
Youth Development and the Arts in Nonschool Hours

Shirley Brice Heath and Elisabeth Soep

There are an abundance of theories – and even more clichés – about why the arts should be in young people’s lives. However, academically rigorous research that demonstrates the power of the arts is scarce. This article summarizes a decade of research by a team of anthropologists in after-school programs identified by young people themselves as high quality. The researchers found common characteristics that made these programs successful, whether their focus was academic, sport, community service, or the arts. The balance of these characteristics differs among programs, though. What surprised the researchers was that the prominence of “risk” in arts-based programs makes them especially powerful developmental sites. This is happy news to all of us who believe in the arts’ value and power.

The 1998 GIA annual conference, “Art Under 21: At the Intersection of Community and Youth Development,” will bring research like this (including Shirley Brice Heath, the principal researcher of this project) together with practitioners – artists, youth workers, and youth – to help us better understand how philanthropic policy can make the arts powerful and meaningful in the lives of young people. I hope this article will whet your appetite.

Nick Rabkin, Conference Chair

What the arts contribute to learning intrigues educators and policymakers, inspires arts advocates, and eludes education researchers. At some level, a majority of citizens in industrialized societies may believe that the arts are somehow “good” for young and old, and that, in the best of all possible worlds, the arts “should” be part of formal education as well as provide a broadening social experience. However, when school budgets shrink and employment opportunities demand knowledge of technology and related skills, the arts slip easily into optional or eliminated subjects of study. Arts enthusiasts respond in ways they believe will help rescue arts as a school subject – by arguing that study of the arts will help students in other content areas of their education.

This article considers the impact of learning in the arts *outside of school* on young people placed at high risk through circumstances in their communities, schools, and families. Is it possible, we ask, that environments organized around the arts are uniquely suited to propel

youth through key cognitive, linguistic, and socio-relational opportunities for development?

Overview of the Research

Results reported here derive from a decade-long study (1987-1997) in organizations outside of school that were judged by local youth to be effective and desirable learning environments. A sampling of youth policy-makers and educators identified locations where “good things are happening for young people outside of school.” Within thirty-four geographic locations from Massachusetts to Hawaii – urban and rural communities as well as mid-sized towns – 120 community-based organizations became sites of study. Approximately 30,000 young people passed through these sites over the decade of the study. A team of researchers used eight major methods of collecting data within the comparative framework of ethnology.¹

With a handful of exceptions, all of the organizations had minimal resources in personnel and finances, and many directed considerable energy to community development and social enterprise for their local communities. They operated in impoverished neighborhoods or counties with dwindling local employment opportunities, within zones of relatively higher crime than surrounding areas, alongside schools in need of stronger professional staff and greater material resources, and amid areas with minimal open spaces or organized recreational or aesthetic activities for children and youth. All organizations were free of charge, and young people attended them voluntarily.

Study sites clustered into three categories – athletic-academic, community service, and arts-based. Athletic organizations included midnight basketball teams, tumbling crews, and baseball leagues, and many connected academic demands to participation in practices and games. Community service programs engaged youth in volunteer activities at locations ranging from nursing homes to soup kitchens to urban gardens. Arts-based organizations spanned all aesthetic domains and many incorporated the principles of community service by virtue of how they operated and where they performed.

Guiding our analysis of sites was the key question: What happens in these community-based organizations that draws young people to sustained participation, performance, and productions that both they and external critics judge to be of high quality?

The study in its initial seven years gave no particular attention to those organizations that featured the arts. Only when analysis of the data indicated noteworthy patterns among the youth did the study turn special attention to an analysis of ways that the arts worked for learning. Here we report, first, on the salient features of

all effective youth organizations included in the study and, second, on the characteristics of settings organized around the arts.

Elements of Effectiveness

Community learning organizations that young people judge as effective carry a common set of organizational features.

- ♦ *Ethos for achievement* At effective sites, a central ethos regarded young people as resources, not as students, problems, or needful clients. Regardless of focal activity, all organizations studied engaged their young members in a host of activities that required managerial and organizational skills. Dominant within organizational goals was ensuring outstanding achievement by youth. This seemingly simple premise meant that certain other features had to follow: the high demand for learning and achieving was non-negotiable, and every member – young and old – had to take responsibility for a wide variety of roles.

- ♦ *Distributed responsibility* Roles and tasks were distributed broadly due in large part to insufficient funds and bare-bones staffing. Often only one or two adults were present for 70 to 100 young people, but since all sites included a range of ages, older youngsters served as models, mentors, and instructors for the younger. Alongside adults, youth maintained buildings and provided security. They helped initiate new members, guided visitors through facilities, and served on boards, committees, and task forces.

- ♦ *Resource identification and use* Disseminating responsibilities broadly led to an assumption that all participants could identify and use resources deftly. Garbage collected in nearby cans or vacant lots served as treasured materials for found object collage. Youth solicited permission from neighborhood property owners to use their buildings' blank exterior surfaces as "legal walls" for public art. When a neighborhood was too dangerous for outside activity, the youth selected stairways and gymnasium walls of their own facilities for murals. Community festivals and other gatherings became venues to showcase performances or exhibition games for already-assembled audiences. Adults who expressed interest in improving conditions and opportunities for local youth were held accountable for their rhetoric and put to work. No potential resource was spared. An expectation of thrift and resourcefulness characterized these settings. "Talent" or "intelligence" was understood as the ability to scan, engage, and transform the environment to achieve as yet unmet or even unrecognized goals in imaginative ways.

- ♦ *Predictable contingency* Youth projects went through many transitions and required months of preparation, planning, and practice. Whether the goal was a soccer

playoff, theatrical performance, party for nursing home residents, or gallery opening, young members of these organizations pursued deadlines over weeks or months. Weeks were marked by long bouts of intense practice, adoption of different roles, collecting information, and group planning. Achieving agreed-upon goals required intermediate deadlines – the game with last year's toughest rival, the first run-through of the full play or concert, or preparing labels for pieces in an exhibition. Along the way, unexpected events and intrusions always intervened, so young members learned to handle unpredictable turns of fortune and last-minute changes in plan. Adults invariably related the challenges and plan changes to "life" and to "just being out there in the world." Marking all these organizations was a pervasive sense of being "ready to handle whatever comes." Slogans, aphorisms, and tee-shirt wisdom carried messages conveying the need to accept and expect the transformative learning experiences that predictably come with the many contingencies of such organizations and their projects.

- ♦ *Collective demands* Youth organizations kept up with their deadline-driven and contingency-marked world by ensuring that no one individual came to be central to any project or outcome. Theater groups not only provided understudies, but also rotated randomly the playing of many on-stage and back-stage roles. Everyone was expected to know everyone else's job and to be able to step into most of them. Choral groups never depended on a single lead singer but instead shifted lead roles, often among both older and younger group members. Neighborhood community center service teams rotated assignment to the mayor's office. Anchoring this state of preparedness were key "rules:" everyone around here has work to do, nobody gets left out here, keep it rolling no matter what, we're all for one and one for all. These guidelines also generated specific day-to-day work rules of punctuality, cleanliness, security, wise use of materials, courteous dissent, and playful interludes that often served as rites of intensification.

- ♦ *Peer critique* Standing out in the daily life of effective organizations was critique – the give and take of assessing work to improve the outcome. Older artists commended the work of younger artists and followed their positive comments with specific feedback about techniques to be worked on, new ways to stretch habituated forms, and strategies to make practice provide more payoff. Seasoned literacy tutors passed on effective ways to assist novice readers, with warnings about approaches that turned out in practice to be ill-advised. First-string pitchers gave pointers to youngsters aspiring to rise in team ranks. The high risk involved in life at youth organizations – whether going on-stage, preparing for a regional tournament, or volunteering for the first time at a homeless shelter – was intertwined with the ubiquitousness of critique. Whether assigned or spontaneous, peer critique conformed to a common mandate that, whenever possible, youth would solicit support, new challenges, and the chance to share work.

The reciprocal and improvisational quality of critique instilled an ability to formulate and offer comments on-the-spot and in ways that were appropriate to the context. The particular form that critique took varied depending on several factors: its timing within a project cycle, whether the project was individual or collaborative, the extent of adult involvement, socio-relational circumstances within the group, and the form of the culminating event (e.g., a community performance, neighborhood board meeting, publication of a literary magazine, or orientation of a new family into a youth-rebuilt house.)

♦ *Conditional reasoning* Along with critique as a dominant form of discourse came intense problem-posing and hypothetical reasoning. Adults posed questions in terms of "what if?" Young people soon picked up this verbal habit and marked their critiques, formal and informal, with queries such as "how about...?" or "have you thought of...?" For arts groups that met as often as three times a week for several hours at a time, even newcomers were ready by the third week with their sociodramatic bids and hypothetical propositions. They asked: "But let's just think about this. What if we get called to perform in a gymnasium without a stage? We better think about how we'll handle this meeting if the police chief and parks warden don't show up." For baseball teams, early weeks of practice hitting and catching fly balls were accompanied by sociodramatic narratives from the coach getting team members to think about such problems as what a fly to left field meant for the short stop if two men were on base and the score was 3-2 in the 6th inning. By the fourth week, 82% of youth who participated in groups as frequently as three times a week were peppering nearly 60% of their multiple-clause utterances with hypothetical phrases such as if-then and what-if queries.

♦ *Prominence of texts* Young people at effective youth-based organizations exhibited sophisticated communication skills, fostered by environments where learning converged with an ability to handle contingency with finesse. These youth organizations created the capacity to produce and consume multiple written texts, and young people emerged first and foremost as producers of texts – original scripts, systems of dance notation, community newspapers, program brochures, and written reviews of other people's performances or exhibitions. Of special note was the diversity of these texts in terms of symbol systems and genre. Rarely was a young person allowed to specialize exclusively in just one form of representation. More typical was the expectation they would be able to move among different forms depending on circumstance. They also needed to manage and

interpret a variety of received texts, such as entry forms for film festivals and documents describing legislation relevant to a youth newsgroup or social justice organization. Life at youth organizations was fundamentally intertextual, demanding forms and fluency of literacies not ordinarily associated with young people cast in passive roles.

♦ *Work and play* The environment of effective youth-based organizations depended on behavior distinguished both by inclusive membership and by the dual work-and-play nature of daily life. Although work toward a performance or playoff continued as the goal that kept the group together, play was ever the lubricant of the hard times of practice, unpredictabilities, and just plain tough luck. Practical pranks, puns and take-offs, innovative combinations of costume, satire, and irony marked nearly every aspect of work during practice. Such play diminished during the final weeks before a deadline and all but disappeared in final rehearsals and the immediate minutes surrounding playoff games. Humorous follow-up narratives after a final game or

performance often involved a joint telling of an exaggerated story about a member in his or her presence. For some groups, imaginary mascots or trouble-shooting characters stepped in as "release figures" for tensions that might have flared over mistakes, forgotten tasks or equipment, or muffed lines.

In short, community organizations judged by local young people to be effective learning environments were marked by a mix of features relating to *roles, rules, and risks* undertaken by the young. In their push toward outcomes of excellence, the youth carried most of the weight of the performance, assumed multiple roles and responsibilities, and followed a rule of conduct based on an organizational ethos of belief in young people as resources. Above all, young people endured the high risks that come with a push toward excellence that results in a final product, performance, or playoff that is judged both by themselves and by outside experts, such as referees from another county, arts critics of the local news media, or park service inspectors.

The Arts of Youth-based Organizations

By 1995, follow-up studies of youth in these community organizations began to suggest that young people in arts-based organizations exhibited certain notable characteristics. Of the 120 organizations studied, 48 centered

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their activities around one or more of the arts. Of these, 32 involved drama primarily, supplemented by music and dance as well as visual arts (such as scene-painting and costuming) and other creative arts (such as writing scripts and copy for programs). The rest of the arts-based organizations concentrated on visual, media, or musical arts. As in all organizations studied, the activities of arts-based groups cycled from preparation (what shall our major program be this season or year?) and planning (how shall we carry this out?) to practice, performance, and final evaluation. Marking all phases of this cycle were conjecture, debate, searches for information, and critique. Arts-based organizations had the following sorts of activities:

- ♦ Joining together in a Boys and Girls Club, young people created a theater group that worked up interactive programs related to key local concerns. All summer they created scripts, practiced, and made contacts for appearances during the school year. From September through May, they averaged three performances a week for parent groups, juvenile detention centers, schools, and civic clubs. Some local groups, such as parental support networks, juvenile detention centers, and school districts, paid fees for the group's presentations and workshops. Funds went back into the work of the theater group, sometimes providing seed money for new initiatives by members.
- ♦ Inside a warehouse they renovated, young people and young adults worked together to create a multipurpose project that united drama, poetry, and hip-hop with community economics and enterprise. Organizers

set up a mini-mall that contained stores offering specialized services (from barbering to graphic design and a bookstore for children). There they also directed theater and dance programs, a computer workshop, and a video production studio for local children and youth. They held poetry readings, open-mike evenings, and comedy hours several times each month. Local mothers bring food to sell at intermission and retain the sales revenue. Proceeds from ticket sales, however, go back into maintenance of the youth mall and its activities.

- ♦ In a rural Midwestern community, students surveyed their families and friends for items they wished had been invented. The students then reviewed hardware and small appliance catalogues to see if such inventions already existed. Inventions not found were fabricated by the students in shop and arts classes at their local school. They designed, created, and tested their inventions, and, after successful field-testing, they tried their hand at marketing. County fairs, local main streets, and friendly merchants in nearby counties became sales resources. They pooled their earnings to bring in a consultant to help them design better marketing plans.

By analyzing evidence provided by such environments, we began to identify features of arts engagement. A positive conclusion is that the arts, by virtue of their very nature, carried a particular power for learning achievement both in the arts themselves and in closely related competencies upon which successful performance and knowledge in the arts depends. For all participants in arts-based organizations, hard work and high risk had a literal payoff in the continued survival of the group and the continued availability of its personnel and space for creating art.

Beyond conclusions specifically about arts learning, the effects of youth involvement in arts-based settings were marked in unexpected ways. A selection of youth from the organizations of our study completed the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS), enabling us to make comparisons between youth participating in arts-based organizations and a national database of students attending schools across the U.S. from 1988 to 1994. Outcomes reveal that involvement in arts-based youth organizations led to an intensity of certain characteristics among the young participants including motivation, persistence, critical analysis, and planning. Young people at arts sites were more likely to win an academic honor than youth from the national sample. They were also more likely to say that they plan to continue education after high school and to be recognized for community service and school attendance. (See box at left for specific findings.)

Achievement through the Arts

A selection of youth from the organizations in this study completed the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS). The following outcomes are based on a comparison of their responses with a national sampling of students who completed the NELS.

Youth in arts programs are...

- ♦ 25% more likely to report feeling satisfied with themselves
- ♦ 31% more likely to say that they plan to continue education after high school
- ♦ eight times more likely to receive a community service award
- ♦ four and a half times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem
- ♦ three times more likely to win an award for school attendance
- ♦ twice as likely to win an award for academic achievement
- ♦ four times more likely to participate in a science or math fair
- ♦ 23% more likely to say they can do things as well as most other people can
- ♦ 23% more likely to feel they can make plans and successfully work from them

...than students in the national sample.

Arguments to discount these findings might assume that since these young people elect to participate in youth organizations they probably boast a remarkable talent and enjoy benefits not available to other youngsters. Quite the contrary. Using a "risk index" of eight factors – such as violence in school and neighborhood, domestic instability, and economic deprivation – young people at youth organizations emerged as having a higher risk index than students in the national sample.

What qualities of experience and interaction at youth-based arts organizations mediated these effects? In comparison with other activities at out-of-school organizations, the arts intensified the characteristics of effective learning environments.

♦ *Greater risk* The range, degree, and frequency of risks called for by the arts differed noticeably from those called for by other groups. Community-service organizations that did not center on the arts could not as readily allow young people to release their imaginations, particularly with vulnerable populations such as the elderly or young children. For youth in community organizations, service often meant working in a nursing home, library, public parks program, or on city properties where they had to follow orders, constrain their creativity, and remain ever mindful of the consequences of their actions for others and themselves. Athletic groups had to follow many sets of rules – those of the game, good sportsmanship, tournament schedules, and good training principles. Here again, taking risks could not be as far-ranging as in the arts where young artists were often allowed to stretch their imaginations as far as possible and to try new ways of doing old tasks or to apply tried methods to new media or methods of presentation. In the arts, divergent thinking was a norm right along with diligence, practice, and adherence to rules that ensured coherence of the group effort.

♦ *Individual identity* Moreover, although the final group product in the arts held dominance, each individual artist also bore identity within the final exhibition or performance. For males, being an "artist," as distinct from an athlete or civic servant, bore a special risk, since many came from communities in which males were not celebrated for their expressiveness, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, or diligence in making art. Within arts-based organizations, both young men and young women could speak of "harmony," "proportion," "balance," and other features of their chosen art forms while remaining aware that, beyond the group, they ran the risk of censure or ridicule. But expectations often motivated their risks, as we hear in the words of Reginald, a nineteen-year-old spoken-word artist, describing his approach to writing poetry:

I use didactic forms. I try to enlighten people... like special sauce, a combination of my life mixed together, pouring it out, spilling it in people's ears, hoping that they'll sop it up.

Audience response to this "spilling" matters to young artists, for they know that audiences criticize as well as appreciate the arts they patronize. Young people in the organizations we studied received no exemption from the effects of the occasional devastating review in the city newspaper that led to a dwindling audience in the second week of a show. Similarly, if their poetry reading did not go well at the local community center open-mike night, they knew they had to face the listeners on the streets the next day.

♦ *Responsibility for consequences* The desire to avoid the sting of negative reviews meant trying at all times to anticipate audience reactions and shape performances accordingly. Youth recognized that what would fly at an in-house show, open only to peers and selected adults, differed from what was appropriate for public openings or debuts where funders and members of the press would be present. When preparing for a performance for friends from the neighborhood, youth grew particularly wary of preachy messages or story-lines that came across as adult-driven or otherwise not "real." They took risks relative to topic, language, and self-divulgence within relatively protected performance spaces, knowing that the same content could confuse or possibly offend audiences made up of outsiders likely not to "get it." With guidance from adults, the youth routinely made decisions about how far they could push their message to invite desired reactions. Rather than unilaterally censor exhibitions or performances, adults at these organizations created conditions where the young artists themselves took responsibility for risks, consequences, and accomplishments.

♦ *Setting rules* Encouraging risk, along with personal and group accountability, led, in turn, to an increase in motivation, persistence, critical analysis, and planning. Considerable motivation for *work* marks the arts-based organizations, for the arts require not only creating a piece of art or a performance, but also collecting goods and space necessary for production, marketing the outcome, and analyzing self and group to improve the next piece. Being engaged in both setting and following rules gives an individual a sense of investment and challenge that pushes achievement further. For example, if a young artist decides to create sculpture using only found materials, then he or she must follow through on the self-made rule and be judged by this rule for the final outcome. If an actor decides to alter the mood of a scene and play a role accordingly, he or she must then enable others in the scene to see how this change affects them and why its contribution may improve the entire dramatic piece. If young people in a media group decide to market their tapes to the local public broadcasting station and the station agrees to air several each month, the group must then work out a schedule to ensure they can meet deadlines.

♦ *Changing rules* Just as rules guided the arts projects, however, rules also were changed and reconfigured as a project played out. While young artists usually began

their work with strong ideas about the effect they wanted, new rules and possibilities emerged through dedicated experimentation with materials and collaborators. The split-vision of artistry called for simultaneous attention to how things are going and where things are headed. Following the practices of professional artists, young people at arts-based sites invented mechanisms for perpetual self-monitoring. Potters made and glazed test-tiles to see if reduction firing would yield the desired pigments and textures. Videographers convened informal screenings to determine how a rough-cut sequence of a documentary-in-progress would be received. Cast members collectively decided whether an understudy called at the last minute could manage a musical's intricate dance numbers. By regularly checking on progress over the course of a project, young artists preempted problems, anticipated responses, and reworked procedures, taking products through multiple iterations before presenting them in final form. Minds and interactions were at all times focused on the present while directed towards the future. Work in the arts was characterized by the ability to shift thinking and attend to cues that come from materials, other artists, and audiences. Rules operated at all times by guiding action, but they never consolidated into fixed formulas for sure-fire aesthetic success.

- *Imaginative planning* Action plans always followed from process-checks and then moved toward the next performance or product. A constant push toward planning and talking with others about the plans meant that young artists seemed to carry around in their heads a sense of serial relationships. Our research team asked young people to keep logs of their mental images of art in the world around them. The logs attested to the many ways the youth incorporated what they saw in a day into their view of themselves as artists. Again and again, they indicated that their perception of forms, shapes, color combinations, demeanors, and character presentations was related to something emerging in their imagination. That is, these young artists described their capacity to extract from daily interactions non-serial, random information and to reshape it into consequential relations in their own creations. The imagining of their own work and that of the group drew on their sense of themselves as artists working with and being professionals. They often said something like, "when my friends ask me what I do everyday after school when I come here, I tell them I'm an actor." Variations included, "I'm in a show," "I'm an artist," or "I've got work to do on this video we're producing."

The Special Power of Critique

Heightened risk, dynamic rules, and demands for identity characterize settings where the arts dominate. Critique held a prominent position in all youth-based organizations, but particularly in arts-based groups. Pleas for peer critique sprang from a need to anticipate audience

reactions (What do you think of that image in verse three? Is my point coming across in this presentation for new park space?...), a desire for impromptu coaching (How can I make this [painted] figure pop out from what's behind it?...), and a need for reassurance after rough performances (What was up with that crowd? And what happened to *us* tonight?). Over time, this regard for peers as sources and subjects of critique allowed young people to recognize and take advantage of one another's unique areas of expertise. An individual particularly adept at acrylic painting was sought out when difficulties arose with tools or technique. A short-story writer experimenting for the first time with free-verse poetry consulted a peer more advanced in that genre. A first-timer making contact with local park services to redesign park benches talked with board members who had the task previously. Pursuing the distinctive wisdom of others led to recognizing that differences in a group are assets to be appreciated and used, not aberrations to be suppressed.

Effective critique in the arts relied on a fluency with many kinds of knowledge and forms of communication: technical terminology, local everyday expressions, institutional memory, awareness of the ways of regional government, and standards of particular judges or critics. In their critique, the youth varied styles – from direct suggestion to parodies of teacher-talk. Combinations of local knowledge and individual expertise, along with a strong sense of humor and camaraderie, allowed young people to maintain favored modes of group interaction even as they took the risk inherent in appraising another's work or opening up one's own work to scrutiny. Critique involved respecting the authority of peers while pushing them to go further and deeper in their aesthetic projects. Even when adults discouraged peer critique by insisting that they control evaluation, youth members found ways to solicit and provide communication appropriate to a particular group at a given moment. The resulting talk articulated the *process* of art even as organizations paced themselves around making the *products* of their work. In this way, instruction, cognition, and assessment circulated among youth and adults. Although from outside the youth organization artmaking may appear to be a magical expression of individual talent, a study of critique revealed the actual nature of artmaking to be a collective, thoughtful mode of interaction with others and with aesthetic media.

An ongoing process of critique ensured that both the art product and the process of becoming an artist received attention. Young artists, in collaboration with adults, deliberately shaped performances designed for consumption, appreciation, and purchase by outside audiences. They were ever conscious of how they made meanings for others. Within the youth organizations, they manifested an awareness of how they worked, what they needed to say and do, and how their messages were likely to be received. For them, the work of art invited exploration of themselves and their worlds in constantly creative ways, but within given frames –

drama, poetry, oil paints, clay, mural art, or video – and with an insistence on excellence as determined by outside audiences.

For the youth in arts-based organizations, the relationships and projects they develop in the arts were more “real” than anything else they do. Thus, rather than being esoteric or removed from reality, the arts *are* reality in many ways for them. In talking about how to get young people involved in theater, a youth commented, “what gets to kids [is] the real stuff.” His friend agreed, saying “[The arts] really help you find yourself when you do all the work. Because the minute you start doing all the work, you feel as though it has to be a part of you.” A third participant talked about art literally as a form of identity construction: “When you do something where you create, it builds something inside you that never really goes away.”

Conclusion

Close examination of how the arts work at the level of everyday interactions in effective youth organizations reveals that the arts promote cognitive, linguistic, socio-relational, and managerial capacities. These achievements are mediated through risks of imagination and interaction, rules that guide but always change, and demands that create identities based in resourcefulness and accomplishment. Arts put the young on the edge – “out there” – in pursuits that themselves seem endangered and held in questionable esteem by the society at large. All artists – especially the young – must be willing to make a leap of commitment. This step involves risks of greater variety than those required to go out for basketball or work on a neighborhood teen board – tasks that few citizens would question or devalue. Once in the arts, young people in groups with few adult financial resources have to play many roles from technical expert on the chemistry of paints to travel planner and stage manager. These responsibilities insist on participation in authentic communication – oral and written – and highly visible representations through varied symbol systems.

The arts offer another decided advantage: they translate into possibilities for generating income and for future employment planning. Excellence in the arts can win internships in a video studio, opportunities in a design office, and independent entrepreneurial possibilities. In addition, the arts are valuable extracurricular activities in conjunction with further education in a variety of fields – business, artistic, and civic.

In arts-based youth organizations, much of the young people’s time was committed to the study of technique, past forms and masters, and surrounding market issues. Students in choral groups could talk about differences between harmony and rhythm, the development of cross-over jazz in Ireland, and the politics surrounding

supra-titles for opera in Italian for English-speaking audiences. Students in the visual arts knew the names of techniques and of artists in nearby galleries, and could discuss the controversies surrounding the use of toxic solvents. Although no assessments were geared to pick up such discrete bits of knowledge, the young students needed to converse with clients, other artists, audience members, and critics. This ability strengthened their competencies overall. Some specialists developed, to be sure. But having members with different levels of knowledge enhanced the conversation that is so critical for critique and validation.

The learning environment that the arts create needs to attract attention if we want art to guide educators. Important to every project in arts-based youth groups is the varied use of symbol systems, from language to music to logos. Using these symbol systems sustains the organization instrumentally and charges each member with a strong sense of responsibility for knowledge and skill. Perhaps foremost is the insistence on acting toward the future, carrying within the head (and often within the body for dancers and actors) a sense of form, technique, connection, and thoughts toward the next work. Paradoxically, the ability to anticipate future possibilities emerges only when the mind is engaged with the intricacies and immediacies of present moments. Constant practice in the mental gymnastics necessary for such present attention and future action helps create a nimble mind, an observing eye, and a resolute spirit.

In an era when learning to learn is the focus, the arts merit greater attention for the attitudes, motivations, and orientations they create. Analysis of the contexts created reveals certain habits of mind that young artists simply have to develop to remain within arts-based

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youth-centered organizations. The young people make excellent art through risks, safe experimentation, validation, and the pursuit of surprise. The special contributions of the arts to the out-of-school lives of young people come in the principles of practice that lie beneath being an artist. The artistic eye – sense, bent, knack, talent – weaves throughout daily activities within the arts-based organizations studied. Yet adults there do not encourage the youth to see a future devoted exclusively to art. Instead, they emphasize the ways that the arts build affective, interpersonal, managerial, thinking habits that can support any vocational choice. Moreover, they emphasize the importance not only of vocational choices but also of leisure-time opportunities to continue pushing the self as learner. Prior to joining a youth-based arts organization, most participants had never done any work in the arts that had received recognition or encouragement. Often they say only that they “had kind of a knack for art,” or had been “secret artists” for years. Few see themselves making a living as artists, but they welcome information about work opportunities and entrepreneurial social possibilities around the arts – from education and administration to production assistance and industrial design.

Our research has led us to refer to “the arts creep.” We use this phrase to refer to the ability of the arts to slip into many aspects of modern life, whether computer technology, advertising, or the law. At a deeper level, it also refers to the capacity of the habits of mind, developed through engagement in the arts, to seep into and through other aspects of learning. In overlapping and frequently practiced and evaluated ways, the arts incorporate all the situations of learning that receive high praise from social scientists and cognitive psychologists. The arts spring from and feed motivation. Their fundamentally expressive base ensures practice in interpretation and production that is individually borne and socially constructed. The necessity of critique ensures analytical attention and incorporates much that is often thought of as scientific – setting forth claims, pointing to evidence, and verifying end points. Young people are given incentives for exploration with restraint by facing both intimate and external judges of their final productions; their creativity functions with knowledge of the rules of what has gone before and what is expected. The opportunity to move through work cycles – from practice through performance and display – requires the young artists to explore many roles, with different levels of responsibility, and through a range of media.

Through the arts, one must engage in the present with the future; the artist must see beyond the moment or the usual to what can be next and must see the self as possible in that making. The arts both form knowledge in themselves and ensure understanding beyond the immediate. In the words of artist and educator Robert Henri (*The Art Spirit*, 1923), the arts provide us, “Sign-posts on the way to what may be. Sign-posts toward greater knowledge.”

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¹ Led by Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Heath, the team included Soep and sixteen other fieldworkers. Data consisted of: interviews with policymakers, social service workers, juvenile justice officials, adult community organization leaders; audio-recordings and fieldnotes made within the activity locations of the young people; youth logs covering daily activities (within and outside the academic year), transportation opportunities, media engagement, and activities linked to literacy and arts; sociodemographic statistics related to economic and education changes; interviews by local youth of community members, and participation in the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS). Of the youth, follow-up throughout the decade has continued with 300 individuals, from which 60 full case studies focus on their learning ecologies.

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