (Ernst et al., 2009, p.294). Diener (2003) stated that researching the individuals’ SWB within a certain society is a useful method of assessing the quality of life of a society. He argued that SWB is a necessary quality of a good society. Therefore, it is important for the success of school systems to ensure that their students’ quality of life in the school setting is adequate and to work to improve it if it is not. Students in urban school systems may face many challenges including the difficulties that come from a high number of students being minorities or of low socioeconomic status.

**Seligman and PERMA.** Towards the end of his life, Seligman created a model of the factors that contributed to well-being that he believed merged the affective components of SWB with the important elements of PWB (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Seligman declared that there are five life factors that contribute to the ability to achieve well-being (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). These five elements include positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement; and they are recognized by the acronym PERMA (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Seligman believed that increasing these five factors in one's life will enhance well-being.

In this literature review, Seligman's definition of well-being is used as a model to explore what well-being means to adolescents in the culture of urban schools and the challenges they face to achieving well-being. Seligman's definition of well-being was chosen based on its use in the research in school settings as well as its strong relationship to art therapy. However, it is important to note that this does not mean that every students' sense of well-being relates to this model, but rather it provides a method to explore the possibilities of strengthening well-being in this setting.

### **Challenges to the Well-Being of Adolescents in Urban School Systems**

Although Seligman's PERMA is based on Western views of well-being, there are ways in which it can relate to the multi-cultural youth in the school setting. PERMA offers a method to illustrate the specific needs of adolescents and the challenges they face in obtaining positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement in the school setting. The following sections describe these difficulties in relation to the five aspects of PERMA.

**Positive emotions.** Positive emotions make up the first factor in PERMA. Positive emotions help with cognitive processing and adaptive thinking and are important in emotional regulation (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). An increase in positive emotions "promotes novel

thinking and inspires pro-social behaviors which in turn fosters increased knowledge, expanded possibilities, social connection, and improved physical health” (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 66). It is possible for positive emotions to overshadow the effects that negative emotions have (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018).

Emotional regulation is the process of managing and navigating positive and negative emotions in everyday life (Chin, Morrish, Rickard, & Vella-Brodrick, 2017). The ability to regulate emotions and create more positive emotions can help with the challenges that adolescents face in schools. Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) defined emotional sensitivity as how easily one enters an emotional state and how deeply one feels it, whether positive or negative. They explained how emotional regulation helps one manage and move on from that state. Positive emotions and negative emotions are both integral to the human experience, but the presence of few positive emotions can make self-regulation difficult (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). For adolescents living in difficult environments, negative emotions can outweigh the positive which can increase emotional sensitivity and difficulty with regulation.

Another issue with self-regulation may be caused by the increased use of digital media by adolescents, which adolescents may use as an escape from reality (Chassiakos, Radesky, Christakis, Moreno, & Cross, 2016). According to Chassiakos et al. (2016), a significant amount of media use that is not of high quality inhibits executive function which consist of impulse control, self-regulation, and mental flexibility.

**Engagement.** Engagement in and motivation to complete schoolwork can decrease when there is an increase in life stressors. In the classroom, the academic performance of a student may be negatively affected when the majority of students are less prepared and have difficulty engaging in academics (Camilleri, 2007). For students who live in urban areas, there may be a



lack of resources and extra-curricular activities, which can lead to a higher risk of students not engaging in school resulting in poor academic performance and possible drop-out (Camilleri, 2007).

Adolescence is also a time when youth may experience an increase in boredom. The curiosity and imagination that children display in the younger childhood years tends to decrease as the child grows older, and this lack of curiosity can lead to a decrease in arousal or excitement. When not stimulated by interest, boredom can ensue which can lead to a loss of motivation and self-esteem (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) designed a five-year study where 1,215 high school students in varying schools across the country responded to questions about their current activity and mood eight times a day for one week. Findings were that there was a significant difference in self-esteem in those who often experienced boredom in contrast with those who displayed interest in everyday life. Those who showed interest and engagement were more likely to view themselves in a more positive manner than those who constantly showed signs of boredom.

It is also a growing concern that the increased use of technology and social media is causing shorter attention spans in adolescents. When younger children are exposed to media multitasking such as quickly alternating from one animated video to the other, it is theorized that these quick shifts in attention may have a long-term effect on the attention span (Chassiakos et al., 2016). This could affect ability to pay attention to teachers in school and focus on schoolwork.

**Relationships.** Adolescents often place a large emphasis on peer relationships because it is a period of time when they tend to move away from seeking guidance from teachers and parents, (Choi & Jang, 2012) especially for those whose parents' or caretakers' involvement in

their life is low based on lack of time or being overworked (Camilleri, 2007). Adolescents may look for advice from their peers and find comfort in the fact that others are experiencing similar difficulties (Choi & Jang, 2012). Adolescents living in difficult environments may struggle with the process of creating relationships due to anxiety and behavioral issues (Choi & Jang, 2012). This can cause social isolation, leading to an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Choi & Jang, 2012). For adolescents who live in dangerous neighborhoods, the ability to interact with peers and other adults may be restricted due to lack of a safe space to socialize (Nelson, 2010). These adolescents may also have more contact to relationships with peers that could increase their exposure to dangerous situations.

The relationships that students have with staff in the school setting creates a power dynamic that the teacher is the leader and the student is there to be helped, giving the staff member power in the relationship (Davis & McAdam, 2019). Marginalized students such as ethnic minorities can face overwhelming stress from this system of power and oppression when confronted by racist acts and microaggressions by staff which can have a profoundly negative effect on their academic success and school well-being (Davis & McAdam, 2019).

**Meaning.** Meaning in life can be described as finding what is important to an individual and others in order to create identity and a sense of belonging (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Exploring identity typically begins in early adolescence and adolescents may experience a crisis in identity during this time (Beaumont, 2012). Discovering a sense of identity is “important for psychological functioning because it provides a coherency to one’s personality that is necessary” (Beaumont, 2012, p. 7). Becht et al. (2019) designed a study to identify the directionality of the formation of depressive symptoms and the inability to understand identity within adolescents. They created two longitudinal studies, the first with 497 Dutch adolescents and the second with

1,022 Belgium adolescents, which analyzed the cause of depressive symptoms and lack of a sense of identity. They used questionnaires to gather data over a one-year period. Findings were that for adolescents, uncertainty and confusion surrounding identity led to a cause in depressive symptoms rather than depressive symptoms causing a lack of ability to form identity. The process of developing identity can be difficult for many reasons, and those who do not come to an understanding of who they are may experience low self-esteem and depression (Becht, Luyckx, & Nelemans, 2019).

Racial minorities may have increased difficulty discovering identity when faced with oppression and racism. According to David and McAdam (2019), “social reality is in part constructed through storytelling, and white culture ignores or suppresses the realities of Black people as a way to maintain power” (p. 88). They argue that there are different ways of identifying as a person of a specific culture and these ways of identifying may shift over time. They stated that “white patriarchal capitalist systems have always manipulated identity constructs – defining who is white and who is not – to maintain power and control” (p. 89). This can influence and negatively affect the way marginalized individuals understand and identify with their culture.

In the school setting, meaning can also signify the purpose of being in school. McCulloch-Vislislis, Neece, & Rosal (1997) argued that students often do not realize the importance of school in their lives. The difficulty of entering high school and an increase in independence causes anxiety and students who have social, emotional, or academic difficulties may choose to drop-out rather than face the pressure (McCulloch-Vislislis, 1997). Creating meaning to school life is important to strengthen hope for the future and the drive to stay in school. For adolescents who face environmental stressors such as poverty and racism, their focus

may be on survival in the present rather than education and their future and the reason for attending school loses its meaning (Camilleri, 2007).

**Achievement.** Achievement is the accomplishment of a desired goal (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Seligman refers to achievement as “the inherent gratification we get from the sheer pleasure of accomplishing something” (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 190). Because school is a huge part of an adolescent’s life, their sense of self-esteem can be tied to their success in school. Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman (2010) argued that when there are “constant threats to a child’s well-being—such as chronic exposure to violence, neglect, and sexual or emotional abuse— stability and safety are threatened...and the child’s capacity for learning is adversely affected” (Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman 2010, p. 70). Collins, Sutherland, and Waldman (2010) also stated that students who live in communities where there is poverty can have a lack of self-esteem and self-worth. This can show up in the classroom with lack of desire to do work. When an adolescent’s perception of success relies heavily on achievement in school, and they are failing, it can cause great drops in self-esteem and well-being.

Because of the vast amount of challenges that adolescent students face to their well-being in the school-setting, finding a method to combat these challenges by enhancing the five factors of PERMA is imperative for the mental health of the students as well as their academic success. Seligman’s model of well-being, PERMA, and positive psychology relate directly to positive art therapy, providing the promise that the implementation of positive art therapy has the potential to enhance the five factors of PERMA through the creative process.

### **Strengthening Urban Adolescents’ School Well-Being Using Positive Art Therapy**

Positive art therapy began in 2009, when it was acknowledged that art therapy had much to contribute to the realm of positive psychology and that positive psychology can enhance the

world of art therapy (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2013). Chilton and Wilkinson (2013) stated that there are many positive aspects of art therapy such as allowing the individual to focus on their creative strengths, inducing playfulness, creating an appreciation of beauty, improving mood, inspiring new ideas, and creating meaning for individuals who are struggling (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2013). They described how art therapy can help “to increase positive emotions, to induce engagement and flow, and to identify and create meaning” (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2013, p.4). Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) use Seligman’s PERMA model to focus the concept of positive art therapy on the study of how creativity and art therapy interventions can enhance well-being.

As previously described, the five aspects of PERMA can be used as a model to address challenges faced by urban adolescents to their well-being in the school setting. It can also be used as a model to combat these difficulties through school-based positive art therapy. Studies have shown that the enhancement of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement through art therapy can directly address the needs of urban adolescent students (Choi & Jang, 2012; Collins, Sutherland, & Waldman 2010; Cortina & Fazel, 2015; Curtin, Sassen, & Spencer, 2005; McCulloch-Vislislis, Neece, & Rosal, 1997; Nelson, 2010). The following sections outline these five aspects of PERMA and how the implementation of positive art therapy can enhance adolescents’ well-being in the school-setting.

**Positive emotions.** Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) argued that art can help with the short-term increase in positive emotions through the enjoyment and relaxation that comes from the process of creating. They stated that repetitive or soothing movements using art materials can relieve stress. They also argued that creating art allows for the facilitation of expressions that one is unable to describe in words. Externalizing these emotions can be cathartic and with the help of an art therapist can provide insight. Emotional regulation can be worked on through art by using

it to create “distance between the experiencing self and the observing self [which] often increases the ability to tolerate unpleasant sensations” (p. 79).

A study of an art therapy program with middle school students in Gyeonggi Province of South Korea focused on clay as a medium, ego-resilience (the ability to adapt to stressful situations in a flexible and effective manner), and the expression of emotions from a positive psychology perspective (Choi & Jang, 2012). Choi and Jang (2012) conducted the study consisting of 16 middle school students of low socioeconomic status from the ages of 13 to 15. There were 18, weekly, 80-minute sessions from May 2010 to September 2010. Ego-resilience was measured before the first session, at the last session, and at a one-month follow-up test. Results showed the experimental group had a “statistically significant increase in ego resilience between the pre, post, and follow up test” (p. 249). Choi and Jang argued that the physical approach to working with clay brought a release to suppressed emotions, creating physical and psychological well-being. They stated that the continued experience of working with clay throughout sessions “contributed to bringing about a positive change in the regulation and expression of emotions” (p. 249). Clay is just one of the many art materials that can spark these changes in emotions.

The Art Room, an art therapy intervention program in the UK, used art as therapy for students ages 5 to 16 who are experiencing emotional or behavioral issues due to difficulty in mainstream education (Cortina & Fazel, 2015). The objective of the program is to “increase children’s well-being, self-confidence, independence, and life skills’ and help each child to reengage successfully in school” (Cortina & Fazel, 2015, p. 36). The Art Room is a safe environment where social engagement is encouraged, students can make and respond to art, students can create independently or in a group, the achievement of creating art is celebrated, and

problem-solving and coping skills are developed. Cortina and Fazel (2015) created a year-long study with over 1,000 students who were enrolled in these interventions to explore the emotional and behavioral impact the intervention had on the students. Sessions were held one to two days a week for 10 weeks, with one to two-hour sessions. Teachers were given questionnaires before and after the sessions were completed on emotional and behavioral symptoms as well as strengths and difficulties of the student. Students completed the Moods and Feelings Questionnaire and answered questions about emotional and behavioral symptoms before and after the sessions were completed as well. Teachers stated students' emotions and behaviors improved and were reduced to levels that were no longer clinically significant. They reported that the 60 students who met the baseline for clinically significant difficulties were reduced to 35 students. This study shows promise that art therapy programs can increase positive emotions.

**Engagement.** Art therapy can have a great effect on the engagement of students in schools through the enhancement of creativity. The art therapist can help students boost creativity by guiding them through the use of different media, creating a supporting environment where it is safe to explore their feelings, and helping them experiment and explore themselves through art (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). The art therapist can evoke creativity in students by “channeling the power of the creative process to foster emotional expression, engagement self-reflection, communication, insight, and connection” (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 96).

Creativity in art can often lead to a status of flow through uninterrupted experimentation. Flow is defined by Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) as a state of “effortless attention” (p. 97). Csikszentmihalyi, who researched and first termed the word flow argued that people tend to be “most fulfilled when they experienced this kind of highly-focused absorption” (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 99). One healing aspect of flow accessed through art therapy is its deep

relaxed state which can be obtained through art with rhythmic movements (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Creating with flow can produce unexpected results because it is often spontaneous (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). There is evidence that flow states are linked to an increase in positive emotions and the enhancement of well-being (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) argued that flow does not only have to take place in a calm state, it can also be achieved with high energy adolescents who are engrossed in creating something, such as a group art therapy session in a school setting. They also described how flow has been found to help relieve children of boredom and loneliness. They stated that artmaking and flow “channels anxiety, transforms chaotic energy, and promotes concentration” (p. 103). Csikszentmihalyi explained that flow may be uncomfortable for people to warm up to at first, and many people seek alternative ways to promote happiness such as engaging in digital media (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) argued that these activities tend to be much less rewarding and can lower energy. Creating art can replace these activities for a more cathartic experience.

**Relationships.** Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) argued that positive art therapy can create strong and meaningful relationships. They explained that positive relationships that create a sense of support and belonging are integral for well-being. Relationships are often thought of as the most important part of peoples’ lives, but they can be the most difficult and painful part as well. Group positive art therapy can create strong connections between people and give them a way of communicating together through artwork. The process of working together on a piece of art can initiate connections.

Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) also stated that a positive relationship between the client and therapist can be formed through the art-making process that occurs in art therapy sessions.



Regardless of theoretical orientation, a strong therapeutic relationship is integral to therapy and art can work as a tool to help connect the client and therapist. Creating a meaningful client-therapist relationship is also a way to increase the student's ability to form positive relationships. Collins et al. (2010) argued that "an alliance with a competent, caring adult predicts positive outcome" (p. 71). They stated that art therapy can encourage students to develop relationships that can increase well-being, cognitive development, and social development, even in the face of adversity.

A strong connection between art therapist and client is especially important when working with marginalized adolescents (Collins et al., 2010). Because art therapists tend to be white and art therapy was grounded in theories created by white people, the relationship between culturally diverse students and the art therapist must be sensitively considered. First, the art therapist must be aware and constantly assessing their own biases (Davis & McAdam, 2019). It is also extremely important for them to be educated about the culture of the individual they are working with (Davis & McAdam, 2019). Through art therapy, the issues of power and oppression in the therapeutic relationship can be worked through when the art therapist allows the students to be in control of making their own art, creating group projects, and sharing their voice in their own words or through their art (Davis & McAdam, 2019). The art therapy room can provide a safe space where they have more authority in their own method of self-expression and discussion of their experiences (Davis & McAdam, 2019). It is also important that the art therapist asks for and considers reflections and feedback from their students and adjusts their art therapy sessions accordingly (Davis & McAdam, 2019).

The Art Therapy Connection (ATC) in Chicago inner city schools uses an Adlerian approach which is centered in creating positive relationships through art therapy to enhance their

students' feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and self-confidence, and encouraging them to stay in school (Collins et al., 2010). Sparking an interest in social relationships is believed to increase the desire of students to form bonds with others that are stable and satisfying (Collins et al., 2010). Collins et al. (2010) argued that "respect and constructive participation in life are critical factors in determining whether a student is able to feel a sense of belonging and safety, both of which reduce fear and allow learning to take place" (p. 70). School-based art therapy offers a safe space where this type of relationship can be formed.

The ATC program encouraged youth with difficult lives to make strides in their social, emotional, and academic success (Collins et al., 2010). By utilizing art and creativity in both group and individual therapy sessions, students were able to broaden their self-awareness and self-management skills (Collins et al., 2010). ATC group art therapy was run on the belief that humans are socially motivated and that important issues among group members will arise and be discussed in a safe space where students can gain a sense of belonging and build a connection with their peers (Collins et al., 2010). Collins et al. (2010) described how in the ATC program, students began to see their actions with others and began to move away from a self-focused mentality to a more cooperative mentality focused on social and academic aspects of school life. They argued that "as students begin to move from feeling discouraged to feeling encouraged, they become more open, actively creative, and receptive to learning" (p. 71).

Art from the Heart is a program established for grades 5 through 8 girls from an urban industrial city in the northeastern US (Curtin, Sassen, & Spencer, 2005). Most come from poor, working class families and are at-risk for psychological or school-based problems (Curtin et al., 2005). Many experience difficulties in the family such as divorce, addiction, incarceration, poverty, immigration, addictions, and legal problems. The program was established to help

adolescent girls learn how to form strong relationships (Curtin et al., 2005). Curtin (2005) argued that “in spite of our yearning for connection, our negative relational experiences lead us to fear these connections and we establish patterns of behavior or “strategies of disconnection” that keep us from enjoying the connections we desire” (p.70). The program takes a relational-cultural approach to acknowledging the difficulties these girls may experience in making positive connections. The program uses group art therapy as a method of bonding, recognizing, and solving relational issues in a safe environment to form deeper, meaningful connections within the group and then practicing these skills in future sessions. By fostering empathy within group members, girls “refrain from acting out this disconnecting strategy, and to, instead, talk about what is happening out loud,” (p. 74) making connections between them grow.

**Meaning.** Art can be used to express values and meaning in life. Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) argued that “meaning and purpose come up in art therapy—if not immediately, then at some point in the process—because art naturally communicates what is relevant and meaningful in our lives,” (p.162). They stated that when one understands their meaning, they understand who they are, what their place in the world is, and their sense of purpose is realized (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). They explained that because of the personal aspects of art, meaningful values occur spontaneously in artwork, and the art therapist can help to bring out those meanings. They stated that the art therapist can also enhance the exploration of identity through art by using directives that bring out aspects of identity such as “values, beliefs, assumptions, worldviews, and meaning and purpose,” (p. 162). Art therapy in schools can focus on individuals’ values regarding school and how they can be used to create meaning and hope for the future.

Art therapy in the Chicago school systems has helped bring students hope that there is an ability for them to change despite their difficult circumstances (Collins et al., 2010). This hope

can aid in the motivation to succeed in school. School involvement of 150 students in the ATC program was tracked in the 2007 to 2008 academic year. Findings were that “approximately 80 percent of the students consistently attended school and that nearly 20 percent of those not at school were ill, truant, suspended, expelled, or transferred out of the district...[and] 78 percent of the students in ATC graduated from high school, whereas the graduation rate for the entire student body was 56 percent” (Collins et al., 2010, p.71). By exploring meaning and identity through art and then instilling hope in their ability to change, well-being for adolescents in schools can be enhanced.

**Achievement.** Art therapy has been shown to create achievement through building skills and creating feelings of pride in accomplishment through art (Chilton & Wilkinson, 2018). Chilton and Wilkinson (2018) stated that not only does art therapy provide the physical achievement of making something, it also can also provide the achievement of the client bettering themselves. They argued that positive art therapy focuses on building strengths instead of fixing weaknesses. Exploring what motivates clients through art can lead to future client achievement. A sense of achievement can promote the positive emotion of pride.

One method of school achievement that can be accessed in schools is the development of a skill. The Jersey City Public Schools system contracted with the Animation Project, founded by art therapist Brian Austin, to give a technology-based form of art therapy to middle school students who were of all abilities and social and emotional levels (Nelson, 2010). This program taught students computer animation skills in a therapeutic way to ignite the interest of future education or career in the subject (Nelson, 2010). From the principal’s perspective, the students were successful in the program and there was an increase in school attendance (Nelson, 2010).

Art therapy can also be used in schools to increase the ability to learn. An art therapy program in an urban public high school was developed to incorporate art therapy into a ninth-grade English program (McCulloch-Visliser et al., 1997). Because of the various reasons that make English difficult to learn, such as those who struggle to read and write because of cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties or English being their second language, McCulloch-Visliser et al. (1997) argued that integrating art and storytelling may help students be more successful in English class.

The design of the study conducted by McCulloch-Visliser et al. (1997) evaluated a combined art therapy and English curriculum using a quasi-experimental research design. The study consisted of 50 male and female students from ages 13 to 15 years-old, 55 percent were Caucasian, 38 percent were African American, and 7 percent were of other races. Jefferson County Public Schools Student Attitude Inventory was used at pretest and posttest which provided questions to students about school, family, and self-perception. Report card grades and dropouts were also recorded. One art therapy intervention was given each month throughout the year for a total of nine interventions. During these interventions, students discussed the literature, made art based on it, shared their art with the class, and ended the session by writing in their journal. The conductors of the study found that “twenty-six items indicated significant positive changes in attitude about school, family, and self from pretest to posttest...In addition to the significant changes in attitude towards school, family, and self, none of the 50 students dropped out or failed the ninth grade” (p. 32-33). Therefore, integrating art into academic learning may help students better understand school material as well as have a more positive view of school.

The studies described in these sections that focus on the five aspects of PERMA provide support for the idea that positive art therapy can enhance well-being in the urban school setting.

Increasing positive emotions through the joy of creating art can help with emotional regulation in the classroom setting. Engaging in the creative process allows for students to become more inclined to engage in academics. Building strong relationships through the art therapist and client relationship as well as through joint artmaking can build self-esteem and enhance life satisfaction. Art can help students discover meaning in life and purpose in school. Art therapy can also create a sense of achievement as well as help students learn. Thus, positive art therapy, which is based on enhancing the aspects of PERMA through the creative process, could be argued to provide a method of enhancing the well-being of underprivileged students in urban school systems throughout the United States.

### **Discussion**

The implementation of positive art therapy in the school system has the promise of being successful in enhancing the well-being of adolescents. Studies conducted in school systems provide empirical support that the further integration of art therapy into schools can increase well-being and decrease mental illness among adolescent students on a systemic level. However, there are limitations that must be addressed in order to reach this goal.

### **Limitations**

Although there is much research on the topic of strengths-based art therapy, there are no empirical studies on the efficacy of the implementation of Chilton and Wilkinson's concept of positive art therapy. Therefore, the studies reviewed in this thesis were not based on implementing positive art therapy through the PERMA model, but rather focused on art therapy interventions related to the five factors of well-being. There is also sparse research on art therapy conducted in urban US school systems. Many of the scholarly articles found on art therapy programs were descriptive rather than empirical research studies. This may be because of a lack

of finances or lack of time for art therapists who are working hard to meet the needs of at-risk adolescents.

Another limitation is that it is difficult to define well-being, as it varies between individuals and cultures. It is especially difficult to create universal interventions meant to collectively strengthen well-being. Looking at an urban school setting refines aspects of well-being to what is important for these adolescents. However, because of the cultural diversity of many urban schools, what will enhance students' well-being may differ based on different sociocultural influences. It is also important to note that the majority of art therapists are white, and it may be difficult for students of ethnic minorities to learn about and strengthen well-being from someone who they may not be able to relate to. Because of this, studies conducted to measure the changes in well-being are difficult to conduct and may have many limitations.

### **Recommendations**

Through researching the literature, it can be argued that interventions that strengthen well-being are essential to the mental health of students in urban schools. In general, school systems focus on academic and behavioral learning, and may ignore interventions that focus on building strengths and increasing positive emotions. Although there have been positive institutions created world-wide that specifically focus on building students' well-being through Seligman's PERMA model, this method of teaching has not been widely integrated into school systems in the United States. This may be due to lack of valid research studies or financial reasons. Another reason may be that these interventions have focused on verbal and written ways to increase well-being, which leaves out students who have difficulty reading for various reasons. Expressing through art can give students the ability to transcend words. Thus, positive art therapy, which relates the benefits of creativity and artmaking directly to Seligman's PERMA

model may prove to be a successful intervention for the unique needs of adolescents in urban school systems.

Although art therapy in school systems exists throughout the United States, many art therapy programs have not been empirically researched. For the grander integration of positive art therapy into school settings, there must be more research conducted, especially on a multicultural level. Although there have been many research studies on art therapy in schools, there are only a few that discuss art therapy specifically in urban school settings. Because of the unique needs that come from the diversity of cultures and mental health difficulties in urban schools, it is important that the research focuses on these settings as well.

Finally, the issues of power and oppression in art therapy must not be ignored. Art therapy was established and based on theories developed from Western societal views and the majority of art therapists in the US are white. Because of the high cultural diversity in urban schools in the US, the differences in power and privilege in the relationship between the art therapist and student must be sensitively considered and addressed. Without doing so, the well-being of multicultural students will be at risk. Unfortunately, this is often ignored in schools, and for art therapy to be successful in these settings a concrete method of addressing these challenges must be developed on a systemic level.

### **Conclusion**

This paper draws attention to the possible benefits positive art therapy can bring to students in urban US school systems. Positive art therapy provides a promising method to integrate the enhancement of well-being into a more prominent role in urban school settings. However, there must be more research conducted on what well-being means to students, particularly those who come from multicultural backgrounds or low socioeconomic families, in



order to create successful interventions for this population. There also must be more research conducted on positive art therapy and its benefits for this approach to art therapy to become more widespread.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** E Kellogg, PhD