



Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Movement for Black Lives sparked by George Floyd's murder laid bare the educational inequity in this country. For the past few years, researchers have been investigating how deep that inequity goes and searching for structural changes needed to make it right.

Out-of-school-time (OST) arts programs are an important site of both educational inequity and of creative and collaborative ways to address it. Furthermore, the researchers argue that the arts and OST arts in particular allow us to reimagine ways to teach and to design learning environments that work for everyone, including our most vulnerable youth.

Erica Halverson, Caitlin Martin, and a research team from the University of Wisconsin-Madison interviewed a number of OST arts program leaders and participants to ask them what they think works best in arts education. Those interviewed were leaders of OST arts programs recognized for their excellence in running programs in communities that suffer from structural inequity. The results of those interviews and focus groups produced recommendations for those who run OST arts programs,

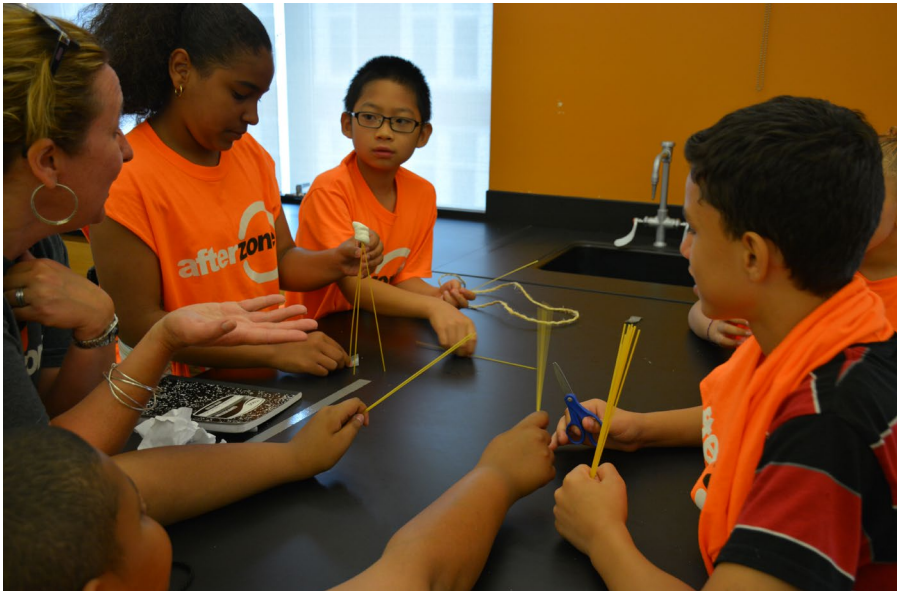
funders, policymakers, and researchers. The findings also have implications for school administrators, who could expand educational equity by adapting some of the focused, caring, asset-based approaches of OST arts programs.

Background

OST arts education is often designed to emphasize youth-centered, hands-on learning, creative self-expression and play, as well as community-based care practices. By helping young people create art from their experiences, OST arts programs can encourage them to express things they care about, to make a change in the world, and to celebrate their own excellence and beauty.

Because educators who work in OST arts programs can work more closely and individually with the youth than classroom teachers, the researchers suggest that they have unique insight into “what works” over time. Thus, OST arts programs can show educators ways to improve learning experiences of young people who do not thrive in traditional, formal learning institutions and who do not have access to as many resources. This knowledge could inform in-school education as well as OST programs.

Research Brief Based on: [“Building Arts Education Policy Using the Tools of Out-of-School-Time \(OST\) Youth Arts Organizations” for Arts Education Policy Review](#) by Erica Halverson, Kailea Saplán, Caitlin Martin, and the UW-Madison research team. Brief written by Virginia Vitzthum.



category for specific audiences: arts education leaders, funders and policymakers, and researchers. Below are the high-level takeaways from the research.

Focus on youth and community assets; use cultural-regional ambassadors

An important characteristic of OST arts programs is their emphasis on leveraging and building upon existing assets. “Assets” refers to young people’s expertise with art forms, cultural histories, and their connections to

popular culture. Assets also include the cultural, racial, and historical traumas young people carry with them. Youth who’ve suffered discrimination don’t need to be fixed (an example of “deficit-based” thinking). What the young artists have been through can be the subject of their art, and their communities offer cultural traditions to draw from. Programs understand these assets, which they leverage to benefit the youth in their programs and also build upon through their work with youth.

To ensure that asset-based work is supported, the researchers propose the use of “cultural-regional ambassadors” who would designate resources to the organizations and projects in their region that take asset-based approaches in their work with young people and communities. These ambassadors could help outside organizations connect with communities in productive and ethical ways and could support the extensive work necessary to build the connective tissue that binds communities together while supporting youth in authentic, culturally responsive ways.

Expand beyond a program-centric model of funding and design

The successful OST arts programs centering BIPOC youth tended to be deeply embedded in their community, meaning that much of their work takes place as part of the program development process and outside of the normal program operating hours. Arts program members visited with families or reached out to community members before implementing the program to determine how best to approach and design the work to meet local needs. Researchers found that understanding the local context and building an infrastructure that leverages existing assets helped OST arts programs establish a

Study Methods

Halverson and team looked at OST arts programs in historically marginalized communities across the U.S. Between September 2020 and June 2021, the research team interviewed 28 arts organization leaders; 17 educators/teaching artists; 8 researchers; 9 funders and policymakers; and 10 youth artists. Organization leaders and teaching artists were from OST arts programs in nonprofit and community arts organizations; museums; school-based programs with informal educators; government agencies; and philanthropic organizations.

The researchers sought to understand how the programs studied, supported, and centered youth in arts learning, particularly Black youth, Indigenous youth, and youth of color (BIPOC youth), youth from low-income backgrounds, and LGBTQIA+ youth. (Research focused on four regions of the U.S. where arts programs served mostly youth from those groups.) They invited the arts program leaders to help them shape the questions they were asking, a participatory and iterative approach that aimed to bring equity into the research itself.

Recommendations

As the people working in the OST arts programs directed the research toward what they considered most important, four main categories of policy recommendations emerged: (1) focus on youth and community assets, (2) expand beyond a program-centric model of funding and design, (3) support creative professionals, and (4) rethink the design and implementation of assessment systems. The paper further breaks down each

cultural-regional perspective that honors and is shaped by local expertise. This work takes time and is often not funded through traditional funding models.

The researchers also recommend that funding be distributed more widely than to individual programs. That sometimes means funding to connect OST arts programs to schools, museums, or community centers. The cultural-regional ambassadors described in Recommendation 1 could help funders and others expand their models to better align with the way arts organizations approach and structure their work.

Support creative professionals

The researchers found that teaching artists in OST youth arts organizations played a significant role in the success of programs by providing collaborative design expertise, mentorship, real-time arts practice, and community building. Though understood as crucial, too often they were underpaid or unpaid and not recognized as educators. These positions within OST arts programs were often filled by younger people of color.

The researchers recommend that funders, policymakers, and arts programs prioritize creative workers by paying them for teaching artist work. They also recommend that OST youth arts organizations better communicate the value of their organization's work to families and communities. Community members need to know what young people are doing with their arts experiences

to encourage them to support their young artists. The young artists need to see that they too could become teaching artists and mentors, that there is a future for them as an artist in their community.

Rethink the design and implementation of assessment systems

Assessment of how the OST arts program is working should be baked into the program so it is responsive to youth and continually improving. One important way to encourage teaching artists and to help programs develop on their own terms is to pay the artists not just for direct work with youth, but also for assessment.

As far as assessment from the outside goes, funders, arts administrators, and policymakers should tailor what they deem program "success" to fit the program and the community. Many funders measure, e.g., the number of youth that participated in a program. But that number may not tell the full story of what the organization offers in the lives of young people—a story they should get from those working within the programs. Expanded assessment criteria might include looking at transformational outcomes of individual youth participants and thinking about these outcomes over extended periods of time beyond the scope of a particular program and across the community. Another measure might be youth recognizing themselves and their work as creative and valuable or reporting a greater sense of agency.

Conclusion

OST arts programs in historically marginalized communities have much to teach policymakers, funders, and arts program leaders – as well as educators at large. Their experience is meeting youth where they are and shaping programs to fit their lives as part of their communities. OST staff can work more closely with individual youth than classroom teachers can; and the arts allows for asset-based learning, as young artists make sense of their whole experience. Just as these arts programs expanded their approaches in response to the lives of youth, so did these researchers adjust their inquiry into the programs and the communities they studied. This participatory, collaborative approach—in programming, research, funding, and education design—has implications for many who seek more equitable systems.