LIVING THE ARTS THROUGH LANGUAGE+LEARNING a report on community-based youth organizations

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For more than a decade, an interdisciplinary team of researchers, policy analysts and artists has studied what happens in nonschool youth organizations that local young people living in low-income neighborhoods consider highly desirable places to spend their time. This research has found that organizations that center activities in the arts enable youth who attend their programs regularly to improve their academic standing, increase their abilities in self-assessment and motivation, and raise their sense of the importance of planning and working for a positive future for themselves and their communities.

What turns young people on to learning? What is it that can draw older children into sustaining their energy and focus to create a product or performance of originality and excellence? How can we provide high-quality learning environments for youth in neighborhoods with beleaguered schools, few economic and recreational resources and too many families trying to parent in the face of conflicting demands on their time, emotions and financial resources?

Concerned parents, educators, juvenile justice officials, religious leaders and policymakers often ask these questions.

This edition of *Monographs* helps answer such questions by focusing on an educational sphere that has received little attention within academic and policy circles: community youth programs that center on the arts. These nonschool programs generate learning and counseling opportunities, family entertainment and social enterprise initiatives. In these programs, older youth become mentors to younger children. They serve as strong role models by committing to tough discipline in the arts and working to benefit others in their communities.

Such programs, located within Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, grassroots organizations, performing and cultural arts centers and museums, offer highly effective learning environments for older

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Special thanks to
Cindy Rosenthal for
comments on this
report and for the
inspiration of her
work: *Living the
Contradiction: The
Living Theatre's
Revision of Sophocles'
Antigone through
Brecht and Artaud.*
Ph.D. dissertation,
New York University,
1997.

children and teenagers who face circumstances that place them at risk. When young people work in the arts for at least three hours on three days of each week throughout at least one full year, they show heightened academic standing, a strong capacity for self-assessment and a secure sense of their own ability to plan and work for a positive future for themselves and their communities.

Learning in the arts for these young people captures their imaginations, talents and social commitments. By occupying responsible roles in programs that focus on the visual, performing and media arts, young people develop organizational skills, sound budgeting strategies and the capacity to communicate with adults in their own neighborhoods as well as in the offices and boardrooms of local businesses, corporations and foundations.

Within the organizations that host these arts programs, opportunities for young people to learn derive primarily from an ethos that actively considers them to be resources for themselves, their peers, families and communities. These programs thus engage the young in learning, both for themselves and for others, through highly participatory projects that encompass listening, writing and reading, as well as mathematical, scientific and social skills and strategies. All of these programs strive for excellence within the competitive world of the arts and work to ensure that young members know the technical, aesthetic and professional standards that practicing artists must meet.

OVERVIEW

The findings reported here stem from a research project which ran between 1987 and 1998. The study centered on the question of what happens in nonschool youth organizations judged by local youth living in

low-income neighborhoods as highly desirable places to spend their time.[1] In sites across the United States, long waiting lists and oversubscribed programs attest to the fact that certain kinds of activities draw young people into these particular learning environments. Drama programs of Boys and Girls Clubs, video arts projects of museums, civic-sponsored choirs and grassroots visual arts studios find themselves unable to include everyone who wants to take part in the long hours of practice, tough travel and study schedules and heavy demand for technical knowledge that such groups require. Youth who want to join these groups come from multiple ethnic, linguistic, religious and national backgrounds. Participants range in age from 8 to early 20s; those on the older side of the spectrum grow into leadership roles at their organizations, in some cases taking on paid positions.

When schools in poor communities report high dropout rates, low attendance and student apathy, how can nonschool programs that generally operate with minimal resources and a tenuous grip on funding from year to year attract and sustain involvement by many of these same students? Furthermore, what kind of quality in artistic pursuits can such programs possibly achieve when the young people who participate have had little or no training and few opportunities to attend world-class symphonic and choral concerts, dance and theatre performances, museum and gallery exhibitions or film festivals? Moreover, how can programs in disenfranchised neighborhoods attract professional artists to work with the young, particularly when such programs make no attempt to hide their social commitment to local communities?

The research project reported here was designed to address these questions by placing young, highly-

trained anthropologists within selected communities to trace the evolution of organizations and the development of young people. Data collected give in-depth pictures at intervals over time of ways that youth **use language** as they plan, practice, perform and critique their arts. Beyond the immediate work of their art, young people **perform as workers** in their organizations, playing roles from receptionist and archivist to travel coordinator, choreographer's assistant, group manager or stagehand. In addition to practicing their particular art form, young people spend time reading and writing numerous genres, from shot lists to organizational histories to dramatic scripts to gallery catalogues. They perform mathematical tasks such as calculating travel costs and tracking time-codes for video editing. They engage in inquiries that include oral history interviewing or digging in city photographic archives. Project researchers kept track of the extent and range of all such activities as well as ways the youth spend their leisure time, find employment and manage their lives as students.[2]

In order to locate these young people who participate in nonschool arts organizations within a national data base of students of a similar age, the research team asked over 100 of them to complete a selection of questions used in a longitudinal national survey of secondary school students sponsored by the United States Department of Education.[3] Comparison of participants within the nonschool arts organizations with students of the national sample provide answers to the questions: How do young people in these community organizations relate to the general American secondary school population? How do they match up along a range of risk factors and how do they compare in terms of academic achievement, leisure-time choices and self-judgements of their worth as planners, problem solvers and community members?

COMPARED TO THE NATIONAL SAMPLE, YOUTH IN NONSCHOOL ARTS-BASED PROGRAMS ARE:

★ Attending schools where the potential for violence is more than twice as high.

★ More than twice as likely to have parents who divorced or lost their jobs in the past two years.

★ Over five times as likely to live in a family involved with the welfare system in the last two years.

AND YET, YOUNG PEOPLE WORKING IN THE ARTS DURING THEIR OUT-OF-SCHOOL HOURS ARE:

★ Four times more likely to have won school-wide attention for their academic achievement.

★ Being elected to class office within their schools more than three times as often.

★ Four times more likely to participate in a math and science fair.

★ Three times more likely to win an award for school attendance.

★ Over four times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem.

But what is it about the arts that enables young people to excel within school in a variety of ways even when their school and family contexts do not have the benefit of strong asset bases?

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN IN THE ARTS?

Numerous studies claim that participation in the arts promotes positive outcomes in other academic disciplines and in social development and cognitive capacity. Few of these pieces start with the view that the arts

can and should stand on their own as valuable.[4] Fewer still consider that enabling young people to work as artists needs no connection to effects other than those that matter greatly within the arts: strength of perception, ability to coordinate work towards production and performance and commitment to understanding contemporary circumstances while creating new ways of seeing. These and other aspects of learning in the arts help shape motivation, intense self-discipline, confidence and perseverance because artists must

Having spent so much time posing problems, asking questions, considering possible solutions and evaluating how the arts communicate, young artists take up some of these habits as "second nature" in other domains of their life.

develop these capacities in order to excel in their chosen domain, be it visual, performing or media arts.

But what happens in the arts that leads young people to self-identify as creative, expressive, independent and tough-minded? Just what is the core nature of learning within the arts?

To create, the artist must imagine what he or she might do with given tools and means. This part of art is entirely predictable: there is no art without wonder, without challenge. Sometimes the idea begins "inside," with a feeling, concept or message the artist wants to convey. In other cases, production comes out of direct experimentation with things and persons that exist "outside" the mind's internal landscape. Found object sculpture, collage and contact improvisation are some examples of methods that give special privilege to features of the media and the environment within which the artist works. In both cases, though, the process of art-making involves movement between the ineffable realm of wonder and the concrete world of form.

It is in the activation of wonder—through image, movement or words—that conditionality, risk and contingency inevitably arise. Real outcome rarely matches the imagined. While artists begin with a vision of what they want, the process of work toward that vision yields unexpected effects that raise new possibilities and constraints. The ability to control one's media is a mark of aesthetic prowess, but no artist can determine fully in advance how work will emerge; indeed, many use chance as an advantage. Poets rarely know the absolute or unique outcome of putting three words or lines together until they see, feel or hear what emerges. And these effects will themselves vary across periods of time or circumstances of hearing the poem.

This level of abstraction—rarely achieved early in the study of other content areas—appears to be hard-wired for art, since very young children working aesthetically recognize how much the work they do in their heads will predictably shape outcomes in forms that are conditional. This characteristic we often term the "free spirit" of young children singing, dancing, talking, painting and acting for themselves and their peers. When an adult witnesses such acts and asks for repeats, children respond with what are often entirely new performances, since for them the art lies in the certainty of the power of creation they know they have and not in

predictable repetition of a sameness that can, in fact, never be "the same."

Every performance, every work is a one-time-only original, but every individual has to work hard to become and to remain an artist. Through older childhood and the teen years, when self-doubts and shifting grips on identity often prevail, holding onto faith in the power of art for one's own learning is possible only through continuous opportunity to practice, self-discipline and perform.

Art, then, by its very nature makes much of what goes on inside the head. Only a small part of the invisible mental work of art gets externalized through words that convey images, affect and chance: "I can picture it in my head." "I've got this sense of what I want to see come out of this." "I want to push ahead until it feels right." These are the kinds of words that mark artists in the act of perceiving and creating aesthetic production and performance.

Means of evaluating outcomes remain as flexible as their creation, for artists never "know" ahead of time the quality of what will emerge. Thus, appraisal from critics and connoisseurs must always draw on what has gone before, so that assessment is comparative based on the prior work of this artist and of others and not on arbitrary external standards or measures.

Young artists in youth organizations—always working with the collaborative eye and ear of others—bring the mental shaping of their art into the open through three pairs of verbal activities.[5]

1. Theory-building and checking out the possible. Artists and those who critique them over periods of production and performance keep asking things like: "What do you think will happen if...?" "Have you

thought about trying...?" Beyond these hypothetical probes lies predictable conditionality: artists try, check, reformulate and revise their efforts toward a finished work. Even after completion of a product or performance, artists carry their emergent ideas with them as resources for ongoing work. They revoice and revisualize outcomes of prior efforts—their own and others'—as they move forward, applying knowledge born of experience to future projects.

2. Translating and transforming. Artists translate perceptions of realities through manipulation of different media—paints, gestures, sounds or words. This process of interpretation gives new form to existing ideas and observations. Shaping those interpretations constitutes transformation and requires intense attention to the artist's environment, which comes alive as potential material. While artists at youth organizations can pursue solo work, even their individual projects depend on group participation. They engage therefore in a double act of translation—from imagined reality to concrete expression and from private vision to visualized, and often verbalized, articulation for others. Young artists explain what they are translating from and, in turn, listen to peers explain how they see the transformation. This interactive process builds new perspectives on circumstances that can otherwise appear fixed and given. Through art, young people transform the world about them by making it their own to create, reshape and carry forward in mental and verbal images.

3. Projecting and reflecting. As individuals engage in the give-and-take that goes on in these arts programs, young people project their interpretations onto the

aesthetic objects of others, implicitly asking other artists to reflect on how components of the work might have led to such interpretations and might move further to affect group projects. Hence, artists have to move out of the imagined spaces in their own heads and consider how their work creates possible worlds, ideas or analogies in the minds of others. Therefore, young artists have extensive practice in getting to know how viewing and listening audiences hear, see and find meaning in their work. Projections of meaning by others call for reflection on the part of the artist.

For example, when the mid-level choral group of a civic choir sings an Israeli song, the senior choral group listens and corrects pronunciation, for they have such folk songs in their repertoire. But they do more than focus on details; they help younger choir members think about what "plaintive" might mean as descriptor for this folksong. Younger singers thus have to reflect on their chosen style and pace of delivery. Similarly, if the director of a short movie wants to make a comic parody but during shooting, members of his crew report that some scenes might come across as mocking, a negotiation must ensue where the director tweaks the script and pulls from his "talent" the right balance of humor and respect.

These three verbal activities are integral to the talk that dominates arts programs for young people. Whether applied to visual or dramatic arts, the process that moves the group toward production of a gallery exhibition or a theatrical performance calls for ongoing critique. In developing a dramatic work, arts directors differ from many of their counterparts in the professional world, in that they encourage young per-

formers to comment on the actions and efforts of other cast members. Youth are expected always to ask themselves and others: "How does this work?" "How does this feel to me?" "Do I think this is working?" Moreover, in most youth theater programs, members write the script and each participant must understand every other role. Actor-to-actor feedback strengthens the process of putting together a full script and staging a show. In video and visual arts, members realize that they are producing pieces for potential collectors and clients as well as for adult critics from the "real world," so peers take on these roles as they critique emerging forms. At the same time, valuing their own work and their own communities as "real" in themselves, they seek judgments of respected members of local social networks.

Visual artists are particularly sensitive to the need to be different, "but not too different," and therefore develop a sense of the company of other artists they wish to see identified with their work. But in these alignments, they must also be aware of how the particular techniques and components of their work cannot simply replicate those of other artists. Emerging artists can manifest mixed reactions when viewers liken their work to that of prominent adults. One young woman who is a singer and painter grows tired of comparisons listeners make between her vocals and those of the trendy performer Jewel, for she objects to the implication that her own songs and style are derivative. But at the same time, she freely and deliberately borrows from masters including Kahlo, Klimt, Picasso and O'Keeffe in her paintings, using art history books as sources of instruction and inspiration. Another visual artist working with spray paints on public walls characterizes his imagery as

unique and totally "now," even as he always gives credit to elders from whom he learned technique. "To follow" or "to appropriate" or even "to parody" do not mean "to reproduce" or "to imitate."

Language enables learners to fit productions and performances into the larger artistic world. Talk fills arts organizations, and close analysis of this talk reveals immediately the extent to which language stands behind and supports the cognitive work of being an artist and organizational member of these effective programs.

★ Posing problems and asserting the hypothetical constitute the kind of language that young artists habitually use during periods of planning, preparing and practicing.

★ Adult professional artists or older youth members looked on as "experts" make themselves available to help younger artists comment on their work or to "move things along."

★ Individuals talk about how parts, steps or pieces of their current work relate to some whole—either the full body of their own work or the full project of the group. Small-group work that centers on accomplishing a specific task characterizes daily life.

★ Museum and gallery visits, theater and concert outings or workshops with professional artists-in-residence provide vocabulary, techniques, strategies and models of innovative practices that young people later use in their own work and in their modes of communication. Young people learn to work and talk as practicing artists.

Threaded throughout this talk are references to or excerpts of aesthetic material. Speakers can point to or sketch an image, mark off a movement, voice a line or hum a passage in order to clarify a claim or suggestion they want to make. Looking and listening, identifying with specific labels and places and referencing bodies of shared professional knowledge enable conversations among young artists to move from in-process efforts to projections of a finished whole.

Frequency counts reveal a great deal. Just how often is it that the young people of these organizations use certain types of language? As their language develops near the time of production or performance, over 80 percent of the talk of young people is heavily engaged with the hypothetical. Seventy-six percent of their talk during the practice

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phase of work is marked by specific "pointing out" terms (such as *this one, right there, in that scene/speech/screen*) and supported with technical specialized vocabulary.

Hence, young artists have extensive opportunity to use language that characterizes critical judgement and systematic reasoning: posing problems, devising methods, specifying parts and steps and using appropriate vocabulary. In addition, since work toward a deadline that involves judgment by an outside evaluator is ever-present within youth organizations, members also have to stay focused, rehearse and prepare extensively and bear in mind that only

the best will do. Focus, repeated practice toward improvement and quest for quality permeate every hour of work.

WHAT VALUES FROM WORK IN THE ARTS CARRY OVER INTO GENERAL LEARNING?

Knowing what happens within learning environments of youth organizations devoted to the arts leads to the common-sense recognition that with ongoing practice embedded in such affective intensity, **many of these critical ways of thinking and talking become habituated for young artists.** Having spent so much time posing problems, asking questions, considering possible solutions and evaluating how the arts communicate, young artists take up some of these habits as "second nature" in other domains of their life. They make no claim that they consistently plan carefully or critique evidence, but they do report being aware in many activities beyond their art that they need to think through possible outcomes, check ideas with others and take time to assess options.

Moreover, taking part in the arts encourages risk-taking—stepping out to try something new, frame a different plan or execute a novel combination. The support of like-minded risk-takers builds confidence in one's ability to take on challenges, solve problems and follow through on plans. It follows that young artists and active members of effective youth organizations would also absorb the need to keep developing by reading, taking advantage of specialized lessons or workshops and attending community organization activities related to their interests.

Young people in arts-based youth organizations show in several specific ways that their learning builds carry-over habits of mind and patterns of action.
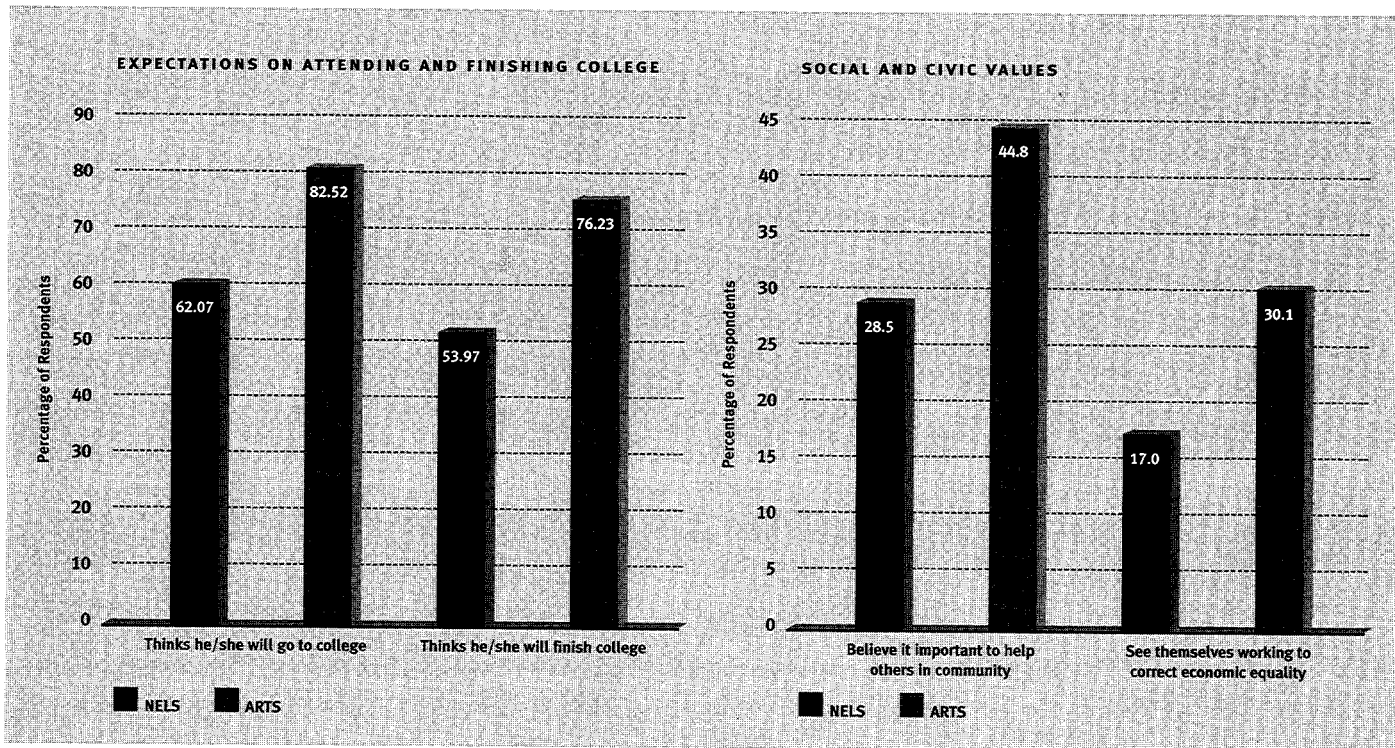
1. Attend music, art and dance classes nearly three times as frequently.
2. Participate in youth groups nearly four times more frequently.
3. Read for pleasure nearly twice as often.
4. Perform community service more than four times as often.

These features indicate that during their discretionary time, young people in the arts find ways to make these hours count toward their general and specific goals for learning. These young artists see themselves as learners and work to sustain this image for themselves and their peers, believing that having leisure time in which to pursue learning is highly important. Perhaps surprisingly, they do not report that getting good grades in school is particularly important to them, nor do they express great interest in what others say or think about them as students per se. Yet, as reported above, these students do excel academically. They seem to accept that working hard is "just something we do."

While young artists at effective youth organizations manifest strong levels of self-motivation, their parents play important roles in supporting their involvement. In spite of the fact that young people in the arts are more likely than youth in the national sample to live and learn in families and schools that do not match the mainstream ideal in climate, economic resources or stability, their parents often participate in their learning activities and hold high educational aspirations for them.

In addition, in a variety of ways, young people working in the arts stand out from the national sample in the extent to which they report that they can:
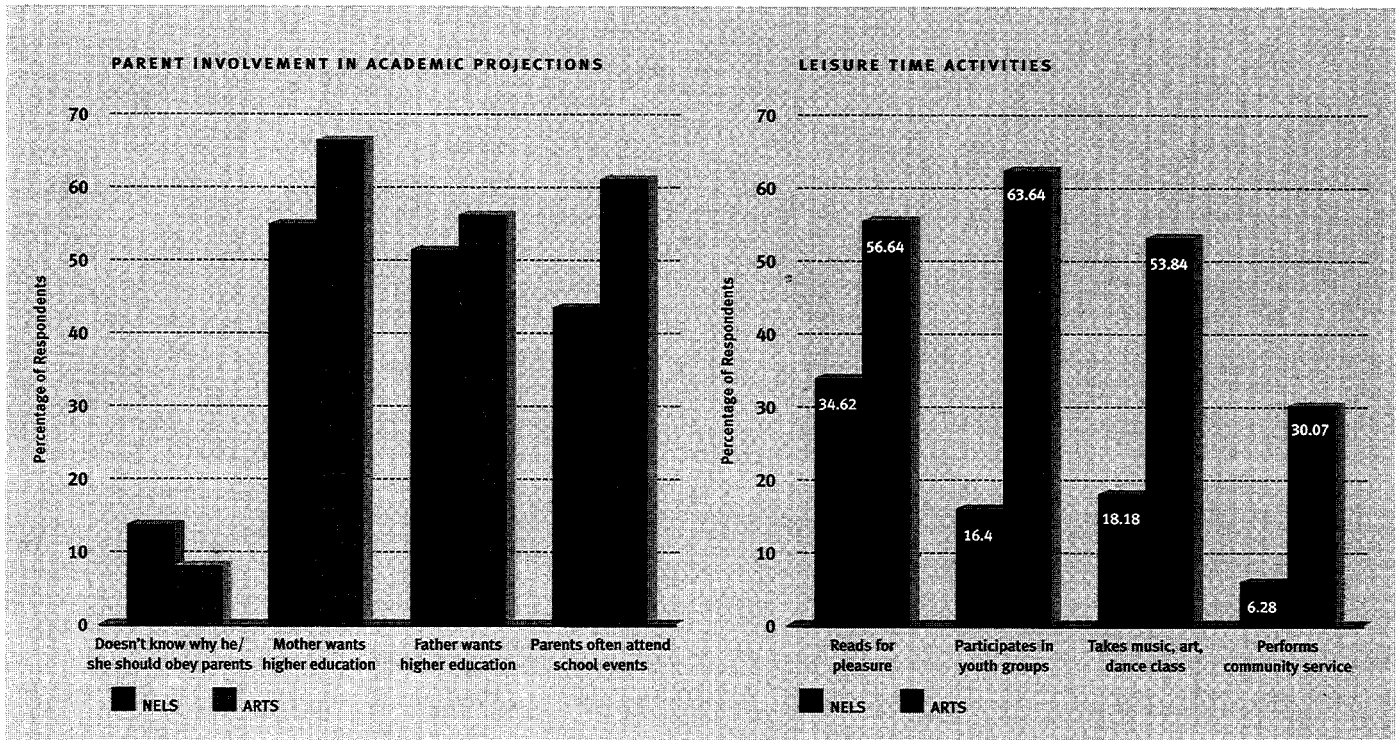
EXPECTATIONS ON ATTENDING AND FINISHING COLLEGE

Percentage of Respondents

- Thinks he/she will go to college: NELS 62.07, ARTS 82.52
- Thinks he/she will finish college: NELS 53.97, ARTS 76.23

■ NELS ■ ARTS

SOCIAL AND CIVIC VALUES

Percentage of Respondents

- Believe it important to help others in community: NELS 28.5, ARTS 44.8
- See themselves working to correct economic equality: NELS 17.0, ARTS 30.1

■ NELS ■ ARTS

★ Make plans and successfully work from them.

★ Do things as well as other people.

★ Project that they will definitely continue their education after high school.

★ Have a close match between their high *aspirations* for themselves and their firm *expectations* of what they can do.

In short, arts-focused organizations that base their existence on the resourcefulness, energy and imagination of young people provide these future community builders with practice in ways of being and habits of thinking essential in the arts. It is not surprising that these ways and habits also carry over into other areas of self-perception and behavior, given the amount of prac-

tice, reflection and intense engagement—as well as group support—these youth programs provide through the learning environments that surround the creation of art and the maintenance of their organizations.

However, the young people who take part in these organizations do so voluntarily. They also do so with a strong sense of taking part in **youth leadership** building and sustaining an organization, project or performance.[6] This broad environment generates energy, high affect and engaged commitment—all of which further stimulate practice, critique, self-evaluation and a sense of wanting to continue to learn. The volunteerism level of these young people, as well as their "jump in and get it done" attitude, is perhaps best indicated by the fact that they are

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN ACADEMIC PROJECTIONS

Percentage of Respondents

70			
60			
50			
40			
30			
20			
10			
0			

Doesn't know why he/ she should obey parents · Mother wants higher education · Father wants higher education · Parents often attend school events

■ NELS ■ ARTS

LEISURE TIME ACTIVITIES

Percentage of Respondents

70			
60	63.64		
50	56.64	53.84	
40			
30	34.62		30.07
20		18.18	
10	16.4		6.28
0			

Reads for pleasure · Participates in youth groups · Takes music, art, dance class · Performs community service

■ NELS ■ ARTS

eight times more likely to receive a community service award than their counterparts in the national sample. Moreover, these youth have strong pro-social values toward working within their communities and striving toward correcting economic inequalities.[7] These qualities bode well for their future roles as community members.

WHAT FEATURES DO EFFECTIVE YOUTH-BASED ARTS ORGANIZATIONS SHARE?

What do the arts organizations that attract these young people look like? How do they operate? Answers to these questions are essential, for along with their work in the arts, members of these groups commit intensely to sustaining the life of the organization. As they play key roles as board member, publicist and fundraiser, young people gain practice and rewards for astute judgements, considered actions and plans for collaborating with other arts organizations (many of which are adult-only).

Youth organizations engage young artists across the full spectrum of the visual, musical, dramatic and media arts. However, programs centering on the dramatic arts are among those with the broadest embrace, for they involve members in set and costume design, choreography, drumming and other musical arts, as well as creative writing and acting. Media production centers include many of these same areas, adding also the technical dimensions of camera operation, sound engineering and analogue or digital editing.

All the arts organizations in our study self-identify as committed to community service, and many partner with other organizations, agencies or institutions that work with youth. For example, one theater group produces several plays each year that highlight issues of prime concern to local youth. They create a series of educational performances through close collaboration with schools, juvenile justice agencies and social service organizations. Other dramatic arts groups operate within performing arts centers, using facilities, equipment and professional actors, crews and staffs to develop their own productions. One performing arts center invites young writers to attend national touring shows and work with professional arts critics from local newspapers to publish reviews. Another theater group partners with local schools, bringing young artists in residence into the classroom and also running a script development and performance program for secondary schools for pregnant teenagers.

Youth-based arts organizations partner with nearby community centers, neighborhood groups and other sites in the region to provide entertainment for families and most especially for children and teens. For example, one youth arts program turned an old van into a traveling arts production and exhibition center for block parties. Engaged by local organizers, the group sent out young artists and the van to provide children's activities such as puppet shows, painted face masks and interactive arts projects. Summer arts festivals return each year to ask youth arts groups to perform, to provide promotional materials or, in the case of video arts groups, to document the event. Parks and recreational programs in several locations count on youth theater troupes to provide afternoon entertainment and educational programming for youngsters enrolled in summer daycare pro-

grams. Local libraries partner with visual arts and dramatic arts groups to enlist entertaining readers and sometimes puppeteers for children's reading hours.

Several salient features over the decade of research marked the organizational structure of arts programs that young people regard as highly effective learning environments in their lives. A few critical macro-structural features of such groups emerge as central to establishing the basic operation that binds together adult leaders and youth members. These include:

1. Goals;
2. Ethos; and
3. Management Framework.

1. GOALS

Goals are never as simple as they appear in arts programs, for they inevitably grow out *of local knowledge and professional expertise*—a combination that is hard to come by in economically-strained communities. Local knowledge comes from insider information about pressing needs and insiders must include key neighborhood youth, as well as adults who are willing to listen and to participate with young people to create and to sustain an organization. Contrary to common misperceptions about highly successful youth arts groups, those judged most effective in economically strained communities may be initiated—but are unlikely to be sustained—through the efforts of charismatic adults.

In the 1980s and 1990s, founders of effective arts-based youth programs inevitably include some local young people who acknowledge needs in their communities and who see themselves as willing and able to play some role in helping to meet those needs. Such

recognition by youth may come in highly general ways ("kids around here need something to do"; "kids in our neighborhood don't have role models"). It is often adults who must probe to learn those activities most likely to engage young people. Such probes work best in the form of specific suggestions, such as: "How about a group that would help kids do plays and musical gigs in their community?" Young people rarely respond with specific ideas to open-ended queries, such as, "What would kids around here like to do?" or "What are the kinds of role models kids would want to have in their neighborhoods?"

Young people within disenfranchised neighborhoods have had little if any experience with either formal arts education or with nonschool organizations that treat them as positive resources (rather than as problems). As a result, they often gain inspiration from others living in communities like their own who have gotten something started in the arts. Once young people trust that participating adults will indeed listen to their views and commit to sustained involvement, these youth join efforts to initiate local opportunities for arts involvement. For example, one program begun by four young adults brought local young people into the project of creating a youth mall out of an abandoned warehouse simply by beginning to work on clearing and cleaning the site. Gradually, neighborhood youth joined in the hard work and thereby many became invested in planning and developing the location and its programs over the next years.

A single, disarmingly simple goal drives effective arts-based youth programs: **excellence in performance or production with community youth support.** All other goals follow from this one:

★ Provision of abundant opportunities for young members to work with and learn from professionals.

★ Achievement (and maintenance) of respect from the regional art world, including artists, critics, funders and arts educators.

★ Operation of a safe congenial environment supportive of young people's creativity through the arts ;

★ Evolution of an organization capable of responding to appraisal by the local community as well as to funders' expectations.

2. ETHOS

Ethos of operation enables achievement of these goals and determines how adults and youth members work together. Respect for young people, as well as a core faith in their ability and willingness to respond to fair challenges through hard work, constitute the primary components of the ethos through which effective arts organizations work.

Programs that revolve around problems such as delinquency, school failure, drug use, teenage pregnancy, vandalism and crime find it difficult to recognize the positive contributions young people can make once they are regarded as resources. Arts-based programs deemed effective by youth invariably operate out of an ethos of **Respect, Responsibility** and **Relevance** with children and young people.

3. MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The "three R's" of ethos shape the Management Framework of arts organizations. If the young members of the organization are to be respected, they have to carry responsibility for keeping the organization relevant. Thus, they forge links to the community; connect to ongoing changes in the inter-

ests, worries and needs of children and youth; and commit to the pursuit of their own craft and to the maintenance and enhancement of a viable environment for learning. These three C's—**Community, Connection** and **Commitment**—follow on the heels of the three R's.

The essential glue holding goals, ethos and management framework together for effective arts programs is RISK WITHIN A SAFE SPACE. Unless organizations keep the stakes high and the demand level bordering on the extraordinary, young people will not sustain involvement and interest. Risk means taking chances, moving into uncharted territories, being creative beyond one's comfort level and pushing further than one expects ever to be able to go.

Risk is the key element of the arts—whether stepping out on stage, expressing an "if-only" idea in poetry, taking up a paint brush or heading out with camera to capture on film an abstract concept such as freedom. Expressiveness, vulnerability and standing out from the crowd as "different" mark every type of activity characterized by young people as "risky." Since effective organizations insist on excellence and achievement of the highest possible standards, as well as evaluation and assessment by professional critics outside of the organization, the usual risks inherent in the arts multiply and intensify. It is not enough to go on stage before one's peers; one must also act before the drama critics of the city's major newspapers. It is not enough to take photographs to share with friends; one must create photographs that will represent the individual artist and organization at regional competitions or that will attract buyers who attend gallery openings.

The rules young people make to sustain the strong work atmosphere of the organization enable members to take these risks. Rules never emerge from members in long lists of "don'ts" but instead in broad-stroke statements of what holds for the group: "everyone here has work to do"; "nobody gets hurt around here." Specific affirmative rules sometimes follow from these and relate to timeli-

A single, disarmingly simple goal drives effective arts-based youth programs: excellence in performance or production with community youth support.

ness, care of equipment, cleaning responsibilities and good-citizenship tied to property, autonomy and privilege.

These relatively open rules mean that the roles of custodian, manager, security guard and critic fall to all members. Dissent and conflict among members violate the general rule that "nobody gets hurt here," and members must therefore find ways to diffuse anger and deflect aggression. Functions necessary to maintain the organization float among older members. Their model filters down to younger members who find it "cool" to emulate the youth experts whose leadership keeps things going and makes the work fun.

WHAT HAPPENS TO LANGUAGE IN ARTS LEARNING?

It is the combination of work and play with risk that carries young people forward in their learning. The demands of a performance or production dictate daily tasks; arbitrary assignments are avoided. The work gears itself toward public presentation, which carries with it an expectation of critical evaluation.

PLAN	--->	PREPARE	--->	PRACTICE
CRITIQUE	--->	PRACTICE	--->	PERFORM
EVALUATE	--->	REGROUP	--->	PLAN
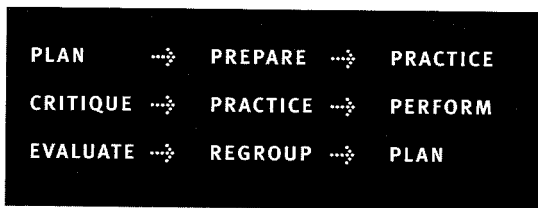
This cycle repeats itself again and again through the seasons or timeframes for specific projects and becomes a habit for members. They learn to expect that preparation for a project follows from planning, and practice generates a product that others within the group will critique. Performance or product presentation generates evaluation—from outsiders, group members and the artists themselves; regrouping to start the cycle

Risk means taking chances, moving into uncharted territories, being creative beyond one's comfort level and pushing farther than one expects ever to be able to go.

again follows every major transition point for organizations, whether it be gallery opening, dramatic presentation, concert or regional conference participation.

As might be expected, the types of language that accompany this cycle vary depending on when they occur. As students plan and prepare, adults and older youth guide them and model for them numerous ways of thinking through ideas, proposing possibilities and considering probabilities. Within five to seven days of work together, newcomers begin to join in with sentences that begin "But what if...?" or "Could we...?"

During practice, language from the director or professional artist working with individuals and group projects often appears in a flow of brief directives—for theater, dance and musical arts: "focus," "pick up the pace," "louder," "bring it down" (referring to a part of the body, volume of music, *etc.*). For the visual and video arts, the practice phase is marked not only by hypothetical language, but also by information-seeking questions ("Is this light going to work here?" "Can I mix these two types of paints?"). Practice time also brings questions of purpose, goal, direction and state of the work, as well as questions that ask individuals to consider the mental state supporting the work: "How does that feel to you? Okay?" "Where's your center? Find it and move from that in this next scene." Participants raise questions concerning not only their own mental states, but also their projections of audience response: "Remember we have to play this in rural schools, too"; "Think about whether or not friends on the street will find this believable—will they buy it?"

Performance or presentation of product brings the language to a tight, fast-clipped pace that marks a close deadline, tensions arising from insecurity and fears that "something will go wrong." During this phase, hypotheticals recede, and direct statements, imperatives and quick questions about action take over. Though certainly at this time adult voices may dominate, everyone in the group plays some role in thinking ahead, trying to anticipate every possible development and ensuring that the group is as prepared as possible.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE TO LEARN IN THE ARTS?

When asked to consider the lives of youth, people eventually raise questions about money or time or

both. **How much will all this cost? Who is out there that can be adult leaders in organizations like this?**

The second question is the more thoughtful, for it acknowledges that working with young people in the arts by allowing them to participate fully does not come easily for most adults. Public perception works hard to assure most adults that young people vacillate between apathy and a desire for destructive or at best, expensive, forms of entertainment. Even parents of adolescents jest about the challenge of "second-guessing" their own children and trying to stay ahead in figuring out what might keep them out of trouble, away from pronouncements of boredom and into behaviors and attitudes that portend a successful future.

Today, adults and professional artists interested in working with young people operate within a shifting and largely undefined field. Those who work in Boys and Girls Clubs, grassroots theaters or video arts programs or community centers with art studios often come to their work when they notice local needs that match their drive to work with youth toward community development. They soon realize that few support systems exist for them in this still uncharted area of practice. Yet most are deeply committed to their work and would welcome opportunities to know more about how young people learn. Just what are the cognitive challenges, artistic responsibilities and technical levels of knowledge that will hold their engagement?

Answers to this need for professional schools or programs that offer both a focus on youth and on learning in the arts must come from realignments within institutions of further education. Art departments of colleges and universities, working in concert with local artists' studios, theaters or video arts cooperatives, as well as other appropriate departments (e.g., education, psychology, anthropology,

media studies), offer the best possibility of providing short-term institutes and degree programs. Preparation for working with youth during the nonschool hours comes about in an ad hoc fashion: former teachers, practicing artists and adults from many other types of careers follow passion and conviction that lead them into developing positive learning environments with young people.

However, leaving to chance the creation, maintenance and enrichment of these learning environments—shown to be so valuable for young people in economically disenfranchised communities—is foolish. Much planning goes into preparing those who teach in schools; it makes sense to provide resources for those who work with young people in the nonschool hours.

The need to provide professional development support—particularly in technical information related to nonprofit management and community development—for nonschool youth organizations becomes even more evident in the face of the substantial difference in the amount of time the young spend in school and out of school. **Students spend only about 26 percent of their time in school; of the remaining time, older children and youth have discretion over about 50 percent of their time.**[8] Hence it would seem necessary to provide not only organizational opportunities for youth during this discretionary time, but also to find ways to prepare and to sustain adults who work with them during these hours.

What about the costs of the actual programs? This is a relatively easy question to answer. Once physical space is available, the costs to support each young person there are surprisingly low. **Annual costs to provide at least two to three hours of instruction and practice three times each week throughout the year run between $900 and $1100 per individual youth member.**

The variation in figures depends on costs of space and equipment. If these are provided, as they often are through partnerships with performing arts centers or community centers, then costs drop significantly.[9] Artists who work with youth generally do so part-time, receiving remuneration for their time as well as other perks, such as free or highly-subsidized studio space or rooms for practice with their own musical, dance or theater group of adults. Finding artists willing to work with young people, even part-time, is extremely difficult, for many feel unprepared to enter the uncharted world of nonprofit community organizations run in large part by and with young people who themselves who need to participate as fully as possible in both the arts and the running of the organization.

In figuring costs, one must take into account that **young artists are not drains on resources—they *are resources*.** Each young artist in the organizations of this study gives back to the community and to surrounding institutions in a variety of forms—education, counseling, entertainment and construction.

Young people provide entertainment in neighborhoods that rarely feature low-cost, eye-catching activities for families. Within their own organizations, youth instruct and counsel their younger counterparts in all the arts and guide them through educational venues whose primary appeal may at the outset be the opportunity to "hang with" teenagers they regard as "cool." As docents for galleries and museums, as guides through technical facilities of graphic arts studios, as radio talk show hosts and as ushers for community theaters and concert halls, young artists send the clear message that such places are "okay." In order for more youth to have access to these kinds of opportunities, cultural cen-

ters must add youth participation to their missions and partner with existing youth organizations to design high-quality programs.

CONCLUSION

Learning in the arts cannot be regarded as "extra," "trivial" or possible only when the "basics" are in place. The arts are *basic*, for they push learners to pose problems and find resolutions, to link thought and action and to recognize the consequences of individual behaviors on group interactions and achievements. Current thinking and demands of communication in the continuing information-based workplace reveal the kinds of thinking necessary for civic, economic, technical, inventive and social challenges and point to society's keen need for more learning of the kind elaborated here as existing within the arts.

Environments must be created that enable community educators and professional artists to see work in nonschool organizations as a viable and compelling option for them. Also needed are youth organizations that send loud clear messages—that our youth represent a vital resource for communities and for the sound learning of children coming along behind them. Communities that support youth-based arts organizations do more than preserve and develop their youth for the future. They engage the creative energies of youth in positive ways that enrich community life and culture today.

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ENDNOTES

1. In addition to organizations committed to the arts, two other types were studied—those that centered in community service and those that encircled athletic pursuits with related academic activities. Awarded to Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey W. McLaughlin as co-principal investigators, funding for the major portion of this research was provided by **THE SPENCER FOUNDATION**. Additional support came from **THE GE FUND** and **THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING**. Members of the research team included (in chronological order of affiliation): Juliet Langman, Merita Irby, Steve Balt, Jennifer Massen Wolf, Shelby Anne Wolf, Ali Callicoatte, Melissa Groo, Kim Bailey, Arnetha Ball, Brita Lombardi, Mailee Ferguson, Sara DeWitt, Shama Blaney, Monica Lam, Adelma Roach, Emma Luevano, Monette McIver, Adriel Harvey and Elisabeth Soep. Key researchers on arts organizations were Heath, Soep and Roach. To locate "effective" youth organizations, Heath and McLaughlin used a process of "exemplary sampling," telephoning policymakers and youth workers across the nation to ask "where are good things happening for kids in poor communities in their nonschool hours?" From responses to this question, several regional locations emerged as choice sites, where the same question was asked of educators, social workers, funders and civic officials. Once specific local organizations were identified, young anthropologists trained to "hang out" with teenagers watched and listened in communities around these organizations as young people revealed the places they wanted to be and the activities that generated their enthusiasm. Through this three-step funneling process, the research team identified as "effective" 124 youth organizations in 30 different geographic locations across the U.S. serving approximately 30,000 youth over the decade. For periods ranging from several months to three-plus years, young anthropologists collected data in these organizations in order to capture the beliefs and behaviors that characterized them and to document the evolving lives of young people who regularly participated there. Policy analysts meanwhile worked with local adults to monitor their perceptions and evaluations of these community youth organizations.

2. Full explanation of the range of methods of data collection and analysis used in the study appears in several publications; see, for example, Heath and Langman, 1994; McLaughlin, Irby and Langman, 1994; Heath and McLaughlin, forthcoming.

3. The National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) began in 1988 when it was administered to 25,000 eighth graders in a representative sample of schools across the United States. Follow-up data collection took place in 1990, 1992, 1994 and further follow-ups will be ongoing. Data from the NELS for the 17,000 10th graders who responded to the survey in 1990 were used for comparison with the sample from nonschool arts organizations reported here. The NELS was given to 358 members of youth organizations; 143 of these were in arts-based groups; all urban sites contained arts-based groups. In rural areas and mid-sized cities (with populations of 25,000-100,000),

community service organizations and athletic-academic focused groups dominated, even though some of these groups occasionally involved their members in arts-related activities. Arts-based organizations in rural areas and mid-sized cities (especially those that are not college or university towns) are rare, given the paucity in these locations of professional artists, equipment and resources related to the arts and appropriate spaces for exhibition and performance.

4. Elliot Eisner (1998) underscores this point in his position that overblown claims that the arts can solve all of society's problems ultimately damage rather than strengthen the position of the arts in the public eye and the quality of educational practice in the arts.

5. Because a major focus of the research project reported here was on language in these youth organizations, hundreds of hours of audio tape recordings (supplemented by fieldnotes) allow repeated analysis of how young artists talked in every stage of their work. Moreover, Elisabeth Soep, a senior researcher on the project over three years, has focused intensely on the process of critique within these and other groups of artists working in the visual arts (see Soep, 1997 and forthcoming). Tannock (1998), a linguist, has identified several other aspects of talk surrounding collaborative creation of a joint project or performance by young people working in organizations of this study.

6. Roach, *et al* (forthcoming) reveals how enactments of leadership among young people in youth-based organizations focus on *how* leadership happens and not on *who* leaders are. Youth participation, distribution of knowledge and talents and collaborative learning capture needed conditions for engagement and development in such sites. Notions of leadership as a set of individual attributes are replaced by concepts of leadership as embedded within situations for communities of learning and practice (see Brown & Campione, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

7. All findings reported in this section result from comparative statistical analysis of responses given by youth in arts organizations and those in the high schools surveyed by NELS. All survey items were subjected to a series of chi square tests comparing proportions in the arts organizations with proportions of positive endorsements in the NELS. Only results at the .001 to .05 levels of significance are reported here.

8. For further data on this point, see the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's 1992 publication *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*.

9. This figure represents a compilation of analyses of the annual budgets of a selection of arts organizations involved in the study since 1987 as these relate to the average number of participants each organization served on a regular basis each year.

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