

Building Singapore Through Arts Education: Six Decades of Institutional Development and Cultural Growth

Contributed by Rosa Daniel, with Desiree Tan

Milestone Developments in Singapore Arts

Singapore celebrates our 60th anniversary as an independent nation this year in 2025. Since 1965, the arts and culture have played a critical role in shaping the Singaporean identity. As the nation transitioned from post-colonial trading port to global city-state in the decades before, the arts fostered in Singaporeans a sense of belonging, encouraging a deep appreciation of Singapore's multicultural heritage, and providing Singaporeans with a high quality of life through cultural participation and engagement.

In 1989, the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA)¹ produced a landmark report to facilitate Singapore's transformation into a culturally vibrant society. This initiated a systematic approach to arts education at tertiary and pre-tertiary levels that would reshape Singapore's cultural landscape and arts ecosystem over the next few decades. Under the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN)² vision launched in 1997, the government further introduced significant changes to Singapore's arts education system. This included a revision of arts curricula in mainstream schools to emphasise creative expression and critical thinking, and the introduction of specialised schools that provided pathways for artistically-inclined students to develop their talents while maintaining academic rigour. Subsequently, the Renaissance City Plans announced in 2000, 2005 and 2008³ further cemented this direction,

positioning arts and culture as crucial elements for enhancing quality of life, building creative workforce capabilities, and making Singapore a more liveable and attractive place. National Arts Council's (NAC) five-year blueprints for the arts—Our SG Arts Plan (2018-2022), and Our SG Arts Plan (2023-2027)⁴—have built on these foundations to commit to arts education from pre-school to tertiary levels, recognising that this is critical to forging a connected society and creative economy for Singapore.

Guided by policy developments over the past three decades, Singapore's approach to arts education can be categorised into four phases. In the first, the integration of arts education into mainstream schools was efficiency-driven, established a foundation for arts appreciation, and cultivated future audiences. Then arts education entered an ability-based second phase, which, to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy, focused on nurturing artistic talent through specialised pathways and establishing centres of excellence in the arts. The third phase focused on innovation and building creative thinking within the education system, with greater emphasis on holistic development through values-based and experiential learning. In the fourth and present phase, arts education corresponds to the "Learning Nation" vision of lifelong learning, extending beyond formal schooling and continuing throughout one's life journey. Within the arts, this means offering diverse and flexible routes, programmes, and courses that empower individuals to continually upskill, explore new creative directions, and define their own paths to success.

1 The 1989 Report on the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) is widely regarded as a watershed in the development of Singapore's arts and cultural scene. It paved the way for the formation of National Arts Council (NAC) and National Heritage Board (NHB), as well as the development of key arts and culture infrastructure such as the Singapore Arts Museum, the Asian Civilisations Museum and The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

2 Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) was a major education vision launched by then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1997. It was a landmark education vision that transformed Singapore's education system from an efficiency-driven to an ability-driven model emphasising critical thinking, innovation, and lifelong learning.

3 The Renaissance City Plans (2000-2012) were a series of strategic initiatives by the Singapore government to transform Singapore into a global arts hub through enhanced cultural infrastructure, arts education, and creative industry development. The three phases progressively built Singapore's cultural capabilities, from establishing key institutions to strengthening community engagement in the arts.

4 The Our SG Arts Plan is Singapore's national arts and culture blueprint, and spans two iterations (2018-2022 and 2023-2027). While the 2018-2022 plan focused on inspiring Singapore, building capabilities and connecting communities, the 2023-2027 plan emphasised strengthening the arts ecosystem, growing audiences, fostering inclusion, supporting internationalisation, and developing infrastructure.

The Arts in Mainstream Education

In Singapore's early years of nation-building, the government's approach to the arts in education reflected its broader national priorities of the time. These focused on industrialisation and economic development, with the arts and culture contributing to educational priorities. Foundational technical skills in visual art and music were taught in primary schools (for students aged 7-12 years) as non-examination subjects. At lower secondary levels (for students aged 13-14 years), visual arts was an examination subject while music remained compulsory but non-examined. Beyond the formal curriculum, students were also able to engage in the arts through extra-curricular activities in school. The Singapore Youth Festival (SYF), launched by the Ministry of Education in 1967, provided a key platform for these artistic pursuits. The Festival evolved over time, shifting its scope from being a comprehensive youth showcase to its current focus on the visual and performing arts, strengthening its role in promoting arts education in Singaporean schools.

Subsequently, MOE introduced the Art Elective (AEP) and Music Elective Programmes (MEP) in the early 1980s, giving students with interest and ability the option to pursue these subjects at O and A Levels. The Drama Elective Programme (DEP) was later added in 2006, further expanding these specialised pathways. Offered in selected secondary schools and junior colleges, these programmes reflected the government's commitment towards nurturing artistic talent within the mainstream education system.

Singapore continues to integrate arts and cultural experiences into formal education through cohort-based programmes like Museum-Based Learning (MBL) and Performing Arts-Based Learning (PABL), bridging classroom learning with cultural institutions. These initiatives provide primary and secondary students with structured engagement with Singapore's heritage and contemporary arts scene. Under PABL, a core learning experience in the lower secondary music curriculum, every student will have the opportunity to experience a bespoke live performance in professional arts venues. Launched in 2024 with 12,000 students across 48 schools, PABL will be progressively rolled out to all secondary schools by 2027.



Picture 1.: Lower secondary students attending a Performing Arts-Based Learning concert by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO). 2024. Image courtesy of Singapore Chinese Orchestra.

Complementing these initiatives in formal education, NAC also works closely with partners in the early childhood sector, such as the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) and Pre-School Anchor Operators (AOP), to increase young children's exposure to arts as part of their core curriculum, co-curricular activities and enrichment programmes. Since 2016, NAC has specially curated a list of well-designed arts education programmes for pre-school children from Nursery 1 to Kindergarten 2. These programmes are delivered by Singaporean artists and arts groups through the NAC-Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) which will reach all government-supported pre-schools by 2027⁵. Currently, about 50% of government-supported pre-schools are onboard the programme.

Centres of Excellence for the Arts

The establishment of the School of the Arts (SOTA) in 2008 marked another milestone moment, and exemplified the shift in Singapore's education philosophy from an efficiency-driven model to an ability-driven one. The genesis of SOTA began with recommendations first mooted in a Parliamentary debate on the Report of the Junior College (JC)/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee in 2002⁶. The report made recommendations to establish specialised schools in various fields, including the arts, as part of a broader strategy to diversify Singapore's educational landscape. The proposal outlined two key objectives: to provide artistically-inclined students with an environment that would optimise their artistic development, and to create a structured pathway for nurturing future artistic talent. The hope was to provide young Singaporeans with quality arts education and nurture future arts

professionals, as well as to develop talents with critical and creative thinking skills that could inject creativity and innovation into the broader Singaporean society.

As Singapore's first pre-tertiary specialised arts school, SOTA provides a unique arts-infused academic curriculum that anchors learning in the arts. For example, students learn about physics principles through sculpture, chemistry principles through pottery glazing, and mathematical principles through music. The school's six-year integrated International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum offers two tracks to support diverse student strengths. The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) caters to academically-inclined students, providing a comprehensive education across languages, sciences, humanities, and mathematics while enabling high-level artistic pursuit, making it suitable for those seeking university admission alongside artistic development. The other International Baccalaureate Career-related Programme (IBCP) track is designed for artistically-gifted students who prefer a more flexible academic approach, combining core IB subjects with career-focused arts studies that emphasise practical learning and creative development, thereby supporting pathways into professional arts careers or further creative studies.



Picture 2.: SOTA Visual Arts students in class. 2024. Image courtesy of SOTA.

⁵ Speech by Senior Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth, Low Yen Ling, at the Committee of Supply debate on 10 March 2025.

⁶ Motion by RADM Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence on the Junior College/Upper Secondary Review Committee Recommendations at Parliament on 25 November 2002.

Concurrently, the tertiary arts education landscape also saw major transformation during this period. In 2010, MOE extended its funding support to the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and LASALLE College of the Arts (LASALLE)—two pioneering arts education institutions (AIs)—for degree programmes offered in partnership with prestigious overseas universities. This propelled NAFA to launch a music degree programme in collaboration with the Royal College of Music, London in 2011, while LASALLE introduced 14 degree programmes in partnership with Goldsmiths College, University of London in the following year.

Diverse arts, media and design degree programmes were also introduced in the other autonomous universities in Singapore. The establishment of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in 2001 within the National University of Singapore (NUS) gave Singapore its first conservatory, providing state-of-the-art facilities specifically designed for training professional musicians. In 2005, the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) established the School of Art, Design and Media (ADM), offering fine arts degrees in animation, film production and design. Its new faculty building boasted advanced

media facilities, including digital laboratories and specialised studios for photography, film, animation, and media production. Local polytechnics also rolled out diploma programmes in arts management, design and media, and theatre production. These have grown in number over the years with polytechnics establishing dedicated schools of arts and media within their campuses.

Singapore's efforts to build a robust arts education ecosystem that serves both cultural and economic objectives culminated in the recent establishment of the University of the Arts Singapore (UAS). Officially launched in 2023, UAS was founded through a strategic alliance between LASALLE and NAFA and is Singapore's first university dedicated to the arts. This initiative enables UAS to leverage the strengths of both founding members, LASALLE and NAFA, while allowing both to remain distinctive colleges. UAS' formation embodies multiple strategic objectives. Most notably, the conferring of degrees under the UAS alliance is a major milestone in the elevation of arts and design education within Singapore's higher education landscape.



Picture 3.: On 10 May 2023, the logo of the University of the Arts Singapore (UAS), Singapore's first arts university, was unveiled by then-Minister for Education, Mr Chan Chun Sing, at the Inaugural UAS Arts Symposium. Image courtesy of University of the Arts Singapore.

Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education in the Arts

“One important strategy is to give our talented and passionate Singaporeans every opportunity to realise their potential. And therefore we have a well-established, longstanding programme to build up our arts education, and students now have a wide variety of institutions and arts forms, (...) All these reflect our commitment to build many peaks of excellence in our education system, and not just a single pinnacle of achievement. And even within the arts, to provide many alternative routes, alternative possibilities, alternative programmes and courses, so that people with very different talents and interests can each find their own niche, their own avenue and their own success.”

Excerpt from Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the signing ceremony between LASALLE College of the Arts and Goldsmiths College, 29 February 2012.

Mr Lee's remarks as then-Prime Minister of Singapore in 2012 reflect a maturing understanding of arts education as a national imperative. This vision positioned creative education not as an optional pursuit, but as a cornerstone of a resilient, future-ready society. It was also a recognition that education does not end with “a single pinnacle of achievement”. Rather, Singapore's arts education ecosystem today aims to foster a culture of lifelong learning and continuous skill development. This is particularly important for the arts sector which comprises a diverse set of professions with a wide range of skills across artforms. With approximately one-third of the arts and culture workforce operating on a self-employed⁷, freelance basis, there is an increased need to support career pathways and progression.

The National Arts Council (NAC), working together with SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG)⁸, as well as the institutes of higher learning and training providers have established a comprehensive set of Continuing Education Training (CET) courses and programmes catering to both professional artists and arts enthusiasts. The CET ecosystem now encompasses formal certification pathways through established institutions like NAFA and LASALLE where individuals can pursue part-time diplomas and certificates across various artistic disciplines.

This is complemented by an array of short courses and workshops backed by NAC. Carefully developed in consultation with the arts and culture sector, these programmes address specific skill gaps and emerging needs in the industry, particularly in areas like digital art, arts administration, and technical production. For example, workplace learning programmes combine classroom training with practical, on-the-job training for specialised fields such as technical theatre.

In 2023, NAC launched the Skills Framework for the Arts in two sub-sectors, Arts Education, as well as Technical Theatre and Production. Jointly developed by NAC and SSG, together with industry stakeholders and training providers, the frameworks help provide industry-level guidance on career development and the skills needed for these sub-sectors. These frameworks help practitioners identify their peaks of excellence and the professional education required to get there.

⁷ Speech by Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, Edwin Tong, at the Committee of Supply debate on 7 March 2024.

⁸ SkillsFuture Singapore is a national agency that drives and coordinates the implementation of the national SkillsFuture movement. It promotes a culture of lifelong learning through the pursuit of skills mastery and strengthening the ecosystem of quality education and training in Singapore.

Conclusion

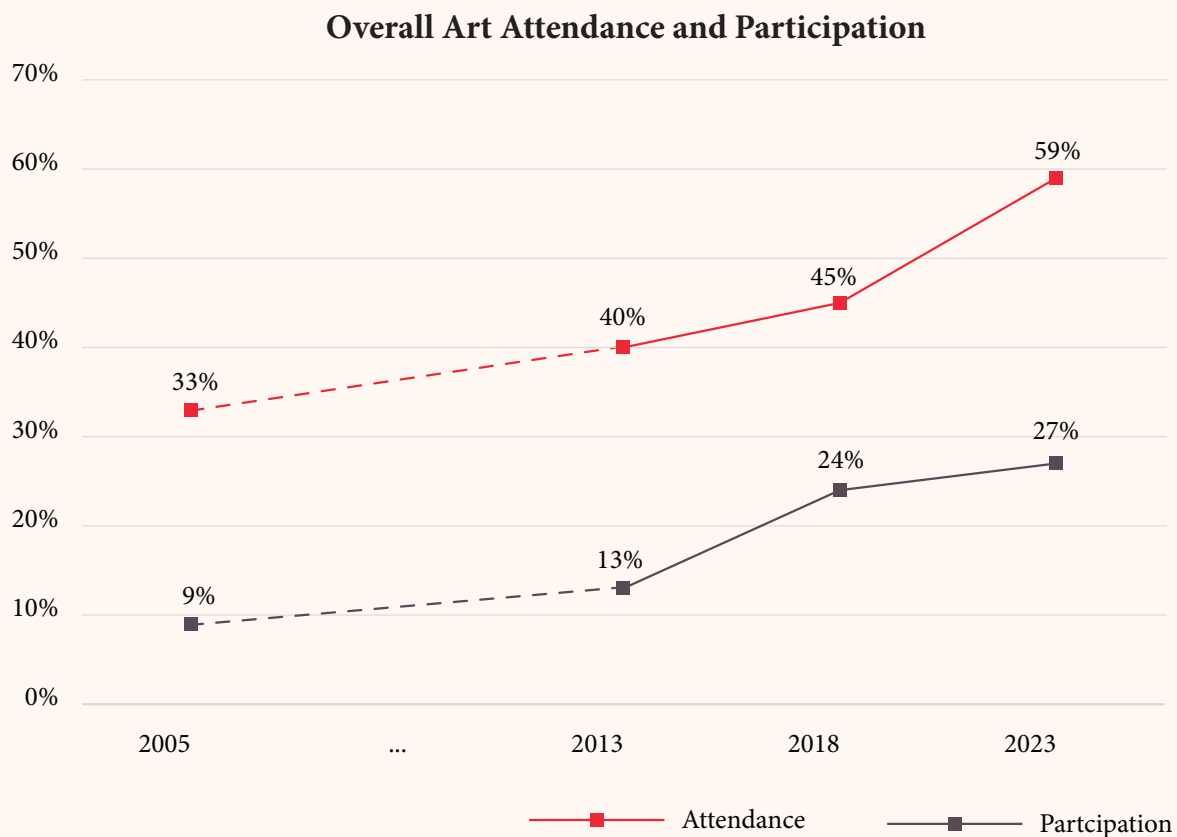
Singapore's journey in arts education over the past three decades reflects a profound evolution in national priorities and educational philosophy. From basic arts instruction to specialised institutions and pathways supporting lifelong learning, this transformation demonstrates a maturing understanding of the arts' role in society. As Singapore navigates the challenges of the 21st century, its investment in arts education serves to cultivate innovation, enrich cultural life, and develop individuals who can think critically and imaginatively—ultimately strengthening the nation's position as a cultural capital while building a resilient and adaptable workforce □

Arts in Education: Nurturing a New Generation of Arts Audiences

Contributed by Dr. Sharon Chang

Singapore's investment in the arts education ecosystem over the past six decades has yielded tangible results.

Data from the National Arts Council's (NAC) Population Survey on the Arts showed that nearly six in 10 Singaporeans attended at least one arts events per year in 2023, compared to just one in 10 in 1995⁹. Similarly, participation in arts activities (such as arts classes and workshops or arts clubs) trebled from 9% in 2005 to 27% in 2023 (Figure 1).

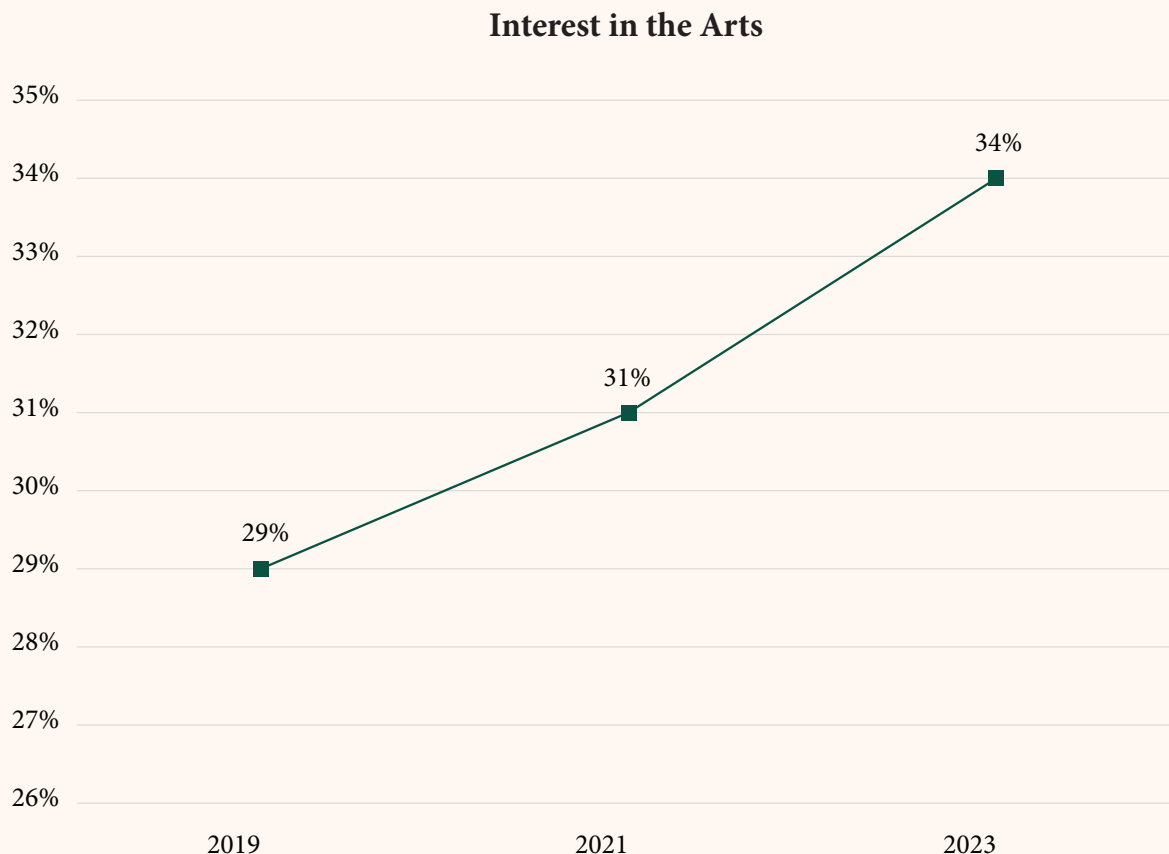


Base: 2005 n=1477; 2013 n=2015; 2018 n=2014; 2023 n=2086

Figure 1.: Overall Arts Attendance and Participation from 2005 to 2023. Overview of Population Survey on the Arts 2023. National Arts Council.

9 Renaissance City Plan III. (2008), p.3

The Population Survey 2023 also revealed that more than three-quarters of Singaporeans recognised the multiple benefits of arts and culture for themselves, the community as well as the country. For example, they affirmed that the arts improved their quality of life (75%), gave them a greater sense of belonging to Singapore (75%), and contributed to Singapore's economy (74%). Even more critically, for an open and multi-ethnic society such as Singapore's, 82% of Singaporeans recognised that the arts gave them a better understanding of people of different backgrounds and cultures. Interest in the arts has also grown in the last five years, since NAC started tracking interest levels in 2019 (Figure 2).



Base: 2019 n=1176; 2021 n=2047; 2023 n=2086

Figure 2.: Interest in the Arts. Overview of Population Survey on the Arts 2023. National Arts Council.

Such growth in arts attendance and appreciation would not have been possible without Singapore's long-term strategy of embedding arts within education from an early stage. In 2023, at least three in four Singaporeans recalled having an experience with the arts and culture during their childhood.

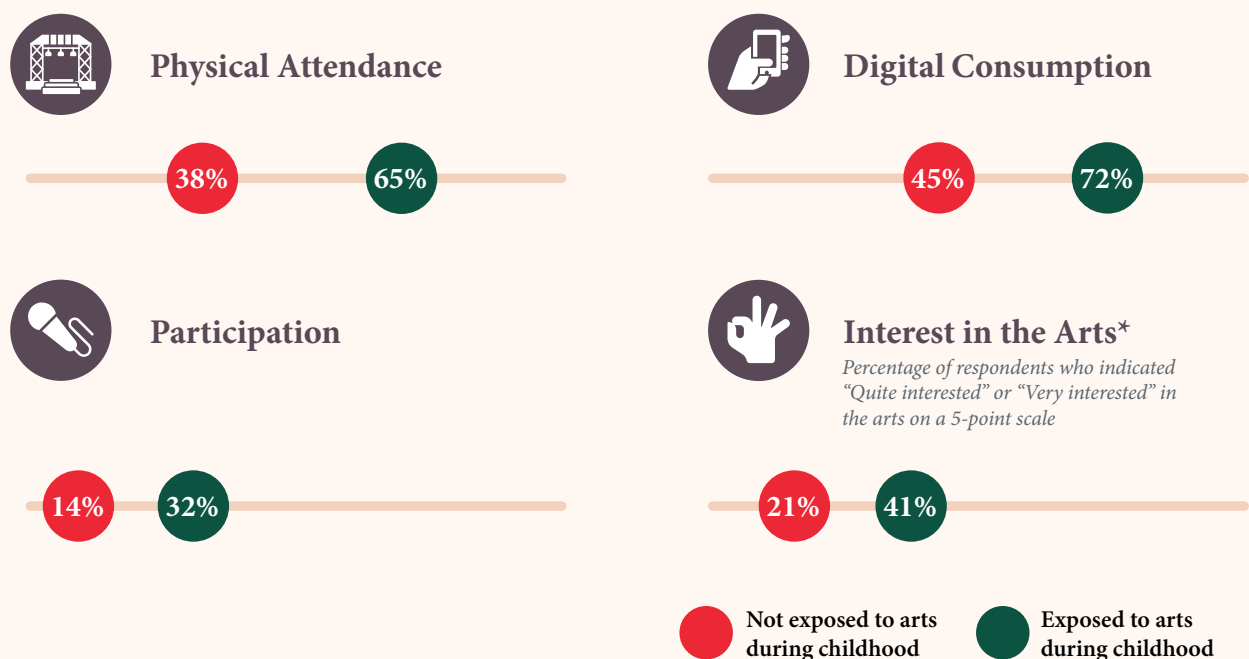
The Population Survey found that these individuals who had engaged in the arts during childhood were more likely to experience higher levels of physical attendance, digital consumption and participation in the arts later on in life (Figure 3). They were also more likely, as adults, to have greater interest in the arts and more positive perceptions of the benefits of arts.

Today, the plethora of opportunities for students to engage with the arts through school (e.g. through the cohort learning initiatives) is seeding greater interest in the arts and undergirding a deeper understanding of the arts' value to society. This not only nurtures future advocates and audiences for the arts, but also plays a pivotal role in transforming Singapore into a more culturally-engaged nation and cohesive people.

Childhood Engagement with the Arts



Current Arts Engagement Behaviour by Childhood Exposure



Base: 2023 All respondents n=2,086; Exposed to arts during childhood n=1,626; Not exposed to arts during childhood n=460

Figure 3.: Childhood Engagement with the Arts and Current Arts Engagement Behavior by Childhood Exposure. Overview of Population Survey on the Arts 2023. National Arts Council.

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