



Inner Reflections: Exploring the Effect of Contemplative Art on Students' Self-Awareness

  Irsa Zahoor (Ph.D)¹ (Corresponding Author)

Board of Advanced Studies & Research
Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad – Pakistan

 Salma Nazar Khan (Ph.D)²

Department of Education
Fatimah Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi – Pakistan

 Najia Sarwar³

Department of Fashion, Art and Design
The Government Sadiq College Women University, Bahawalpur – Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences and perceptions of university students to establish a connection between Contemplative Art (CA) and self-awareness. It also explores strategies for integrating CA across various academic disciplines. Using semi-structured interviews with 12 Fine Arts students from public sector universities in Punjab, Pakistan, the research identified key themes that underscore a strong relationship between CA and the development of self-awareness among higher education students. The primary emerging themes include increased self-confidence, spiritual awakening, and enhanced emotional expression. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of departmental collaboration and teacher training as effective strategies for integrating CA into other disciplines, thereby promoting interdisciplinarity. By disseminating these findings, this research aims to stimulate discourse on the role of CA in educational settings, contributing to the broader discourse on holistic and contemplative education. The insights from this study have the potential to enrich existing literature, encourage faculty to incorporate CA in their pedagogical practices and inspire future research into this essential area of education.

Keywords

Contemplative art
 Departmental collaboration
 Emotional expression
 Holistic development
 Self-awareness
 Spiritual awakening

INTRODUCTION

Humans ignore one of their most precious assets, their own 'selves.' It is habitually unknown to us what makes us happy and sad and what motivates our behaviour. Managing emotions and feelings involves precise recognition and awareness of one's feelings (Ghaffari & Ahadi, 2007). Self-awareness is often confused with self-knowledge, and self-consciousness (Beitel et al., 2005; Morin, 2017; Sutton, 2016; Vanechoutte, 2000). Self-awareness is fundamentally defined as the ability to perceive oneself clearly (Eurich, 2018), involving the capacity to become the focus of one's attention. Recent literature (Carden et al., 2022; Chon & Sitkin, 2021; Eurich, 2018; Rasheed et al., 2019) suggests that self-awareness can be understood through content and process dimensions.

The content dimension includes internal awareness; understanding one's emotions, beliefs, cognitive processes, goals, personality traits, and values; understanding external awareness, which involves recognizing one's physical appearance, behaviours, and social feedback from others. External self-awareness also includes sensitivity to how one's behaviour affects others. The process dimension of self-awareness refers to the cognitive activities of self-reflection, such as introspection and self-examination, where individuals consciously contemplate and sustain awareness of their traits and integrate this awareness into their behaviour and interactions (Carden et al., 2022; Chon & Sitkin 2021). Generally, self-awareness means being aware of your needs, emotions, fears, disgusts, hatreds, interests, pressures, deficiencies, satisfactions, empathy, strengths, weaknesses, and their effects on others (Flavian, 2016).

Research Questions

- How do higher education art students perceive the connection between contemplative art and self-awareness?
- How does contemplative art foster self-awareness among art students?
- How can contemplative art be integrated into other disciplines within higher education in Pakistan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-awareness involves focusing on oneself, recognizing one's feelings, and determining how one's actions complement one's inner values and life philosophies (Morin, 2011). Highly self-aware people

can evaluate themselves objectively, control their emotions, align their behaviour with their values, and prove themselves to be better decision-makers (Dierdorff & Rubin, 2015) and effective leaders (Axelrod, 2012). Research also associates high self-awareness skills in adolescents with better anger management (Mohammadiary et al., 2012), better mental health (Ghaffari & Ahadi, 2007), and better communication and relationship skills. Individuals who are not able to regulate their emotions and feelings and are unable to manage aggression tend to have anxiety and depression (Hendricks et al., 2013). Mitsui et al., (2014) added another critical finding describing how people who experience suicidal thoughts are less aware of themselves and have low self-esteem. However, self-awareness processes can have dysfunctional consequences, as awareness does not always lead to positive outcomes. Excessive self-reflection may impair functioning (Ariel et al., 2018), and self-serving biases and self-deception can distort self-perceptions (Showry & Manasa, 2014). High levels of self-awareness can also lead to negative traits like aggression, narcissism, and emotional dysregulation (Chon & Sitkin, 2021), as well as anxiety and depression from self-criticism and introspection (Walsh & Arnold, 2020). Interventions that reduce self-blame and enhance control over biases can help mitigate these issues (Vitriol & Moskowitz, 2021).

Zarie et al., (2010) found that self-awareness training was associated with more excellent decision-making skills. Self-awareness and self-expression skills enhance problem-solving and personal management skills and decrease anxiety, depression, stress, violence (Ashrafi et al., 2014), and drug abuse behaviours. As a result, empathy, humour, positive self-concept, self-esteem, and resilience flourish. Rehman (2001) and Zahra et al., (2010) researched in the Pakistani context on 16 to 18 years old students to find the effect and relationship between self-concept and academic achievement. Both the mentioned studies concluded that self-concept positively affected students' academic achievement. The ability to recognize one's rights, values, attitudes, and strong and weak points is an essential skill when it comes to self-awareness (Khademi et al., 2017) and is considered a crucial education priority by parents, students, teachers, and educational specialists (Sahraian et al., 2012).

In exploring the self through art, one can discover their individuality, an authentic reflection of who they are. Art allows one to see themselves from a fresh perspective and is a quick and easy way to begin self-awareness (Topper, 2021). Art as a contemplative practice can foster wonder in nature and inquiry into yourself and the larger universe (Topper, 2021). The use of art for telling a personal story has been around for centuries since it produces a more detailed expression of an object or situation (Anning & Ring, 2004). Art conveys deep meaning, feelings, and emotions through symbols, shapes, and colours. The meaning of symbols, colours, and images may be more profound than what the viewer initially grasps. A contemplative work of art can bring the individual closer to their true self, their divine self, and thus help them become aware of who they are (Gelo et al., 2015). Contemplative Art in any form specifically, of drawings, paintings, calligraphy, and sculpture, can illustrate one's perceptions or confession that may not be expressed through conversation or in writing (Malik, 2022; Newland et al., 2020; Zeb et al., 2023).

This type of art helps individuals recognize their past, present, and future and embrace their journey from where they came to where they are now and where they see themselves in the future (Nelson, 2017). Holistic development, including self-awareness and creativity, is essential for students to thrive in the demanding 21st century (Passow & Passow, 2017). Based on the literature review, CA enhances students' self-awareness (Hughes, 2011). CA has the potential to enrich students' lives by allowing them to express themselves creatively. It helps them perceive and appreciate the beauty of shape, colour, harmony, and movement (Nelson, 2017). Art profoundly influences creativity, instilling ethics and aesthetics, promoting cultural adaptation to prevent or address antisocial behaviour, and fostering global respect for cultural diversity (Clarke & Basilio, 2018; Labor, 2018).

In Pakistan, the education system faces systemic problems related to equity, quality, teacher capacity, infrastructure, funding, and governance (Murtaza & Hui, 2021). The research documented that it had never been a priority on the political front of Pakistan to alleviate these problems; thus, the educational institutions, with limited funds and autonomy, have equally failed to resolve these issues (Arshad et al., 2015; Murtaza & Hui, 2021). The inadequate focus on holistic development and the neglect of art education in higher education has resulted in students lacking critical thinking skills, stress management

abilities, and self-awareness. Unfortunately, Pakistan's education system focuses on getting marks and degrees and securing better financial opportunities irrespective of individual interests, abilities, and moral and ethical development (Murtaza & Hui, 2021).

In addition, teachers remain stuck to the old and traditional teaching methods and do not get opportunities for professional development in innovative teaching methods (Haq et al., 2020). Moreover, institutional restrictions, limited resources, and administrative support prevent them from integrating new and innovative teaching pedagogies (Kashif, 2018). They do not incorporate art activities and contemplative practices for the holistic development of students (Zahoor & Khan, 2022). Art activities such as drawing and colouring are part of early years education but are not part of the teaching-learning process. Even in 2021, the education reform instituted by the government, outlined in the Single National Curriculum (SNC), failed to include art as a subject in schools or to integrate it into education (Sadik, 2021). Due to outdated pedagogies and minimal focus on holistic development, lack of self-awareness, self-esteem, ability to express emotions, and critical thinking among students is common. Poor self-awareness and self-management cause stress and anxiety among students, and they prefer to end their lives in stressed situations (Salman et al., 2022). Teachers should continuously refine and improve their teaching methods to effectively foster the development of creative skills in students (Shaheen et al., 2023). Thus, the literature mentioned above emphasizes that art education needs to be mainstreamed through all formal and informal education forms.

Regardless of its importance and positive effects on individuals' well-being, today's environment does not allow these messages to be sufficiently communicated and the public still neglects art as a subject (Yue, 2022). This study analyses the perceptions of art students regarding the connection between CA and self-awareness. It also provides strategies for incorporating CA into other disciplines besides the art discipline. In terms of the concerns of educationists, students, and parents, students at college and university level experience confidence issues, goal setting, social pressures, financial issues, academic pressure in the form of competition, interest in the subject being studied, and subject selection (Jin & Ye, 2022; Shahid et al., 2016). This study helps parents, faculty members, and students gain a better understanding of how adults perceive themselves and how to become more self-aware. The findings of this study will likely contribute a valuable impact to the existing literature by providing a contextual analysis of under-discussed phenomena in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An interpretive study was conducted within a qualitative paradigm to explore the perceptions of university fine arts students about the connection between CA and self-awareness. The study further explored how to integrate CA into other disciplines within higher education. Qualitative research methods, including interviews, offer a robust framework for the in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, making them particularly well-suited for investigating self-awareness. This construct, which is characterized by internal thoughts, emotions, and reflective processes, is best captured through open-ended, exploratory interviews that allow nuanced expression (Rejnö et al., 2014). As a multi-dimensional phenomenon shaped by personal history, social context, and emotional states, self-awareness is complex and dynamic. Qualitative approaches yield rich, contextually grounded data, offering insights into how self-awareness manifests across diverse settings and revealing the underlying mechanisms that influence its development (Wertz, 2011).

Participants of the Study

We engaged postgraduate students specializing in painting, drawing, calligraphy, and sculpture from three public sector universities in Punjab, Pakistan. We specifically targeted art students by employing a purposive sampling methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participant selection was facilitated by program coordinators and class representatives, leveraging online student learning platforms to reach

potential participants. The demographic distribution within the fine arts departments revealed a gender composition of 70 percent female and 30 percent male students. The principle of thematic saturation guided the sample size (Marshall et al., 2013), particularly pertinent in qualitative research, known for its small, in-depth, and time-intensive samples (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saturation was attained after conducting interviews with twelve participants with a mean age of 22. The demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants

No.	Gender	Age	Course
1	Female	22	Painting
2	Female	24	Sculpture
3	Male	25	Calligraphy
4	Female	21	Painting
5	Male	21	Sculpture
6	Male	23	Sculpture
7	Female	22	Painting
8	Female	22	Calligraphy
9	Female	21	Drawing
10	Male	22	Painting
11	Female	23	Calligraphy
12	Female	21	Painting

Research Ethics

Research ethics play a pivotal role in safeguarding personal data and fostering trust throughout the research process. The voluntary nature of participant involvement is paramount, and any breach of ethical standards can significantly compromise the integrity of the study (Nunan et al., 2020). To address these concerns, all participants were provided with a comprehensive consent letter. This document outlined the study's objectives, ensured confidentiality of personal data, and explicitly affirmed participants' right to withdraw from the study at any point should they feel discomfort.

Procedure

This study employed semi-structured individual interviews to explore participants' experiences studying art at the university level. Open-ended questions guided the discussions, allowing in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. To enhance the data collection process, follow-up questions were strategically planned. The semi-structured format allowed researchers to delve into emergent themes relevant to the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The first two authors conducted the interviews with oversight from the third author. Before the main study, the interviewers conducted pilot interviews under the third author's supervision. During the initial interviews, the interviewers observed and assessed mutual performance, ensuring rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the data collection process. This scrutiny facilitated the maintenance of objectivity and reflexivity throughout the research.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, researchers first generated insights from the interview transcripts. These insights were further articulated through memos and field notes. The interview materials were then systematically coded, and data analysis was managed using NVivo software. After transcription in the original language of the interviews, the content was translated into English for interpretation. A three-stage thematic approach was employed to analyse the data, which extended beyond mere word and phrase counting. This approach involved identifying implicit and explicit underlying ideas through coding, clustering,

pattern recognition, and report writing. Consistent with Corbin and Strauss (2015), transcription and open coding were utilized to ensure accurate interpretation of the data.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

Increased Self-Confidence

The first theme from the data highlighted how CA enhanced participants' self-confidence. All twelve participants believed they felt more self-aware and confident about themselves when studying art. The level of self-confidence a student can achieve depends on how much they are aware of themselves. Students with high levels of self-confidence are better able to interact with others, are more likely to trust themselves, want to stand out from others, and think independently. One participant studying painting stated, *"I feel more confident about myself as much as I express myself through art...the process of art making/CA allows me to be disconnected from the routine life and makes me feel content and blessed the way I am...I feel happy and grateful"* (Participant 4).

Another participant believed, *"Contemplating through art helps me in self-exploration...now I feel happy about myself. I can interact with people and feel confident about myself...it helps me to explore who I am, what I want to be, what I like and dislike etc."* (Participant 11). Studying/practicing art, especially painting, allowed one of the participants to be more confident because he could express what he felt, and his work helped in deciding his future, *"My work allowed me to explore what I am and what I want in my life in future...my work serve as a source of expression which helped me to cope with routine issues/challenges...I feel being mindful about my actions, emotions, and feelings"* (Participant 6). The self-confidence of students contributes to their ability to cope with daily challenges.

Spiritual Awakening

The transformation from form to formlessness is moving from artistic experience to spiritual experience. When one enters the spiritual stage of the process, image sight forms. Holmes et al., (2007) describes it as occurring when one develops a more profound connection or experience with the artwork. The form gradually dissolves during this process, allowing the experience to expand and ascend into formless spaces. In this study, participants who mentioned the spiritual awakening through art were mainly from calligraphy and drawing/painting. One participant stated, *"During my classes of calligraphy I started to analyse and understand the religious aspects of life...the translation of selected verses helped me to be more connected to Allah (God)...and I feel at peace"* (Participant 3). *"It feels good when I do my calligraphy the verse of Holy Quran connects me to Allah (God) and helped me to connect to nature as well...sometimes I experience something indescribable..."* (Participant 11). *"During the process of painting, I feel disconnected with the world, and it helps me to connect myself and the powers around me with nature especially and the creator..."* (Participant 7). Participants felt more connected to the superpower and were more satisfied and grateful. They may not be at the highest spiritual awakening, but they started to experience it gradually.

Ability to Express Emotions

The importance of art is beyond question in expressing thoughts, feelings, opinions, and internal needs. Using art can be a means of communicating knowledge and expressing emotions (Zakaria et al., 2021). There is so much diversity and subjectivity in art. There is much freedom in art, and it is such a unique way to express one's feelings or thoughts to others. Being able to express emotions emerges as one of the themes in this study. One participant stated, *"I was an introvert, but my art has taught me to express myself, although I was hesitant at the start, it made a significant impact on my life"* (Participant 4). *"My paintings provide me opportunities to express my feelings...when I am sad it reflects in my work when I am happy it showed in my work...overall all forms of art help the artist to express themselves"* (Participant 10).

In the views of another participant, *"The art I create makes me feel safe and happy...in a way, it's like painting your heart on a canvas, colour by colour, until you're satisfied"* (Participant 8). Apart from the above-discussed themes, participants believed that CA helped them in better decision-making because

they felt more self-aware and confident. Moreover, art improves their well-being and self-motivation. Ultimately, CA is very influential, whether it takes the form of painting, calligraphy, or sculpture.

Strategies for Inclusion of CA in Other Disciplines

There are many ways to incorporate CA into the curriculum, ranging from a small amount to a full-fledged integration. For art to be successfully integrated into the teaching process, the teacher plays a vital role. Art students revealed that art-rich environment motivates students and have a positive effect on them. Students can express their interest and creativity through various art tools and materials. However, general education teachers do not often integrate art into their curriculum for many reasons, such as a lack of confidence in their artistic abilities and ignorance of art educational methods. In addition, there is a lack of time to prepare and implement art lessons. The participants suggested some strategies for the integration of CA across disciplines.

Art Activities Part of Professional Training

As mentioned above, teachers play an essential role in integrating art into the teaching process; therefore, CA should be part of their professional training. One participant shared, *"For the integration of CA in other disciplines, teachers should get pre-service and in-service training of basics of art and how art can be made part of routine teaching"* (Participant 2). Another participant expressed, *"Being an art student/practitioner I can say that it will be easy for teachers of other disciplines to integrate art activities in their teaching if they get training and know the basics of painting, drawing, and color scheme, etc."* (Participant 7). Teachers do not have to know all the technicalities of art, but basic knowledge of art may help them integrate CA into their teaching process.

Interdisciplinary Collaborations

Art is extremely valuable, but teachers in other disciplines lack the knowledge and experience to integrate art activities into their classes. Teachers can collaborate to integrate art activities or establish interdisciplinary collaboration for art integration across disciplines. A participant exclaimed, *"Collaboration between the art department and departments of other disciplines will certainly help teachers to integrate CA in their classes...I think weekly team teaching will be possible because of such collaboration"* (Participant 1). Another participant was of the view, *"Interdisciplinary collaborations between art and other disciplines will help teachers to integrate art activities into their lesson plans..."* (Participant 5). Apart from the themes above, participants stated that collaborative learning in joint projects will also provide a good opportunity to include art in other disciplines.

Discussion

In the education system of Pakistan, art has lost its relevance to education and everyday life; art has become a luxury and a source of indulgence for the wealthy. Throughout human history, creativity has been experienced at a very early age. Humans inevitably lose their creativity if not nurtured and cultivated over time. Due to this decline in aesthetic appreciation, the educational system must be reinvented and revamped. Identifying art as a contemplative practice reminds us that it can be a powerful tool for transformation (Franklin, 2017). It is essential to live a whole and active life and be engaged in it. There is a close connection between art, creativity, and self-awareness. Art provides tools for gaining insight and coping skills (Franklin, 2017; Gelo et al., 2015). The current research studies explored this connection by comparing the perceptions of art students regarding CA and its connection with self-awareness.

The study results indicate that students from the art department considered CA a decisive factor in discovering themselves. The major themes that emerged from the data were increased self-confidence, spiritual awakening, and ability to express emotions. The results echoed the findings of the earlier conducted studies, where participants considered art as contemplative seeing and inseparable from the practice of being alive (Dustin & Ziegler, 2016). Earlier research also found that contemplative art among adults yields several spiritual benefits. These include a sense of belonging, comfort, meaning, transcendence, and a sense of self (Gelo et al., 2015).

Students develop their self-esteem and social skills through CA, contributing to their well-being. There was a significant correlation between self-efficacy and self-acceptance, as well as self-efficacy and autonomy and the ability to master the environment, progress toward personal goals, and meaning in life (Ahmad & Kausar, 2021). Participants believed that the art-making process created opportunities for them to disconnect from their routine busy lives and enabled them to think about themselves, their connection with the world, and the creator of the universe. These findings support the notion of Dalton (2019), who explains that art as a contemplative practice provides a much-needed counterbalance to finding inner peace, reflection, spiritual awakening, and creativity.

CA helps participants develop self-awareness and spiritual awakening. This study also identified that CA, such as drawing, painting, calligraphy, and sculpture, provide opportunities for the students to express themselves through nonverbal and symbolic interactions. Art practices enable them to present their ideas, reactions, cultures, identities, and feelings/emotions. These findings resonate with the literature (Malik, 2022; Newland et al., 2020; Zeb et al., 2023). Often, expressive activities such as drawing, painting, sculpture, and others serve as methods for externalizing information that may not be readily accessible. Through this, an individual's conceptions of self and environment, or their life narratives, can be explicitly analyzed and constructed/reconstructed (Chan & Horneffer, 2006; Holmes et al., 2007).

The second question of this research paper explored the strategies for including CA in other disciplines in higher education. It was found that pre-service and in-service training and interdisciplinary collaboration will help faculty members of other disciplines integrate art into their teaching/class. Teachers from other disciplines should learn the basics of art as the inclusion of art in other disciplines starts simplistically (Bazan, 2019). Participants also mentioned collaborative learning while talking about collaborative teaching. It is evident from a study where students from the fine arts and sciences departments developed classroom partnerships to explore how ideas are visually communicated and how knowledge is constructed (Bazan, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Incorporating art into the educational system significantly enhances a student's personal, social, and academic development. Beyond the academic benefits, contemplative arts (CA) promote self-esteem, self-awareness, motivation, aesthetic appreciation, cultural exposure, creativity, emotional expression, social cohesion, and the appreciation of diverse individuals and cultures. As a contemplative practice, art provides a medium for personal expression, facilitating emotional exploration and self-awareness while fostering spiritual growth. The current study's findings indicate a strong positive relationship between participation in CA and self-awareness among university students. Integrating art activities across various academic disciplines can be supported through targeted teacher training and interdisciplinary collaboration. To effectively prepare students for real-world challenges, institutions should consider embedding art programs within their curricula, treating them equally as traditional subjects like science and mathematics.

Recommendations

This research offers valuable insights for faculty and university administrators in designing and implementing interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, as well as incorporating art into non-artistic disciplines. Additionally, given the critical role of self-awareness in student development, further intervention-based studies are recommended across different educational levels. Future research should also explore diverse forms of CA, such as music, dance, and photography, to broaden the understanding of its impacts on student development.

Competing Interest

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Biography

- ¹ **Irsalrsa Zahoor (Ph.D)** is currently on an Administrative Position at the Board of Advanced Studies & Research, Allama Iqbal Open University in Islamabad – Pakistan. She obtained her Doctorate in Education from Fatimah Jinnah Women University in Rawalpindi – Pakistan.
- ² **Salma Nazar Khan (Ph.D)** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Education, Fatimah Jinnah Women University in Rawalpindi – Pakistan. She obtained her Doctorate in Educational Policy Research and Administration from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in Amherst, Massachusetts – United States.
- ³ **Najia Sarwar** is a Lecturer at the Department of Fashion, Art and Design, the Government Sadiq College Women University in Bahawalpur – Pakistan. She received her Masters in Fine Arts from the University of the Punjab in Lahore – Pakistan.

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