

The curtain rises: How Community-Based Arts Contribute to Youth and Community Development

by Jennifer Fuqua¹

It's 6:20 p.m. on a Friday in December, and the show is about to begin. After waiting for 20 minutes, the crowd is restless. The delay couldn't be helped; six girls were running back and forth between two subway stops to get the "clean" tape of their music. As the crowd prepares to heckle, the atmosphere in the junior high school auditorium is closer to Showtime at the Apollo than to afterschool education. The neighborhood is out in force, along with friends, family members, and co-workers who have caught the F train from far-flung Queens neighborhoods. More than 500 people sit crammed into seats designed for 12–14-year-old students. They are repeatedly asked to sit down as they line the aisles trying to get a better view and a gulp of fresh air from windows that never seem to open far enough.

A bit nervously, I walk to center stage to welcome the audience to the annual talent show at the Queens Community House Beacon in JHS 190. As I make a pitch for the young people who have spent so much blood, sweat, and tears preparing for their performance and inform the audience that the Beacon is a boo-free zone, I'm thankful that no one boos me. I'm vaguely aware of getting a "shout-out," which reminds me of the deep love and respect I feel privileged to share with the performers. We are a family.

At 6:25 p.m., the show begins. An unassuming boy with glasses, age 14, stands alone with a music stand that holds his notebook. Some of the kids in the audience are ready to pounce. Then the teen does something amazing. With a purposeful cadence, he reads his poem, which speaks about loss to the citizens and families of New York City after 9/11. When he finishes, someone shouts "yeaauh!" in a way usually reserved for a favorite gangsta rap. The boy has won over the audience; expectations have just risen.

In this talent show, the Beacon performers shared with their community a set of productions that took months to prepare. During that time, the young people received guidance from more experienced artists and had space and time to create their own process and experience. Different acts often practiced in close proximity, sometimes in structured activities but more often in informal open sessions. Two or three dance groups would stake out opposite corners of the gym, their dueling boom boxes blasting an escalating cacophony of noise. In the process, the performers developed their own language, overcame shyness, projected their voices, expressed their poetry, and moved together. Finally, they also moved their audience.

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This story is not unique. In any community you can find people—often a lot of people—who value the arts and support the idea of providing a place where young people can share in creating artistic products. Community-based arts programs support positive youth development in city neighborhoods and in smaller towns across America. Some receive government support, some have foundation money, and others build an entrepreneurial base. When such programs do not get enough funding or cannot find an affordable space—or when standardized testing is valued as an end result—we miss opportunities to develop the hearts and minds of young people.

Research has found connections between typical models of community-based arts programs and authentic learning (Heath, 1999). Young artists in programs like the Queens Community House Beacon form “communities of practice,” informal groups united by what they do together and what matters to them. In such joint enterprises, where the members negotiate the processes and the products, mutual engagement over time builds a shared repertoire of knowledge and resources (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice in the arts enable what Lave and Wenger (1991) have called “situated learning,” where co-participation and social engagement provide the context for learning. The situated learning within communities of practice encouraged by community-based arts programs supports positive youth development. Besides its intrinsic value, arts education also helps young people gain knowledge and skills that apply to fields outside of the arts. My own observations as a teaching artist and program director, some of which are described in this article, provide evidence that community-based arts programs are key to the futures of young people, particularly alienated youth who struggle to find a place in public school systems.

Youth Development and Learning through the Arts

According to the Youth Development Institute (1998) at the Fund for the City of New York, a youth development program is designed to meet the human developmental needs of youth and to build a set of core assets and competencies needed to participate successfully in adolescent and adult life. Four typical models of extended learning that enable “authentic work experience,” identified by Shirley Brice Heath (1999, p. 28) in her evaluation of 124 youth-based arts organizations, mirror the values of a youth development framework. These four models provide the basis for my examination of the value of arts-based programming for youth and community development.

In Heath’s *marketing model*, young people research local resources and become entrepreneurs by selling in their neighborhoods the artistic products and services they develop. In the *tagging model*, young people not only develop their own creative skills but also assist others, particularly younger children, in developing their talents. The *positioning model* places youth in an apprenticeship or internship where they can observe and imitate teaching artists or youth workers. These experienced mentors can introduce the young people to cultural

institutions and their workings. Finally, in the *line-up model*, young people continue their traditional education in high school or post-secondary institutions while also developing their artistic abilities either as a possible career or simply as a hobby.

Community-based arts programs fit the youth development framework in many ways. Teaching

artists, who often develop long-term relationships with the community based organizations that employ them, play a significant role in the success of young people. Community arts programs create safe spaces in which youth can build constructive relationships with peers; small classes also give youth the chance to develop close interactive relationships with adults. As in Heath's four models, young people develop concrete job skills through hands-on learning, apprenticeships, and exposure to technology. Furthermore, these programs build on what youth value by incorporating their point of view in meaningful ways and encouraging voluntary participation and leadership.

Clear expectations and rewards are a part of regular, sustained programs in which children count and youth are valued community members. The same qualities that aid in social development also make art education an excellent means through which to develop the skills needed for lifelong learning. Art activities develop persistence and attentiveness; curiosity, reflection, and interpretation; and imagination and invention. Arts activities often teach creative use of language and vocabulary, as well as impart cultural knowledge. As Weitz (1996) noted, art education develops self-awareness, empathy, and sensitivity; it also provides an outlet for the expression of emotions. "Creative art activity allows the adolescent to gain mastery over internal and external landscapes by discovering mechanisms for structure and containment that arise from within, rather than being imposed from the outside. The artistic experience entails repetition of actions, thoughts or emotions, over which the adolescent gains increased tolerance or mastery" (Weitz, 1996, p. 9).

In an era when the importance of communication cannot be underestimated, the intrinsic qualities of arts education should be seen as essential to the development of any contributing

member of society. *Gifts of the Muse*, a study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004), describes how the intrinsic and instrumental benefits of the arts experience have both private and public value. For an individual young person, initial pleasure in the arts—an intrinsic benefit—can lead to expanded capacities for empathy and cognitive growth—an instrumental benefit. Since creative and critical thinking

and effective communication skills are prerequisites for many fields, these capacities are important for any endeavor a young person might undertake. The Wallace Foundation study thus shows that the intrinsic and private benefits of arts education can spill over into instrumental

and public values, such as the development of social capital and economic growth. In particular, the study found that arts experience has a powerful effect on engagement (McCarthy et al., 2004).

Welcome to the Neighborhood

New York City's settlement houses have a long tradition of incorporating the arts into their work with communities. Many serve as arts centers in their communities, offering training in a variety of art forms, including visual arts, theater, music, and dance. Some settlement houses are even home to renowned conservatories. Dance, music, and theater organizations, such as Carnegie Hall, Theater for a New Audience, High 5 Tickets for the Arts, and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, offer settlement houses opportunities to enhance their arts and cultural offerings without great expense or in-house expertise. Connecting youth development, arts, and learning through successful partnerships with arts and cultural organizations has characterized the approach of the Queens Community House (QCH, formerly known as Forest Hills Community House) throughout its history. Located in a public housing development in the Forest Hills area of Queens, New York, QCH has integrated the arts into its services in many schools and satellite community centers, as well as the "mother house," since its inception.

Countless staff members—not only teaching artists but also managers and program directors—call themselves artists, musicians, performers, or filmmakers. Through the local council for the arts, the city council, and other government agencies, QCH has been able to build partnerships with local museums and arts organizations. These partners enrich the programming in all divisions—youth, senior, and community services. The arts have often bridged the gap between generations, whether participants work together or gather together to appreciate the arts. QCH has offered afterschool activities for more than thirty years. A typical afterschool group at the "mother house" includes newcomers and second-generation immigrants from South America, Southeast Asia, China, and Eastern Europe. For the past nine years, QCH has operated a Beacon Youth Development Center in a local public middle school. The Beacon provides homework help, test preparation, academic enrichment, arts activities, leadership training, sports, and recreation year-round to more than 2,500 youth ages 6–21 and their families each year. Participants reflect the ethnic mix of their neighborhood: Approximately 20 percent are African American, 16 percent Asian, 16 percent Hispanic, 20 percent white, and 18 percent of mixed ethnicity or "other." Many are recent immigrants from Asia, Central and South America, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union. Most are from low-income or working poor families.

Community-Based Art Educators

The teaching artists who are so vital to community arts programs are attracted to working in out-of-school-time programs for a number of reasons. Out-of-school-time programs offer longer sessions over longer periods of time, more opportunities to work in the community with local

arts institutions, and often more flexibility in curriculum choices than do school-based programs. Where community-based youth programs see the arts as a necessity rather than an add-on, teaching artists find a safe haven. Since most jobs are part-time, they fit well with the lifestyle of artists who need time to work on their craft. Particularly in New York City, community-based programs and artists provide great mutual support.

Ten years ago, I found myself longing to make a deeper connection with the community and with communities of practice. As an artist, academically trained and participating in professional arts networks, I knew that some of my most cherished moments of clarity, learning, and connection had been through sharing the arts in education and practice with young people. Serendipity led me on a trip on two trains, with a bus transfer, to the middle of Queens. I started working with teens at QCH not only as an arts educator, but also as a girls' group facilitator, cooking teacher, and technology instructor. I often saw some of the same young people on different nights at the center. As I got to know them and they got to know me, it became easier to connect everyday experiences with learning new skills, and I moved from a didactic, "institutionalized" approach to a more participant centered strategy. As I watched young people grow up, I felt personally connected to them.

Teaching artist Patricia Runcie, who recently worked on a play with fourth and fifth graders in the afterschool enrichment program at QCH, noted that she has seen some of the kids who have been labeled "troubled" or "difficult"—particularly boys—blossom in her class. "Often they end up being the most creative and committed," she explained (personal communication, May 2007). The afterschool setting provides both freedom and a safe haven from potentially destructive influences. Runcie, like many teaching artists in New York City, juggles several part-time jobs. Besides teaching, she also runs her own emerging theater company and does marketing and promotion for Broadway theaters. In the past, she has done clerical and restaurant work. However, she wanted the hours she spent not working on her craft of acting to *mean* something. Like many others, she has chosen to work with kids in community-based arts programs. She believes that artists who are in the field practicing their craft have a valuable connection to make with kids who are aspiring artists.

Unfortunately, maintaining the funding needed to keep experienced teaching artists on staff is a challenge for community-based organizations that are not viewed specifically as arts programs. A few years ago, the arts budget was cut in Runcie's QCH afterschool program. The program director tried to maintain the same number of sessions for the afterschool participants but had to decrease the stipend for teaching artists. As a result, much more oversight was required to support less experienced teaching artists. With its smaller staff and less-skilled teaching artists, the program struggled to help parents understand the valuable contribution the arts make in the learning process. In a high-pressure school environment focused on high-stakes testing, parents, particularly those of English language learners, preferred that their children spend time on homework. It was hard to "sell" a reduced, lower-quality arts program to kids who felt pressured to concentrate on homework.

Arts at the Settlement House

The arts are alive and kicking in out-of-school-time programs in schools and community centers. It is not a great surprise that, in places that value community-building, teaching artists and young people can create opportunities for situated learning, communities of practice, and the apprenticeship models outlined by Heath (1999). Because life in general, and the arts in particular, are non-static, circular processes, there is often overlap among models. Arts programs at the Queens Community House show several of Heath's models in action at once. The stories that follow show how young people, through their arts programs, make connections to family and community while developing assets that can serve them now and in the future.

Queens Rocks

The Cocoa House Planners have fostered a youth rock scene in central Queens by developing a bi-monthly all-ages show run by Beacon youth. The brainchild of Casey, the former music coordinator, Cocoa House is one of several music initiatives in the QCH Beacon program. A self-taught working musician, Casey started with the Beacon at its inception in 1998 as a leadership coordinator. With the advent of new funding to support music programming, he shifted to working as music coordinator. This part-time position fit with his lifestyle of touring and promoting his band.

The Cocoa House Planners are a group of young musicians who meet weekly to plan for the bi-monthly event; new recruits attend every month. The planners become well versed in stagecraft, setting up and breaking down sound systems and full sets of instruments. They also organize and promote the shows. A consistent group of ten youth planners, as well as new recruits and others who opt in and out, manage to book an average of five bands every other month for shows that draw up to 300 audience members. An even bigger accomplishment is that the planners become expert at the complex process of marketing and outreach to their target audience, producing literature, and making connections in a process that explicitly reflects Heath's *marketing model*. Several young people have transferred that knowledge to other types of performance events and have expressed interest in further post-secondary training in performance management. Several young Cocoa House bands have gone on to play other venues and to produce demos and CDs.

When Casey moved on to the national tour of the play *Rent*, Heath's *positioning model* came into play. Casey passed the torch to David, a teen musician, who has now coordinated the Cocoa House for several years. David went through a kind of apprenticeship during his five years with the music program at the Beacon. He honed his skills by watching a more skilled musician execute a youth-driven rock show. In effect, David "shadowed" Casey and thereby learned how to step into the role of coordinator.

David was participating in a community of practice, where a shared set of activities and a common goal led to the co-creation of an active rock music scene. The music program gave him the opportunity to gain skills by participating in an endeavor that excited him. As David said in an informal interview, “I see myself as a motivator, being in the position to give young bands a chance. I feel responsible” (personal communication, December 2003). David’s sense of responsibility to pass along his knowledge to younger musicians reflects Heath’s *tagging model*.

Jean Lave, a social anthropologist, and Etienne Wenger, an educational theorist, put forward the idea of “situated learning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). After observing a wide variety of kinds of apprenticeships, they theorized that certain social engagements provide the proper context for learning. This idea radically shifts the notion that knowledge is acquired by individuals alone. The Cocoa House program is driven by a community of young musicians who learn together with an experienced teaching artist and who take responsibility to teach one another something they love.

Art on the Sidewalk

Heath’s framework and the principles of youth development are also reflected in the PASE (Partnership for After School Education) Sidewalk Arts pilot. Sidewalk Arts, which lasted for three years at QCH’s “mother house,” incorporated seasoned teaching artists into an existing school-aged childcare program. Each fall, spring, and summer semester, a new artistic discipline was introduced. The program included incentives, such as trips to local cultural institutions, as well as culminating performances and exhibits. Sidewalk Arts’ primary objectives were built around personal development: fostering self-confidence, building leadership skills, and instilling lifelong patterns of creative and productive self-expression. The program also sought to change the perception that urban youth are a deficit to the community.

Sidewalk Arts brought a flexible approach to a focused and disciplined arts program for school-aged children. Four times weekly, two teaching artists worked with groups of eight to ten children in a way that reflects the *positioning model*. The children were exposed to various artistic disciplines and worked on skills in a particular discipline. In the process, they furthered participation in and study of the arts. A fifth weekly session addressed personal development through reflective discussions and journal writing. Since the children were continuing their traditional school education in an intensive arts curriculum after school, Sidewalk Arts also provides an example of Heath’s *line-up model*.

The arts and personal development sessions culminated in end-of-semester shows. The last Sidewalk Arts event was a multimedia exhibit featuring a video diary, a photography display that included journal entries next to each child’s visual work, and graphic works related to identity. Parents and staff were surprised to see the amount and caliber of artwork. The teaching artists and afterschool staff gave the event “polish” by treating it as an opening, providing fresh fruit and cookies, as well as music to give the room ambiance. The multi-purpose room, with its cavernous spaces and tattered basketball

nets, hosts many programs, including morning yoga for seniors, a lunchtime feeding program, and an evening gymnasium for children and teens. For the exhibit, it was dressed up with partitions to create intimate spaces in which to view the works. In contrast to the ten or so parents who attended a beginning-of-the-year parent orientation, more than 40 parents attended the Sidewalk Arts exhibit. Many stayed for a while, talking with staff members and enjoying the pride that was evident in their children's faces.

Cultural events such as the Sidewalks Arts exhibit and the Beacon talent show give families an opportunity to get involved in the lives of their children in ways that celebrate and build community. In keeping with Heath's *marketing model*, children make connections between their work and their families and communities. Such opportunities to gather in community spaces to reflect on children's successes foster a love of the arts. They also build connections to arts networks through teaching artists and arts partners. In so doing, community-based arts programs build new audiences to support the community's arts economy.

My American Idol

When core principles of youth development are integrated into program design, Heath's four models fit naturally into community-based arts programming. The importance of offering flexible opportunities and multiple points of entry cannot be underestimated. In a program focused on positive youth development, a young person can first observe, then participate, and finally lead. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning includes this notion of "legitimate peripheral participation," a process through which a newcomer builds expertise and knowledge by observing from the periphery and then moving toward the center through fuller participation in the sociocultural practice of the group. The story of Marlana, one of many young people I have been privileged to observe as they grew over many years, provides an example.

Marlana was part of the QCH Beacon talent show, which was described at the beginning of this article, for each of its seven years. She started in the Beacon program as a participant when she was in junior high school. She then held a summer youth employment position and later became a program aide. For the talent show, she began as an emcee and gradually took on more responsibility as a choreographer and director. My first conversation with Marlana, when she was 15, came after she had experienced the acute blow of failing to be accepted at a specialized high school for the arts. Marlana had been involved in dancing and performing from an early age, attending the Alvin Ailey school before entering kindergarten, so the arts high school would have been perfect for her. The entrance exams for specialized high schools in New York City are highly competitive. Young people begin preparing in elementary school to be accepted to the "right" high school, which, in turn, often results in acceptance to the "right" college. For a young person without financial means, these high school entrance exams are one of the few avenues to a better future.

Marlena struggled in the high school that was not the one she would have chosen. Her guidance counselor even suggested that she drop out and get a GED. But Marlena remained engaged with learning because of her involvement with performance and the arts at the Beacon. Like many of her peers, Marlena perceived the school environment as threatening. As she recounted stories of her high school experience, she noted, “School wasn’t how it should be. There was no support and guidance counselors didn’t help” (personal communication, November 2007). Her “affective filter” (Lee, 2003) for protecting herself from perceived threats or insults to her individual, social, or cultural sense of self was high in school but lower in the more comfortable environment of the program, where she was surrounded by peers and adults whose language and cultural practices were familiar. She spoke highly of the support she received in the Beacon program during a difficult time of transition in her life. As a matter of principle, youth development models like the Beacon incorporate what Lee (2003) refers to as a “Cultural Modeling Framework,” which makes explicit connections between participants’ everyday knowledge and the demands of content-oriented learning. Cultural modeling introduces new concepts and ideas while guarding against maladaptive reactions to unfamiliar and threatening environments. A large urban public school can indeed be such a threatening environment. The supportive atmosphere of the Beacon enabled Marlena to resist the pitfalls that plagued many of her friends—such as acting out, isolation, destructive behavior, drug dependency, and lack of motivation—so that she could focus on her future.

In a textbook example of situated learning, Marlena improved her literacy and numeracy skills by applying them to tasks that were important to her. She demonstrated Heath’s *marketing model* as she developed the organizational skills of a Broadway producer. Planning for the talent show included space allocation, set design, stage management, and fundraising outreach to local businesses. She used the Beacon advisory council to connect to the local chamber of commerce and community board. In teaching younger performers, she passed on her knowledge and experience in a way consistent with the *tagging model*. Her self-efficacy demonstrates the benefits of community-based arts education. Now 22, Marlena has obtained her GED and, in addition to having been promoted to the position of full-time leadership specialist, is currently attending a local community college.

A Commitment to Community Arts Education

A nation that used to take the importance of the arts as a given now requires educators and youth workers to explain why the arts belong in our educational programs. The demand for outcomes-driven data has supplanted captivation with and pleasure in the arts as an educational value in its own right.

Even as arts institutions themselves have lately struggled with resource development, community based organizations have an even more difficult time in convincing funders that the arts should be part of community-based afterschool programming. Those resources that are available are often accessed only by the few community-based

organizations that can support programs through matching dollars and have a large enough infrastructure to seek funding through other revenue streams. Smaller organizations often cannot compete. Money that can be applied to arts education from publicly-funded programs for school-age children, such as the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers and New York City's Out-of-School Time Program through the Department of Youth and Community Development, also increasingly comes with a pre-determined outcomes driven agenda that mirrors institutional cookie-cutter standards and disregards unique community values and practice. Arts programming designed to promote pleasure and appreciation seems to be accessible only to those who can afford it. The Sidewalk Arts pilot sought not only to bring the arts to low-income children but also to offer evidence

of intrinsic and instrumental benefits such as cognitive growth and improved self-efficacy in order to better advocate for resources—but then Sidewalk Arts itself was unable to develop and maintain funding.

In our modern skills-driven economy, access to arts education should be seen as essential for disconnected youth. Whereas in the past, discrimination prevented many minorities from reaping the benefits of higher levels of education, today, increasing stratification of wealth segregates those who achieve higher levels of education from those who do not. Economic segregation thereby restricts access to high-wage jobs for newcomers and the working poor—and their children and children's children remain stuck at the bottom of the ladder. To improve our human

capital, we should draw on arts education as a means of developing the expressive and cognitive abilities of young people. Thus, a comprehensive plan for community renewal should draw on the enrichment capabilities of the arts. The stories of the young people in arts programs at Queens Community House—and hundreds more like them—demonstrate how such programs can improve skills. The four models identified by Shirley Brice Heath that have threaded through these stories are explicitly linked to “authentic work experience” (Heath, 1999, p. 28). The skills young people learn in community arts programs can provide access to income-producing activity. A comprehensive range of access points to the arts, including a variety of community-based arts education programs, is thus both natural and necessary. Such programs deserve our support and require certain commitments on the part of funders, policymakers, and program leaders.

Commitment to Sustainability

The benefits of community arts education for both the individual and the community should be supported and recognized. Arts institutions in a city like New York often find that community-based programs are great places to support cultural participation, spark interest, and build new audiences. In turn, community-based organizations benefit from the expertise and resources of their arts partners. Building such partnerships requires time and money, so the funding streams must be consistently available from year to year. Indeed, sustained funding for arts programs that serve all children, and particularly those whose families cannot afford exposure to the arts, deserves broad public support. Programs like the City Council's Cultural After School Adventure (CASA), which brings

arts and other enrichments to city students, received an increase in this year's budget, and is one step towards making sure that cultural institutions in the city connect with community based programs. Recognition of for-profit arts organizations as a part of the "ecosystem" of cultural participation is one way to build connections and increase the sustainability of community-based arts programming.

Commitment to Fitting the Arts into Existing Programming

From the perspective of both visiting teaching artists or cultural institutions and afterschool program staff, a commitment is necessary to bridge potential gaps in the delivery of arts activities. Youth workers need training and support in understanding the role the arts play in the program, while teaching artists need training and support in understanding the youth development context, group work, and administrative functions that characterize the program. This support needs to come straight from the top, starting with funders and executive directors

who provide the structure through curriculum, staffing patterns, and resource development. This commitment then filters down through program directors, who supervise both teaching artists and youth workers. Program directors must support both in their roles while encouraging collaboration and mutual understanding.

Commitment to Learning and Growth

According to the Youth Development Institute (1998), young people who participate in community-based arts programming develop many competencies. In the *social* arena, they learn self-awareness, empathy, and sensitivity. *Cognitive* competencies developed through community-based arts education include critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities. *Civic* competencies include an orientation to community service, peer mentoring, and community organizing. Arts programs also build *creative* competencies, such as original thinking and the ability to express one's self through verbal, written, and visual communication and performance. All these can lead to *employment* competencies achieved through an apprenticeship model that develops skills applicable not only to careers in the arts but also in many other areas (Youth Development Institute, 1998). Teaching artists and youth workers have a positive impact on participants by providing role models that exemplify involvement in the arts and a love of artistic expression. Authentic learning can be achieved in environments that support communities of practice, where young people participate in a safe social structure that allows them to observe, test, and master their art.

Who can a young person like Marlana become? I like to think of Marlana as the mogul she emulated when, at age 16, she wrote, directed, and starred in her own version of a talk/variety show called *Dreams*. Could she be the next Oprah? Absolutely. Marlana discovered that her voice could have a positive impact on peers and adults. The support she found in the program inspired her to give back. Whether she becomes a media mogul,

a lawyer, or a CPA, her experiences in a community based arts program gave her time and space to develop self-confidence, creativity, and focus that will help her succeed in whatever she chooses.

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