



# How to Introduce Creative Youth Development into an Existing Afterschool Program

## The Casita Maria Story

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Out-of-school time program leaders know that engagement is critical to their ability to achieve youth outcomes. Programs have to ignite and sustain participants' interest in order to help them thrive. According to the Search Institute, "The major component of thriving is the concept of 'sparks'—the interests and passions young people have that light a fire in their lives" (Scales, 2010). Research into these "sparks" identified creative arts as the top-ranked interest among teens aged 12 to 17, cited by 54 percent of teens surveyed (Benson, 2008).

Programs that seek to engage participants in arts-based programming may be drawn to creative youth development (CYD), a youth-focused, holistic

approach to learning through creative expression. As the Creative Youth Development National Partnership (2018) defines it, "*Creative youth development* is a recent term for a longstanding theory of practice that integrates creative skill-building, inquiry, and expression with positive youth development principles, fueling young people's imaginations and building critical learning and life skills."

After a period of learning about CYD and exploring its suitability, Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education in the Bronx, New York, launched an initiative to integrate CYD principles into its afterschool programs. Though Casita Maria built on a growing base of knowledge about these principles

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and how to implement them, its staff had to integrate new practices into the existing program and extend the principles to reach youth with a wide range of ages and experience levels. As an initial pilot phase of the program launched in spring 2018, I was engaged as its evaluator. The resulting observation and evaluation has provided useful information for practitioners who want to reap the benefits of CYD programming.

## Casita Maria and Creative Youth Development

Founded in 1934, Casita Maria has a long history of providing enriching afterschool and summer camp learning and arts opportunities in East Harlem and the South Bronx. According to Executive Director Haydee Morales, Casita Maria aims to “create a high-quality, fun learning environment that fosters excellence in creativity, learning, and life” (Morales et al., 2019). Programming serves young people from kindergarten through high school. The organization has owned and operated its current arts learning facility in the South Bronx since 2009. The community is 76 percent Latinx and 21 percent African American, with a growing constituency of new immigrants and migrants. Casita Maria has built ongoing relationships with schools, the school district, and local artists and arts organizations, all of whom support and enrich the educational programming.

Casita Maria launched its CYD initiative in 2018, after studying the approach, building buy-in from the organization’s leaders, and designing a customized program with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The existing afterschool programming already included a robust music program, including instruction in violin, percussion, and piano, as well as chorus and musical theater. The organization’s commitment to creative arts programs in the community was evident in its participation in BLITZ (a Bronx-based Latin jazz ensemble with Arturo O’Farrill), the annual South Bronx Culture Trail Festival, The Mural at Casita Maria, and exhibitions in the Casita Maria Gallery. Though the educational and creative arts programming was successful, staff lacked a shared institutional understanding, language, and training base that would center the work around a common goal. Leaders made a commitment to integrating CYD in order to better align Casita Maria’s youth programs with the organization’s belief in the arts as a community-building resource and as a means of empowering youth to take collective action toward social justice.

## Why Integrate CYD Principles?

CYD’s focus on creativity and engagement with professional artists and arts activities supports the “spark” that activates young people’s interest and engagement (Scales, 2010). Although CYD can focus on artistic skill-building (McClanahan & Hartmann, 2018), it is also a youth development approach that can be applied broadly to learning through creative inquiry in diverse fields. The principles of CYD (see box) are consistent both with the tenets of positive youth development and with best practices in many arts-based afterschool programs.

### Ten Principles of Creative Youth Development

Montgomery, Rogovin, and Persaud (2013) identify 10 principles of effective CYD programming:

1. Instructors are professional, practicing artists and are valued with compensation for their expertise and investment in their professional development.
2. Executive directors have a public commitment to high-quality arts programs that is supported by sustained action.
3. Arts programs take place in dedicated, inspiring, welcoming spaces and affirm the value of art and artists.
4. There is a culture of high expectations, respect for creative expression, and an affirmation of youth participants as artists.
5. Programs culminate in high-quality events with real audiences.
6. Positive relationships with adult mentors and peers foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.
7. Youth participants actively shape programs and assume meaningful leadership roles.
8. Programs focus on hands-on skill building using current equipment and technology.
9. Programs strategically engage key stakeholders to create a network of support for both youth participants and the programs.
10. Programs provide a physically and emotionally safe space for youth.

CYD has been documented primarily in teen learning environments (Hirzy, 2011; Levine, 2002; Montgomery et al., 2013). However, with modifications, it can be adapted for other age groups, including tweens (McClanahan & Hartmann, 2018).

Multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1983) holds that individuals process information in many different ways. Studies indicate that providing multiple ways for participants to access material improves learning outcomes (Hattie, 2012). With its emphasis

on experiential learning and creative expression, CYD has the potential to develop multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999), including those not typically developed in school classrooms.

Research is proving that CYD learning has impact on participants' critical thinking skills, well-being, and confidence. In her 2018 blog post "There Are Not Enough CYD Programs," Denise Montgomery states, "Many youth participants in CYD programs attest that their involvement changed the trajectory of their lives. Additionally, numerous young people state that participation in a CYD program effectively saved their lives." Many authors have established the value of afterschool arts programming, including high levels of youth engagement that contribute to substantial learning and enhanced critical thinking (Holloway & LeCompte, 2011; Lampert, 2011). Other benefits for young people include heightened confidence and sense of agency (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003).

### **Integrating CYD into an Existing Program**

The evaluation of Casita Maria's CYD programs was built around a series of 46 observations I conducted between May and December 2018. I not only observed CYD components in the actions of adult leaders and program participants but also discussed program intentions and delivery with Casita Maria staff. For consistency, I worked with an evaluation and engagement rubric, which I completed at each observation. This rubric enabled me to compare sessions prior to, during, and after implementation of CYD principles. In addition, I designed a self-report survey, which I administered to 148 participants in grades K–5 at the beginning of programming and to 131 participants at the end. Survey responses provided data on trends by grade level but not on individual progress.

For practitioners who are interested in integrating CYD principles into existing afterschool programs, the Casita Maria experience provides some useful insights. The pilot program in 2018 helped staff identify five approaches that continue to facilitate the ongoing process of integrating CYD principles:

1. Create a learning environment that is distinct from traditional school-based structures and learning approaches young people regularly encounter.
2. Focus on building and sustaining positive caring relationships with adults.
3. Value participants' creativity and provide platforms to showcase their creative work.
4. Integrate CYD principles cumulatively and in ways

appropriate to young people's cultural experiences and developmental growth.

5. Foster community and a sense of belonging.

### ***Distinctive Learning Environment***

To change the perceptions and behaviors of participants, programs must change the environment and what it signals about their experience. CYD Principle 3 is that "arts programs take place in dedicated, inspiring, welcoming spaces and affirm the value of art and artists" (Montgomery et al., 2013).

Casita Maria maintains several dedicated arts studios at its facility on Simpson Street in the Bronx. These bright, inviting spaces offer room to move around and access to equipment and materials. A dedicated lounge space on the sixth floor allows teens to create their own space and share their inspirations with others. Because it owns the Simpson Street facility, Casita Maria has access to spaces that other afterschool programs might not regularly be able to use, including not only the arts studios but also an auditorium and gym.

Still, many of the rooms in the Simpson Street building, as well as in the Harlem facility, are traditional classrooms. Casita Maria staff thus have experience with a common challenge in afterschool arts programming: They are using a physical environment that was not designed for the work they are doing and to which they can make only minimal changes. Teaching artists and group leaders have adopted the following practices to establish creative and collaborative environments within the physical constrictions:

- Positioning youth in the space. Especially effective are arrangements in which youth and mentors sit in a semi-circle or a circle.
- Enabling movement. Especially for younger children, the ability to move around encourages creativity and signals that this environment is different from school.
- Providing a forecast. Group leaders post a written greeting and overview of every session. This visible reminder both sets expectations and gives participants the information they need to feel in control of the experience.
- Developing a creative and interactive environment. Group leaders may play music, show a video, start a song, or encourage dialogue among youth to get creative juices flowing.
- Providing tools. Open access to tools (such as cameras, art supplies, or laptops), inspirational images, or games can allow youth to explore their creative instincts in their own time.

“ Language used in program sessions should assert and acknowledge that we are all artists, musicians, writers and creatives. Similarly, our spaces are not classrooms, but community studios, and youth participants are identified not as students but by the activity they are engaged in. All these changes help to distinguish CYD programming as separate from the school environment.”

— *Creative Youth Development at Casita Maria Center for Arts & Education: Staff Toolkit* (Morales et al., 2019)

- Transitioning from the language of school. Rather than using such terms as *teacher*, *student*, and *classroom*, program staff use words like *mentor*, *artist*, *scholar*, *maker*, *practice*, *rehearsal*, and *studio*.

Knowing that many environments for young people are rules-based, Casita Maria set up its CYD environments to give young people opportunities to shape own their experiences. Rather than setting rules, leaders work with participants to shape behavioral norms and set shared expectations—moving from top-down rules to self-generated behavioral norms. In ways that are appropriate to participants’ ages and development, Casita Maria follows CYD Principle 7 (Montgomery et al., 2013), giving participants input into programming and supporting them to assume leadership.

In the lower grades, children need structure to stay focused and engaged. Group leaders and teaching artists give these children opportunities to make creative decisions within set projects or to choose between specified options. Children are invited to take limited leadership roles within their groups. A session in which sixth graders learned to make their own simple bath salts shows how decision-making and leadership opportunities are inherent in Casita Maria’s CYD approach. Before CYD integration, the children were given pre-measured quantities of ingredients and a recipe. They simply followed the group leader’s

instructions to assemble the bath salts. After CYD integration, small groups of eight to 10 children were seated around shared tables on which ingredients were placed. Each participant took a turn reading the instructions and demonstrating a step in the process by measuring out and adding an ingredient. Then group members passed the materials around so they could add them to their own mixtures, often helping each other as needed. Throughout the process, the group leader prompted participants to talk about why they thought specific ingredients were being added or to describe changes they observed as they added ingredients.

At later developmental levels, participants’ opinions and ideas become more integral to program development, and the programming emphasizes autonomy. Youth shape some of the programming and influence program elements including content, space design, and snack options. Educators, teaching artists, and program staff are open and flexible, encouraging participants to share their suggestions and demonstrating trust by accepting and integrating these ideas. For example, I saw high school youth suggest ways to restructure the daily agenda; they also identified topics they wanted to explore in their projects.

### **Positive, Caring Relationships**

One of the tenets of CYD programming, and of positive youth development generally, is the opportunity for young people to engage in positive mutual learning relationships with trusted adults (CYD Principle 6). At Casita Maria, group leaders, teaching artists, staff members, and tutors work with participants regularly, getting to know them and supporting their individual trajectories.

An important element of the Casita Maria pilot initiative was training and coaching to help group leaders and teaching artists shift from traditional classroom “teaching at” relationships to CYD-informed “learning with” relationships. The Casita Maria team encourages educators, teaching artists, and program staff to celebrate participants’ successes, giving young people confidence and driving their desire to succeed. The educators and creative arts teaching staff regularly highlight the creative work or ideas of individual participants as examples for others.

For example, in one elementary-level session I observed just before the December holidays, the group leader helped participants share their holiday traditions. Children created ornaments and symbols of their own family holiday traditions to put on a tree the



leader had drawn on the board. The children seemed excited to put their ornaments on the tree. The group leader admired their work and then asked the children to share a story. Every participant had a special moment and was celebrated by the group leader.

Program educators, teaching artists, and staff are encouraged to approach work with the youth as a process of shared inquiry in which they support participants' curiosity, draw out ideas, and ask questions rather than giving answers. Participants are asked to share what they think, not just what they know. An attitude of "Let's see what's possible," rather than an insistence on existing structures and approaches, informs adults' responses to participants' ideas.

### ***Value Participants' Creativity and Showcase Work***

Though Casita Maria programs were always committed to high-quality arts learning (CYD Principle 2), they had not always showcased participants' creativity or shared the quality of their work (Principle 5). As part of the CYD integration, program staff renamed the Youth and Community Gallery as the Young Artists Gallery and dedicated the space to the artwork of Casita program participants only. At the same time, staff more intentionally structured culminating program performances to raise awareness of and

demonstrate respect for the young people's creative work. Opportunities were added to showcase youth talent at events such as the South Bronx Culture Trail Festival and openings in the Casita Maria Gallery.

Casita Maria strategically engages key stakeholders to create a network of relationships and connections to support the afterschool programs and participating youth (CYD Principle 9). Through its Creative Arts program—a public performance and exhibition program for local communities featuring the work of professional artists—Casita Maria engages with professional artists, musicians, and creative leaders. Seeing this engagement as an important asset for CYD, Casita Maria has connected the professional artists in these programs with afterschool participants. For example, in fall 2018, Casita Maria gave teens an opportunity to work with a professional mural artist. The teens also participated as subjects for new works to be exhibited both at Casita Maria and at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Such opportunities not only enrich learning opportunities for Casita Maria participants but also provide real-life examples of creativity and collaboration in action.

As part of this connection, Casita Maria programs provide the best possible tools and materials, such as musical instruments, art supplies, and computers. Program participants are expected not only to use these tools in appropriate ways but also to maintain them carefully. For example, all young musicians in the violin program receive violins and bows that they take home. They are taught the proper ways to care for, store, and transport their instruments. The staff CYD toolkit instructs staff to "have program participants mentor each other on how to care for equipment."

### ***Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate CYD Integration***

Casita Maria's programs are structured to support the needs of individual participants as they develop. Recognizing differences in how participants learn, and then supporting their development with appropriate programs and with personally and culturally relevant material, engages young people and encourages them to express their own creativity.

Casita Maria's comprehensive programming creates a cumulative learning and development environment for many participants. Year-to-year retention rates are high and increase with age: 40 percent in elementary programs, 65 percent in middle school, and 90 percent in high school.

“ At Casita Maria, young people participate in performances and exhibitions including the Young Artist Showcase, South Bronx Culture Trail Festival, holiday shows, and recitals. These events are a great way to boost engagement. When young people outside of Casita Maria see what's going on, they want to join, too. Culminating events also allow youth to be seen in a new way outside of their family and friends.”

— *Creative Youth Development at Casita Maria Center for Arts & Education: Staff Toolkit* (Morales et al., 2019)

The programs focus on age-appropriate aspects of creative development at each stage. In the primary grades, children tend to interact well with each other and have strong relationships with caring adults. Casita Maria's programs for these children focus on creating a culture of high expectations, valuing creative expression, and affirming participants as artists. CYD practices also encourage children to start to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, participants in one grade 2 storytelling class I observed were prompted at various points in a story to share ideas about how the protagonist could solve problems, such as how to get into a giant's home without waking the giant.

In middle school, young people are trying to figure out who they are and how they relate to others, including adults. Casita Maria programs focus on positive relationships with adults and peers to foster a sense of belonging and acceptance. As participants' capacities increase, staff introduce use of modern equipment and technology for hands-on skill building. For example, middle schoolers can work with software to make short movies. High-quality public culminating events that showcase their work motivate young people to do their best. The programs build autonomy by gradually increasing opportunities for participants to take on group leadership. For example, in an improv session, sixth- and seventh- grade participants took turns leading the group in movements based on the sequence established by previous leaders.

At the high school level, the CYD principles really come into play. Older youth need opportunities to engage in problem solving, to actively shape programs, and to assume meaningful leadership roles. For example, young teens who identified as female worked together to plan and deliver a leadership summit for girls, incorporating both artistic expression and advocacy to elevate young women's voices.

Programs and curriculum units are inclusive and differentiated so that all participants can find their own voices and personal resonance with materials. Casita Maria's CYD programs are designed with a mix of independent and collaborative activities. Young people who need opportunities to build confidence to speak up can do so through independent work, while those who need to build teamwork and listening skills can do so through group work.

One of the most important connections in Casita Maria's integration of CYD practices into existing programs was linking the activities in the afterschool programs to exhibitions and programming in the

Creative Arts programs. By experiencing the work of professional artists in tours of the Casita Maria Gallery and in performances of art forms such as Latin jazz, participants were inspired to experiment with their own creative expressions. They were able both to appreciate the work of professional artists and to see themselves as artists.

Even more valuable for many participants was the connection between the Creative Arts programs

“Consistent with CYD practice and in an age-appropriate way, Young Artists choose their medium and style, work in peer groups, and focus on social justice issues as they analyze real-life activists and imagine their own Mujeres Guerreras/Warriores.”

— *Creative Youth Development at Casita Maria Center for Arts & Education: Staff Toolkit* (Morales et al., 2019)

and their own cultures. One particularly effective unit engaged participants in creating their own female superheroes based on *La Borinqueña* by Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, a female superhero whose powers are drawn from the history and mysticism of Puerto Rico. This inspiration encouraged many young people to explore their own cultural roots in Puerto Rico; to learn more about social justice issues and community activists; and to experience strong, positive characters who are members of their own communities.

### **Community and Belonging**

The success of the CYD integration depended on encouraging participants to feel safe and to experience Casita Maria as a place where they belong.

One way Casita Maria fostered community and belonging was to create shared rituals, such as consistent introduction and conclusion rituals for group sessions. A closing ritual, for example, might include sharing, reflection, and transition. The teaching artist or group leader might initiate the closing ritual by bringing participants together into a circle and asking who would like to share what they created that day. After

the group celebrates the accomplishments of those who choose to share, the teaching artist might ask all participants to reflect on their experience, asking questions like “What did you discover today? What surprised you? What would you like to learn more about?” To transition out of the activity, the leader might help participants get ready for the rest of their day with a simple breathing or stretching exercise. Such shared rituals develop relationships among participants and leaders, set expectations, and establish a safe space for creative expression by separating the experience from other activities.

Another way to foster belonging is to encourage participants to personalize the space in which they

“ You should encourage youth to contribute their own ideas, artwork, or signage to the space. ”  
— *Creative Youth Development at Casita Maria Center for Arts & Education: Staff Toolkit* (Morales et al., 2019)

work. By designing the space together, they develop a feeling of ownership and create spaces that feel personal and welcoming.

Casita Maria further enhances community and belonging by involving participants in the process of establishing and enforcing expectations through group-defined behavioral expectations. Call-and-response cues, for example, help to focus participants’ attention. I saw the teaching artist in musical theater program sessions refocus middle schoolers’ attention with the call “Quiet on the set!”—to which all participants would reply in unison, “Quiet!” Collaborative work, from simple tasks such as volunteering to distribute materials through to the advanced connections that come from mentoring peers and working on group projects, also helps to build a sense of belonging.

## Youth Outcomes

At this early stage of the evolving integration of CYD principles into Casita Maria’s programs, the initial evaluation has indicated positive trends in several key areas of youth development. Using a rubric to assess

participating youth, the evaluation tracked five metrics of youth development: creativity, critical thinking, leadership and teamwork, identity and community building, and problem-solving capacity.

The CYD approach led to unique opportunities and learning for many program participants. In an all-girls comedy improv session in which the activity was to form the shape of a letter with their bodies without speaking to each other, a participant who was confident and dominant in the group appeared to struggle to convey her approach nonverbally. As I observed the exercise, she gradually began to collaborate with the others in her group. The result was an approach that incorporated the ideas of several girls to achieve the goal.

In self-assessment survey results, 44 percent of elementary-level respondents indicated an increase in their own perceptions of their critical thinking. Similarly, 20 percent of respondents reported increases in problem-solving ability, 17 percent reported stronger identity and community building, and 17 percent saw improvements in creativity. Middle school participants indicated increases in their perceptions of their critical thinking (43 percent of respondents), teamwork and leadership (57 percent), and problem solving (20 percent).

One Casita Maria teen who attended the college fair expressed to a cable reporter his appreciation for the way in which the fair presented a full range of opportunities to the community’s youth. Saying that he wanted to establish his own drama school, he said he hoped to return to the college fair to offer access to the arts to other young people in Casita Maria’s programs.

## Next Steps

Integrating CYD principles at Casita Maria was a relatively smooth process. Existing resources and relationships, including Casita Maria’s creative arts programs and established afterschool arts curriculum, were definitely assets. Casita Maria’s diverse staff team and experienced teaching artists were also critical in translating CYD principles to reach culturally diverse youth across a wide age range.

Casita Maria intends to continue to track youth development outcomes to better establish the impact of CYD programming, including the longitudinal impact over time. Given the population with which Casita Maria works, comparative studies would facilitate better understanding of how CYD approaches support the needs of such groups as recently arrived migrants, immigrants, and English-language learners.

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