

# The Realities of Art Misconceptions in Ghana

(A study on misconceptions surrounding the study of the arts in senior high schools in Ghana and how a positive attitude towards the creative arts could enable sustainable living.)

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*Abstract: Art is a way of life (Bauman, Z. 2013) that embodies freedom of self-belief and a way to make meaning of life. Art is an integral part of everyday life. Unfortunately, the regularity of these daily creative decisions has contributed to why many disregard art or do not perceive it as a respectable career. The creative arts industry has been a low-hanging fruit for many economies worldwide, with very little attention given to its vast potential, especially on the African continent. Failure to recognise and pursue art's social, cultural and economic value has been daunting on the African continent. The research has shown that studying art in senior high schools in Ghana is second to all other subjects. The warped perception (misconception) of people pursuing art programs, especially students in high school, has a long-term effect on the country's development. The research collected critical data from three (3) stakeholders (students, institutions and guardians) in the southern parts of Ghana (Accra and Cape Coast). The data analysis reveals the sources of this misconception and its effect. A significant ratio of art-based humiliation (misconception) suffered by art students comes from their peers (non-art students), followed by institutions (system and structures) and guardians. The thesis revealed that educational reforms and deliberate exposure of art knowledge to the research stakeholders could help build a perfect synergy of positive perception of arts, leading to a robust creative economy in Africa.*

*Keywords: Art Misconceptions, creative economy*

## 1 Literature review

There are two significant groups of intelligence: intellectual (left-brained) and emotional (right-brained), which constitute the learning process of every human being on earth. Pursuing art requires cognitive and top performance from both the left and right brains. This statement means the study of art is for intelligent students, contrary to what most people perceive (Goleman, 2006). Some scholars noted that art education merits a significant part in the heart of the education curriculum because of its numerous benefits, mainly in reasoning and critical thinking.

Creativity in African children is overly controlled, meaning parents constantly tell their children what to do and how to do it. There is little room for children to follow their interests or find their own paths. "These controls leave children less confident about their originality, and following your heart is a waste of time (Ntim-Ofosu, 2018). If one asked Ghanaian children what career to choose when they grow up, most would mention professions like law, medicine, and engineering rather than art-related jobs.

The study and pursuit of art are not strongly encouraged in several communities in Ghana. It is often viewed as a non-professional pursuit, associated with individuals perceived as less intelligent or who have failed in life. This stigma is particularly prevalent in senior high schools, where students studying the arts frequently face humiliation (Agyare & Atiase, 2022).

These negative perceptions are classified as "art misconceptions." Any statements or actions that shame or humiliate individuals who choose to pursue the arts hinder the social, cultural, and economic transformation of our communities.

This study aims to understand the sources and long-term effects of art misconceptions in Ghana's senior high schools and propose ways to foster a community that values creativity.

## 2 Methodology

The debates and discourses on art misconceptions and the value of art have been carried out by researchers, policymakers, and international organisations around the world; it is crucial not to pick and adopt any research approaches, strategies, and models for the study of the impact of the creative misconception on African creative economy keeping in mind that any viable empirical assessment of the relevance of institutions, society and the senior high students needed to be approached and observed in its uniqueness, incited the study to adopt quantitative and qualitative research strategies.

**Quantitative Strategy:** The quantitative approach helped to form the hypothesis and then use deductive reasoning by forecasting how the data should look if the hypothesis is true after collecting and analysing it to confirm or reject it. Researchers who use this method aim to create a general understanding of the behaviour and other phenomena of the students and guardians.

**Qualitative Strategy:** This strategy allows researchers to approach the field inductively by generating new insights, theories and hypotheses based on emerging data collected from observations and interviews. Another benefit is the iterative nature

of this approach, which allows for understanding a phenomenon from different perspectives.

The research was conducted in Accra, Ghana, from June to July 2022. Every respondent gave consent to the use of the information. The research targeted three groups, and each group had a different survey approach.

**Students:** The first group was senior high school students aged thirteen (13) to nineteen (19) years in the Greater Accra region in Ghana. The criteria for choosing the schools were based on the background that the students came from, all sixteen (16) regions of Ghana, with diverse socio-economic backgrounds, which makes a good representative of SHS students in Ghana. The hardcopy forms were circulated to students during a special event - an inter-school sports competition. The event was an annual regional sports event that involved over thirty (30) schools participating from the Greater Accra region. The respondents came from seventeen (17) schools (Public and Private schools). Three hundred eighty-six (386) participants filled out the printed survey form.

**Guardian:** The second group were parents with children actively schooling in senior high schools, who were the target for the survey. British English is the official language of Ghana; hence, the survey content was in English. The responses were slow at the beginning. Coordinating teachers had to call several times to send reminders to parents to fill. The researchers had to make direct calls to get submissions. At the end of the period, we recorded one hundred and thirteen (113) respondents.

**Institution:** The view of educational institutions' authorities was relevant in understanding the art misconceptions. Nine (9) interview questions were self-administered to gather the thoughts. The interview opened up the discussion for deeper understanding. The interviews were held and recorded via Zoom. The time allocated for each interview was 45 minutes. Recorded audio was transcribed.

Interviewees	Institution	Description
Mr James Nii Allah	Achimota Secondary School	Painter and teacher - Picture making, Graphic Design, General Knowledge in Art and other support.
Desmond Edofonafani	Mepe St. Kizito Senior High/Technical School	A sculpture and a teacher: General Knowledge in Arts and Sculpture.
Isaac Ebowah	Archbishop Porter Girls Senior High School	Painter and teacher in Ceramics and General Knowledge in Arts

Table 1  
Overview of Interviewee

## Hypothesis

**Hypothesis 1:** Students studying art in senior high schools suffer some form of humiliation from their peers, school authorities, and society, which has a significant negative impact on the creative economy in Ghana.

**Hypothesis 2:** The researcher also states that most guardians do not want their children to study or pursue an art career.

## 3 Findings

This chapter presents evidence indicating that rooted misconceptions exist in the study of art, which has social, cultural, and economic impacts on Ghana. Through the data analysis methods outlined in the previous chapter, the researcher highlights the origins of these negative behaviours, from students to guardians and the national systems designed to shape the new generation.

### 3.1 Students' understanding of the misconceptions in art.

Out of the three hundred fifty-five (355) responses, 58% were second-year students, 32.7% were third-year students, and the remaining were first and other years based on diverse curricula. 56.9% of the respondents were non-art students; the remaining studied art or art-related subjects. Also, about 15% of the student respondents were from private/international schools, and a more significant proportion of the respondents were from public schools.

This creative interest was challenged when I asked the art students (247 respondents) if they had suffered humiliation for wanting to do art. The majority said yes by choosing the group that caused the most humiliation.

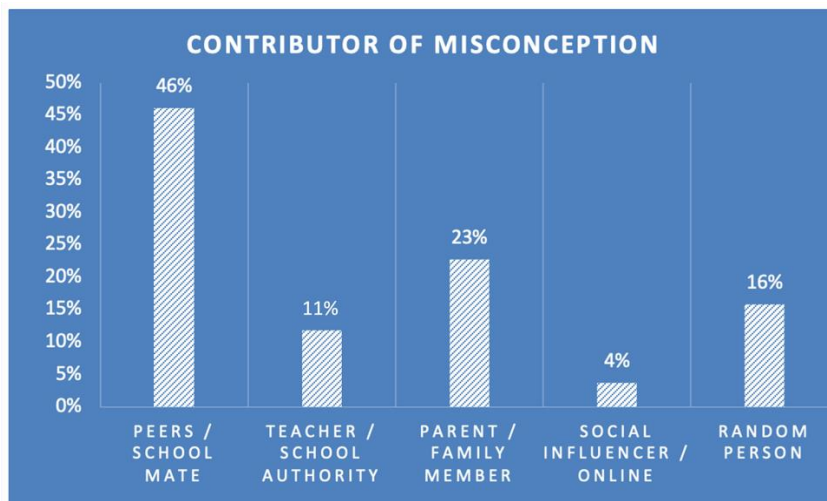


Figure 1  
Contributors to the Humiliation of Students

First, Readers should note that the humiliations are the art misconceptions children encounter when they want to or are living their creative abilities, whether it is a hobby, studying art or having an interest in an art career. The result shows sources of art misconceptions about art in public senior high schools in Ghana. The data in Figure 1 shows that art and non-art students were the primary source of humiliators (**peer group at 46%**), followed by parents/family/ random people in the society (**social group at 43%**), and finally, teachers/school authorities (**institution group at 11%**). This study classified negative influences from social media platforms as part of the social group.

The analysis emphasises that peer influence is essential during character-building in young adults. Students listen and seek validation from their fellow students, and these conversations and challenges are primarily not discussed with their guardians. The humiliation comes from both art and non-art students. Their ignorance of the possibilities of art and the negative influences of society has shaped their thoughts and has made them naysayers or non-believers. If an art student does not love the course because he or she does not see a future, the reactions and behaviours towards art and the training process will be a bad experience.

Non-art students make negative utterances toward fellow students interested in art, which is heartbreaking. But it hurts more when art students themselves do not believe, hence, say negative things about what they study or about art. It makes them feel not so special and a bit on the wrong path. Some keywords/phrases were collected from the sample verbal utterance during the survey. Statements like “*waste of time, not a proper job, useless, misfit, not respected, and no future*” illustrate the heart-breaking moments for students offering art. This gets into the subconscious, becoming a daily struggle to prove the naysayers wrong or succumb to their defeat. This has become an everyday battle for art students with little or no knowledge of what they could do with the art. It is not surprising to notice that the majority of the respondents are indifferent or agree that these negative attitudes have a negative impact on the studies of art students (Figure 2).

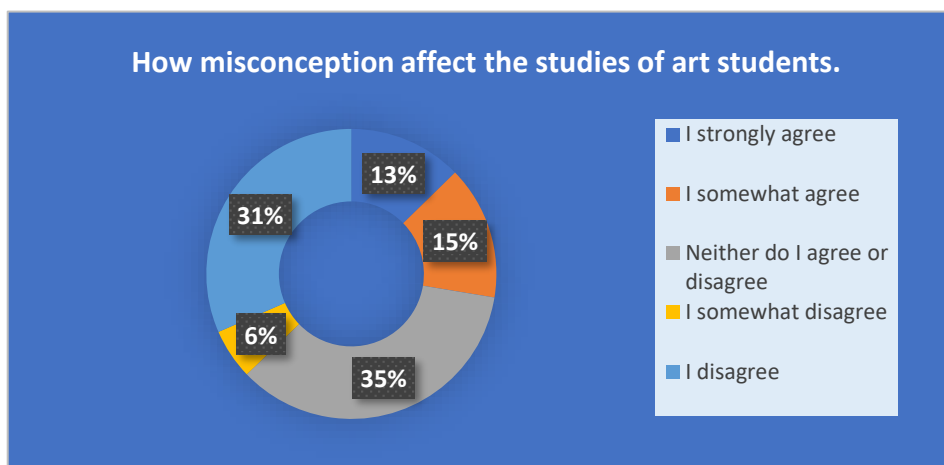


Figure 2  
How Misconception Affects the Studies of Art Students

On the contrary, over 70% of the student respondents agreed that art could be a respectable career and would play their role in convincing everyone if they had the opportunity. They believe art could change their society and the world. This is a good

indicator, and if the authorities implement a system that provides the proper knowledge and infrastructure in art, there would be a positive yield. But that is not the case in the public school. It is worse when you believe something has great cultural, social and economic relevance to the country but still disregard it. Maybe this understanding is on a shallow level, and they are not knowledgeable enough.

### 3.2 Findings from guardians (Social group)

As indicated in the above sub-chapter (figure 1), parents or family, social influences, and online communities are the second group of humiliators. This is because parents and the community have a significant influence on shaping the minds and behaviours of young adults. One hundred and thirteen guardians were involved in a survey to appreciate their stand on the research topic. The majority, 76.1%, were between thirty-one (31) and fifty (50) years old. 36.3% have three (3) children, 30.1% have two (2) children, 21.1% have a child, and the rest have more than three children. The number of children in school is almost equivalent to the percentage split mentioned above.

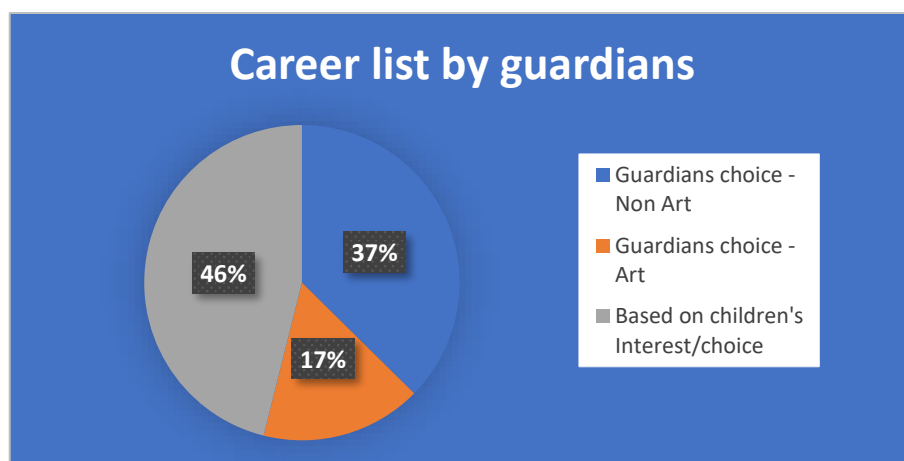


Figure 3  
Analysis of career choice by Guardians

Guardians were asked if they had a career they wished their children would pursue, and my analysis of their response was unexpected. There was a tall list of careers that was categorised into three groups. Non-art career choice by guardians, art career choice by guardians, and career choice based on the child's interest. 17% of the respondents wished their children would pursue an art career. 46% of the respondents acknowledge that the interest of their children is an essential factor in choosing a career path. Keywords like “depends”, “interest”, “their strength”, and “their choice” are good

indicators that the middle class and upper class seek to involve their children in career decisions. I also noticed that many careers listed were not art-related. This shows that guardians are becoming more open in the new world where no more dominating career(s) can guarantee sustainable living.

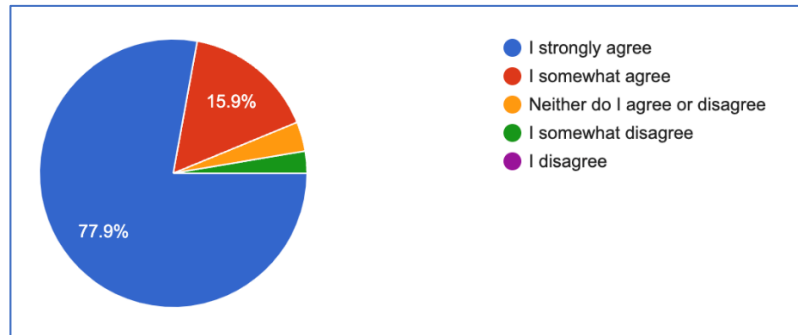


Figure 4  
Guardian's response on the belief that a child can have a successful career in art

Guardians strongly believe their children could have a successful art career if they choose. The data proved that more than 77.9% of the respondents are willing to support it even though guardians are the second contributors to the creative misconception. To uncover their true thoughts and perception of art, a linear correlation was developed to find any relation between guardians' support for their children's creative course and where they would pursue an art course if they had a second chance to choose a course as a child. This analysis intends to test their love and commitment to artistic endeavours. The linear is inclined, which is a positive correlation.

### 3.3 Comparative Analysis of Art Misconceptions in students and guardians

A spider diagram shows a comparative analysis of the misconceptions between the guardians and students. I paired questions from these two groups that were strongly linked with the core areas, providing stronger evidence of the misconceptions. The responses were then coded into a unified rating from zero(0), the lowest rate, to ten(10), the highest rating.



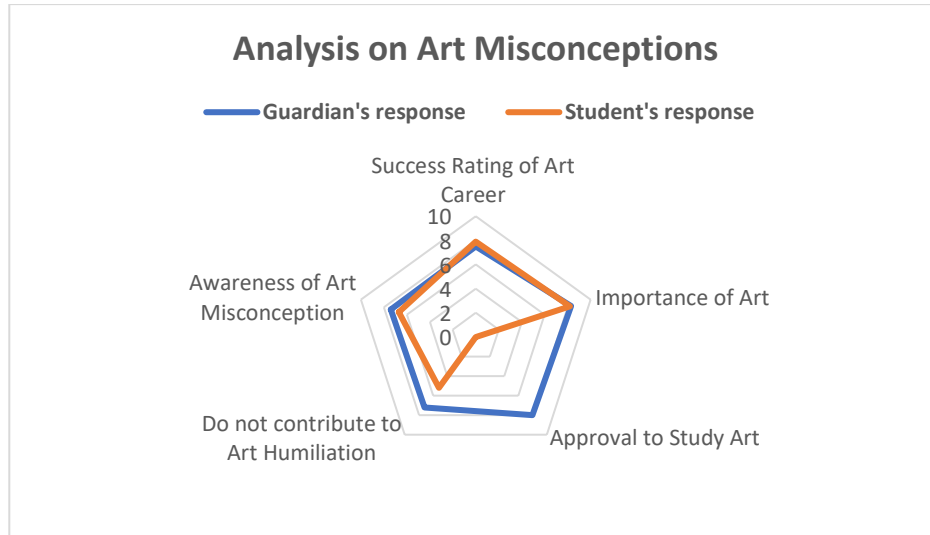


Figure 5  
Comparative Analysis of Art Misconceptions

The grouped questions:

- Approval to Study Art: Do parents and children think they would approve and support each other in a decision to study art?
- Do Not Contribute to Art Humiliation: Has any group said or acted negatively towards art and the study of art?
- Awareness of art misconception: Do you think art is for failures?
- Success Rating of Art Career: Do the two groups think anyone can have a respectable and successful career in art?
- Importance of Art: Is art relevant in our social, cultural and economic life as individuals or as a country?

The data reveals that both groups understand that anyone can have a successful career in the arts. They are also aware of the misconception surrounding the study and art practice. Still, you can also see the contrast between the results in their contribution to the humiliation. Students contribute more to the humiliation than parents. As stated above, peer humiliation tops the chat. This could also result in parents loving and supporting their children irrespective of any disagreement on the course they want to pursue. This shows that the guardians in this study put the interests of their children first when it comes to their academic and career paths.

One outstanding contrast in the spider diagram is the approval to study art. The data show that children do not think their guardians would want them to study art in senior high school. This may result from stereotypes and the possibility of humiliation if they

choose the art course. Still, surprisingly, the data shows that guardians are more likely to approve of their choice. I also want to highlight that the guardians in this study would be classified in the middle-income range (living standard measure). If the research was conducted in a rural location with lower-income status, maybe guardians would not consider art an option.

### **3.2 Findings from Institutions**

This chapter presents the qualitative results from the perspective of selected authorities representing three schools in three regions. The strategic selection ensured the body of work captured the reality in schools in rural and urban communities. Achimota School represents the urban schools (Greater Accra Region), Mepe St. Kizito Senior High/Technical School represents the rural school (Ada community), and Archbishop Porter Girls Senior High School (Western Region) is a blend of the two.

The teachers interviewed were from the visual arts department of their respective schools. The intention is to get a proper perspective of what happens in the department and the management level of their schools. All the interviewers taught art subjects, and they have been involved in administration processes like the selection and admission of students and the academic and operational management of their schools. The endeavour brings them into contact with parents quite often. Thankfully, all of them practise art as a second career. The above-stated roles make them the ideal respondents to share their opinions and thoughts on the misconception that they still suffer as teachers and artists.

#### **3.2.1 How the admission process downplays the art subjects**

The Ghana Education Service (GES) is solely responsible for validating and placing junior high graduates into senior high schools. The process allows students, under the supervision of their parents, to choose their preferred courses and schools before the placement period. Isaac indicated that it had become a trend for graduates/guardians to choose an art course as a preferred course to be admitted into their preferred school, so they can change their course to a non-art course. In other words, choosing an art course becomes a way to get into the school, so they can change their course when admission is completed. Most of the students in the art department got there as their last option, as they did not pass the other non-art courses (James). There is no cut-off grade for admitting a student into the art department, unlike other courses. The art course has become second to every other course, hurting the very few who chose art as their preferred course.

*...Sometimes you are lucky you can get about 5% who genuinely want to do the program, who came with single grades and want to do the subject; it is not much, but how can I say... the chunk overrides the good students, and it disturbs the class as well since most of the students are not academically strong, they how do I say... they muffle the 5% who are very serious. (Isaac)*

The situation is worse in rural schools, where GES usually places the worst-performing graduates. Desmond lamented that the teachers in rural schools like his had to work twice as hard as those in urban communities to calm the chaos in the department.

### **3.2.2 How does the lack of infrastructure contribute to the narrative?**

GES is the government agency responsible for developing infrastructure in public schools. Taxpayers contribute a 2.5% levy to the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFUND). This revenue is used to manage the education ministry, including the construction of school infrastructure. Among the three schools in question, all structural improvements were allocated to other departments except for the art departments. Under the Free Senior High Education policy, the government chose to subsidise tuition, which included learning materials, but tools and equipment for developing art skills were unavailable.

*The GES is more interested in the sciences than in the arts, so if you are given somebody a question to fire their works, or throw their works on the potter's wheel, then you also have to make arrangements or find the means necessary to ensure that every school in Ghana, offering visual Arts, is having a good studio, a working kiln, a working porters wheel, a light room, and lightboxes. So it is either you encourage the schools to do them on their own, or you find ways and means to fund such infrastructural developments in schools, because I have never heard the GES saying, let's do this for the visual Arts students (Desmond)*

There are severe disparities, but the non-existence of proper art studios in senior high schools explains why studying art in Ghana is considered a waste of time. To develop skills that meet the global market, the studio must be equipped with the latest technology to build the right skills.

### **3.2.3 Teaching and the art syllabus**

GES trains most of the teachers at the Teachers Training College. The teacher focuses on the area of specialisation according to the syllabus. Art is a unique subject that requires teachers with special skills. Teaching art requires the theory and the practical aspect, so it sometimes becomes challenging to find a teacher who easily fits the department. In most situations, the school designs an elective subject based on the

teacher's skill. Here is a case where sometimes teachers are forced to teach a subject with limited skill knowledge (James). Art is passion-driven; if you lack the passion, you cannot inspire and impact your students. Also, teachers who offer mandatory core subjects like core mathematics, social studies, and core science must be trained in art or have some art background to differentiate the approach when teaching art students. Art is one of the most challenging subjects, and teachers from the training college would need to update their methods to perform rather than engage them with the perception that art students are not brilliant.

*I used to teach prehistoric Arts, African Arts, and Renaissance Art, and you would be teaching it verbally and talking about the Bambara of Mali. The Minerals of Sierra Leone, Da-Vinci, and Michael Angelo's David and these kids are just looking at you like they have seen a ghost. Still, now we project the works for them, we talk about the artists, they see their works, oh so this is what Monalisa is, so this is what the creation of Art is, oh so this is what Chiwara Mask looks like, and you can tell that the students pick up a huge lot of knowledge. (James)*

There were some concerns with the more than thirty-year-old art syllabus. James also agrees that the content of the general knowledge in art has a history of the very old artists. There are recently iconic artists like Amoako Boafo, whom students can read about, be inspired by, and resonate with. The methods and the approach for many of the experimental processes required for final exams are obsolete. These operational requirements need to be improved to prepare students for the job market. If not, we will keep increasing the gap between what is being learned and the realities of the job market. These gaps contribute to the misconceptions.

### **3.2.4 Industry Collaboration**

More industry collaboration needs to be conducted at the senior high level, as highlighted by Desmond. Some talented students have the passion and seek ways to turn this into a fortune. In urban communities, the school authorities sometimes organise or get invited to some art-related events or competitions. Corporate bodies, brands, and social workers sometimes engage them on a project basis. A school like Achimota got its art school renovated through Artlife Matters and some old students. Archbishop Porter's Girls' Senior High School also got its art department refurbished by its alumni. Mepe St Kizito Senior High still struggles to call a space their Art studio because it is located in a rural community. Schools in such locations barely attract opportunities that would inspire and spark the hope that they, too, would be able to have a sustainable career through the arts.

## **Conclusion**

The study explored how students, guardians, and institutions understand the value of art and how the Ghana Education Service systems and structure significantly contribute to individuals' and society's lack of ability to achieve the vast potential of African creative potential. Critical analysis of the data gathered from structured qualitative questionnaires and interviews revealed the following causes.

Art and non-art students in senior high are not exposed to art in a way that would allow them to value art and have a respectable and sustainable career. Both students and guardians agree that the pursuit of art is very relevant in character-building in children or teenagers. Hence, the study or engagement with art should not be limited to art departments, but every student should have a lifetime opportunity to express themselves through an artistic experience.

In the study analysis, it was understood that students do not think their parents would allow them to pursue art, and most parents also agreed that they would allow their kids to pursue art. This contradictory response indicates that the perception of parents and society may be changing.

Data shows that parents are much more interested in what their children want than in what they desire for their children when it comes to selecting a course or career path. However, few of them would fully support a pursuit in the arts. The statistics indicate that respondents have a limited understanding of the opportunities within the art sector, and that the level of acceptance will improve if they are exposed to and fully comprehend the vast potential of the creative industry.

Ghana is a beautiful, peaceful country with a diverse culture and a great history. Every expatriate feels welcome once they step on Ghanaian soil, and this is exhibited through art and culture. This uniqueness should reflect in the way we see and understand art. The misconception in this study is clearly a behavioural concern that can only be resolved with time. The following pointers may help reshape our thoughts towards a more deserving future with art.

## **Educational Reforms**

Ghana Education Service (GES) needs to review and adjust the process of recruiting teachers for art departments in senior high schools. Strategic thoughts would go into training teachers who understand the theory, practical and mentoring of art students. The syllabus would have to be reviewed to reflect recent times.

The advent of digital technology is fast-changing the way art is applied in various sectors of our lives. However, the current school curriculum for the art department still uses old ways and outdated learning knowledge. Most senior high schools do not have

a dedicated computer lab for digital lessons. Students still practice with traditional methods, forgetting that the real world operates differently.

As mentioned earlier, the art department's admission process has no cut-off grade. Students who fail to get their preferred subject in non-art course areas are put in the art department as a last resort. My research highlighted that about 5% of the current art student in the research schools chose art as their preferred course. This means the departments are filled with confused students who are still trying to make sense of the art course. GES should have a safety net to admit many more students with art interests, or should find a way to improve the interest in students pursuing art in senior high schools in Ghana.

### **Industry Exposure**

Ghana's creative art and culture industry has slow growth, but there are a lot of individual achievements and global recognition. Ghana has become a spotlight for the international contemporary art scene with Amoako Boafo, Kwasi Botchwey, and many more, selling at record prices in auction houses, museums and private collections. There is a gap between what is taught in the senior high school and how things work in the creative art space. And this gap can only be closed if there is constant interaction or collaboration between art students through the schools and the industry players. This will give the students great exposure and inspire them as they see and interact with people they wish to be when they grow. Knowing what you can do with your studies will give students a new purpose and confidence to defend themselves when they encounter misconceptions from naysayers.

Parents and society must frequently dialogue and interact with the art industry to understand the dynamics of art and how it can help develop the country's cultural, social, and economic areas. Art institutions and industry stakeholders must have an agenda to grow a robust industry that involves the young and upcoming, the practising artist, or entities with a national interest.

### **Government Interventions**

The government of Ghana believes in the potential of the creative art and culture industry. In 2020, the parliament passed the Creative Arts Bill, intending to establish a government agency to protect, guide and manage a vibrant creative economy. The country needs initiatives, policies, systems, and structures that protect and encourage young children to have a sustainable career through art.

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