



Creative Youth Development Toolkit

Landscape Analysis

Program Evaluation

by Justin Jalea

About Americans for the Arts and Our Commitment to Arts Education

Founded in 1960, Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts and arts education. From offices in Washington, D.C. and New York City, we provide a rich array of programs that meet the needs of more than 150,000 members and stakeholders annually. We are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and to creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.

Americans for the Arts envisions an America where every child has access to—and takes part in—high quality and lifelong learning experiences in the arts, both in school and in the community. Through our Arts Education Program, Americans for the Arts provides leadership development, networking, research, and tools designed to empower individuals and organizations to create equitable systems and strong policies which strengthen the arts education ecosystem. For more information, visit <http://www.americansforthearts.org/ArtsEducation>.

About this Paper

Americans for the Arts is proud to be one of the leaders of the **Creative Youth Development National Partnership**, which is working to advance the field of creative youth development (CYD), the intentional integration of arts learning and youth development principles. As part of this collective initiative, Americans for the Arts commissioned field experts to produce a set of seven landscape analyses about key topics within youth development. These papers identify trends in creative youth development, share recommendations for CYD practitioners, and suggest areas for future exploration. The areas of focus of these papers are:

- 1) Trends in CYD Programs
- 2) Advocacy and Policy
- 3) Working in Social Justice
- 4) Program Evaluation
- 5) Preparing Artists & Educators
- 6) Working with Youth
- 7) Funding, Sustainability, and Partnerships

These landscape analyses are one part of a larger project led by Americans for the Arts to create a new, first-of-its-kind **Creative Youth Development Toolkit** that will aggregate the most effective tools and resources from exemplary creative youth development programs throughout the country. The CYD Toolkit will build upon the success and longevity of the Youth Arts Toolkit (2003), a landmark study of arts programs serving at-risk youth that can be found at <http://youtharts.artsusa.org/>.

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Deutsche Bank

Program Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

The theory and practice of program evaluations in Creative Youth Development (CYD) is as new as the field itself. However, leaning on a long history of lived experience and an ever-growing body of knowledge in the youth development sector, CYD program evaluation is not without its foundations. But because of its unique aims and organizational make-up, CYD programs have had to forge new paths in measuring outcomes and overall program success, breaking with traditional models while preserving best practices from its evaluation roots. Although the way forward is unclear, it is precisely out of this need to create new methods for knowing itself and capturing its impact that CYD programs are poised to develop innovative approaches to evaluation, and consequently have the potential to substantially contribute to advancing the field of youth development program evaluation at large.

In what follows, I give a very brief overview of the history of evaluation in the youth development field. This will help provide context for an analysis of current CYD evaluation trends, both in terms of *what* and *how* programs are evaluating. Finally, I offer recommendations and calls to action that draw attention to the continuing needs of the field.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Although youth development programs have existed since the 19th century, evaluations of such programs follow the overarching historical trend of evaluations in the U.S. starting in the 1960s, with efforts to strengthen all manner of government mandated social programs from defense to the equitable treatment of racial minorities (Kellogg Foundation, 2017). But it was not until the late 1980s that systematic evaluation of youth development programs emerged (Arnold & Carter, 2011).

In its roughly 40-year history, what has defined the “success” of a youth program and how to articulate it has advanced significantly. Where once strictly narrative accounts that attempted to capture the sentiments of stakeholders was the predominate approach, evaluation culture saw a shift to focus on the number of individuals served by a given program, guided by the implicit thought that the greater your program’s “reach,” the more successful it was (Rennekamp & Engle, 2008; Arnold & Carter, 2011). This was later accompanied by a focus on measures of participant satisfaction, a program feature easily captured by narrative evaluations. However, as Weise (1987) points out, although such evaluations galvanized the “belief” in the success of such programs the supporting evaluation data was largely ignored and did not provide evidence to support claims of program effectiveness (Arnold & Carter, 2011).

Into the 1990s, attitudes toward this ‘more is better’ approach shifted to focus on the completion of program outcomes through rigorous design and creation of logic models and theories of change (Swabak et al., 2012). It is not enough to rely on a program’s popularity as an indicator of success, but rather that those accessing said program achieve the values it purports to impart. However, this new, ambitious focus on rigour and program outcomes is said to have fallen short of capturing the complexity of youth life (Rennekamp & Engle, 2008), while the field of youth evaluations itself was under scrutiny for being drastically under resourced. In a report from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992), concerns were raised that a combination of a lack of expertise and limitations on research methods were commonplace in youth development evaluations, which sparked initiatives to bridge the gulf between practitioners and evaluators to develop common outcomes among like organizations. In addition, an emphasis was placed on evaluations that encouraged organizational learning, to access the full potential of evaluations as multi-dimensional strategic tools to be employed throughout programs and at all organizational levels, and not simply to be considered programmatic afterthoughts (Eccles and Gootman, 2002).

Out of such critiques a nascent youth development framework began to arise. Arnold and Carter (2011) identify essential features of this framework as involving: “1) the presence of adults who fostered skill, community building, and hope for youth; 2) youth who were seen as resources to be developed rather than problems to be fixed; and 3) programs that created spaces of belonging where youth feel safe, cared for, and empowered.” Less emphasis was placed on specific outcomes and rather on constructing evaluations with a comprehensive approach to youth development in mind, which translated to evaluations that employed rigorous experimental design—the “gold standard” to which many evaluations still aim.¹

Arnold and Carter (2011) go on to identify three trends that have emerged in youth development evaluation in the last decade: 1) measuring program quality as a critical factor in youth program evaluation, 2) evaluation capacity building, and 3) youth participation in evaluation. In my estimation these trends continue to gain slow traction in CYD-specific evaluations with some important nuances as CYD programs increasingly tackle complex social issues and organizational structures become more dynamic and collaborative. The rise of developmental evaluation, for instance, attempts to support innovation in organizations in constant flux, where standard evaluation methods would be too rigid to capture such change (Kellogg, 2017). So, too, an emphasis on culturally competent evaluation grows increasingly important as CYD programs almost ubiquitously engage in community engagement and social justice or are themselves social justice enterprises. With a focus on arts-integrated programs, CYD-specific evaluations have an added layer of complexity, since the outcomes of such evaluations are found at the intersection of numerous youth disciplines. This has been the case since the earliest examples of CYD initiatives, as captured in such reports as *Champions of Change* (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999) and *Powerful Voices* (Levine, 2002), where evaluations needed to demonstrate the causal arguments

¹ It is worth noting that this point continues to be a contentious one and will be taken up below.

for how involvement in the arts enhanced all aspects of youth life. Such arguments continue today, but seem to have reduced to be contained in a smaller set of outcomes as will be shown below.

KEY TRENDS

Current trends in CYD program evaluations can be viewed from various perspectives, from the kinds of methodologies being used to collect data to the ways data is reported to funders. Key evaluative desiderata, vis-à-vis outcomes, continue to include things like well-being, development of long-term relationships, rigor, and high expectations in artistic and academic performance, while prevailing methodologies continue to strive for rigorous experimental design. Below I have distilled what I take to be overarching trends in both *what* CYD programs are evaluating and *how* evaluations are transforming across the field of youth development at large.

TREND #1: WHAT ARE CYD PROGRAMS EVALUATING?

Heeding the evaluation mantra of “measure what you value, and others will value what you measure” (Bare, 2005), CYD programs focus evaluations squarely on the values they purport to impart. Naturally, some variation in the combination of evaluation criteria appears across the vast swath of CYD programs, but a tripartite theme growing among them seems to have emerged and can be expressed as three categories that I refer to here as: 1) the Empowered Self, 2) the Skillful Artist, and 3) the Community Contributor. Using different terms, these themes have been articulated as organizational values by groups such as Dream Yard (Empower. Create. Connect), the Boston Youth Evaluation Project (I am. I create. We connect), Destiny Arts Center (Peaceful. Powerful. Creative.), and Mosaic Youth Theatre (Self. Skill. Society.)

The Empowered Self

In comparison to early CYD program goals such as “the encouragement of teamwork, decision-making, and expressive and communicative skills” (Levine, 2002), there is currently the desire for CYD program participants to develop a comprehensive and robust sense of self by realizing their full inner potential. This refers to developing or enhancing attributes such as confidence, integrity, honesty, self-esteem, responsibility, resilience, moral character, and overall self worth. Various organizations have described this in terms of “influencing students’ capacities to be powerful” (Destiny Art Center),² or to encourage youth to “evolve as unique individuals” (artworxLA),³ or develop “empathy and connection to empower the individual” (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts).⁴

² Evaluations, Destiny Arts Center: <https://destinyarts.org/about-destiny/impact/evaluations/>

³ artworxLA: <http://www.artworxla.org/>

⁴ Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Annual Report 2015-16: https://www.ybca.org/cms/2017/08/YBCA_15-16_Annual_Report_Final.pdf

The Skillful Artist

More than simply focusing on building technical artistic skill, CYD programs encourage rigorous development of skills in all domains of youth life. Emphasis is placed on self-motivation, decision-making, and the refinement of essential employability skills. It is important to note, however, that this renewed focus also encompasses traditional assessments of academic achievements, such as accessing post-secondary educational opportunities, scholarship, and performance on standardized tests. See, for example, Project Launch at Raw Arts.⁵ Nevertheless, CYD programs promote the broader development of globally skillful and motivated individuals by, as in the case of Mosaic, “help[ing] young people to learn to manage their lives effectively by teaching skills, providing resources, and developing their talents and interests” by providing “opportunities for skill building in physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social arenas” (Gutiérrez & Spencer, 2008).

The Community Contributor

A hallmark of CYD programs is a commitment to championing youth engagement with the community. They highlight the importance of adopting the skills needed to not only identify socially pressing issues, but underscore the importance of having youth actively contribute to the communities to which they are inextricably connected. Such engagement is mediated through many concepts that include social justice, cultural competence, conflict resolution, love, peace, and unity, but all revolve around the call for youth to be “active agents for social change in their communities,” as Destiny Arts Center articulates in their theory of change.⁶ This call to action is distilled into outcomes such as nurturing empathy or as “respect for diversity, community involvement, and positive social capital” (Gutiérrez & Spencer, 2008), and quantified into short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals that progressively integrate youth into their communities—moving from forming positive bonds with those different than them to eventually gaining recognition for their service.⁷

TREND #2: HOW ARE PROGRAMS EVALUATING?

Involve Youth in Evaluation⁸

Across the field of youth development at large there has increasingly been a move to engage youth in evaluation. Often referred to as “youth participatory evaluations” (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2007; Sabo Flores 2008; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006), this approach views youth not as subjects of evaluations, but rather as resources. It places them in the middle

⁵ Project Lunch, Raw Arts <https://www.rawartworks.org/campaign-2>: <https://www.rawartworks.org/campaign-2>

⁶ *Movement Arts for Peaceful, Powerful and Creative Young People: A Study of Artists-at-School Residency at Havenscourt*. Informing Change. Accessed May 2018 from <https://destinyarts.org/about-destiny/impact/evaluations/>

⁷ The Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project Handbook clearly articulates such a structure: https://issuu.com/byaep/docs/byaep_workbook_isuu3_31 (p. 41)

⁸ Resources for Youth Participatory Evaluations can be found at The Act for Youth Center: http://actforyouth.net/youth_development/evaluation/resources.cfm
Where are Young people in Youth Program Evaluation Research?

of the evaluation process as consultants, leaders, and co-creators of evaluations. Put simply, this approach views youth as experts in their own lives. With the right support, youth can be included in developing research questions, identifying the sample set, gathering data, analyzing findings, and making recommendations for program improvements. There are two other advantages to this approach:

- 1) Youth participatory evaluation reinforces the idea of youth as agents of change in their journey of self improvement and increased competence described earlier. Further, youth learn to develop tools and knowledge around issues that most impact their lives and involves them in the process of self-reflection and positive change; it can be an empowering experience (Chen, Weiss & Johnson-Nicholson, 2010).
- 2) Youth participatory evaluation imbeds the idea of evaluation into the heart of the program experience, thereby breaking the conception of evaluations as ad hoc addendums, separate from “main” program activities (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Conner, 2005; Camino, 2005).

The Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project Handbook is a watershed CYD evaluation document that demonstrates a commitment to engaging in youth participatory evaluation, since they “perceive youth’s view of themselves and other self-reported data as valid and valuable in assessing our participants and programs (Swaback et al., 2012).” As a result, their evaluation tools were designed with input from all relevant stakeholders, especially the youth they serve.

Evaluation and mix-methodological approaches: A principled approach to doing what works

A brief but important point to note is the growing counter narrative among youth evaluations at large and CYD evaluations specifically that turns, either actively or out of necessity, from the purported superiority of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations in assessing a program’s strengths and weaknesses. Save for perhaps the longitudinal study being undertaken by Wooden Floor and CRoC,⁹ evaluation literature and current enterprises of this magnitude is sparse at best. This is not to suggest these studies have no merit, but that other evaluative strategies and methods might even be better suited when evaluating youth programs. The Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project has given teeth to the notion that usable, and indeed valuable, data encompasses the voices of youth themselves.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

Cross-Sector Collaboration, Sharing, and Constant Contact

A constant refrain in CYD program evaluation literature is the desire for more opportunities for program evaluators to share experiences, findings, methods, and practices. As CYD program

⁹ The Wooden Floor 2014-2024 Longitudinal Study: http://www.thewoodenfloor.org/proven_results_2014/

¹⁰ The Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project Handbook: https://issuu.com/byaep/docs/byaep_workbook_isuu3_31 (p. 35)

evaluation is still in its infancy, constant effort must be made to seek opportunities for growth by learning from each others' successes and indeed failures. I would like to echo the sentiments of Kathe Swaback at Raw Art Works and the Project Leader of the Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project in 2014 when she said, "Our programs can all offer up our separate evaluation results, but what are we really proving; what are we really learning; how are we really improving our programs based on this? If we could get support to pool our national and cross-sector brain power, we could go to the next level."

- Encourage organizations to make their evaluation practices at all stages of development and execution transparent and available for public consumption.
- Create a centralized repository of information for program evaluation that includes assessment tools, logic models, theories of changes, and other resources.
- Create a program evaluation virtual "sandbox" where evaluators can voice concerns, seek advice from peers, and strategize on solutions to common obstacles.
- Create and maintain an annotated list of materials about CYD evaluation practices as they emerge.
- Seek opportunities to form partnerships with peer organizations to pool evaluation resources and develop shared conceptual frameworks wherever possible.

Narrative Change Needed

A re-evaluation of what counts as useful data and valid methodology is desperately needed. While research such as that being undertaken at the Centers for Research on Creativity and programs such as The Wooden Floor engage in longitudinal studies that go far beyond pragmatic, utility-focused evaluations, most organizations are not suited or equipped for such studies. A move away from the expectation for CYD programs to produce evaluations based on experimental design seems to me inevitable, and rightly so. Changing the narrative around applying a combination of evaluative methods should nonetheless be pursued with rigor while acknowledging an organization's unique circumstances. However, caution is needed to ensure that the evaluative pendulum does not swing too far in the other direction where sentiment alone drives our evaluations, otherwise we run the risk of having our programs and the evaluations of them become the snake-oil of the future.

- Refine the gamut of evaluative methodologies to make them more sound, convincing, approachable, and relevant to organizational needs.
- Engage funders in narrative-changing discussions around context-dependent, mix-methodological approaches to evaluation.
- Clarify the distinction between evaluation and long-term research in program assessment and determine what circumstances are appropriate for each.
- Convene experts in the various fields of evaluation methodologies across the youth development sector, including in storytelling, alumni affairs, participatory evaluation, and

experimental design to discern new and innovative ways of approaching program evaluation.

Creativity and Youth Participation

Finally, just as CYD programs champion the power of creativity, so too should their evaluations. The strength of artistic approaches in constructing, conducting, and communicating evaluations must be fervently pursued. BYAEP has led the way here in their three-pronged approach to evaluation that combines numbers, stories, and images that beautifully illustrate their work and passion. Other organizations such as the Afterschool Alliance's Afterschool Storybook takes an artistic, personal approach to documenting personal accounts of program impact on youth.¹¹

- Encourage the creative exploration of accruing and documenting evaluation data through artistic representation—including multimedia, visual arts, and new technologies.
- Create collaborative opportunities to develop pedagogy around creative approaches to evaluations.
- Develop participatory evaluations through creative methods to engage youth in the evaluation process.
- Identify and use case studies to teach and encourage the proliferation of creative approaches to evaluation.
- Develop a shared framework around youth participatory evaluation with peer organizations specifically for use within the creative youth development frame.

CONCLUSION

As the field of CYD program evaluation continues to evolve, best practices and a body of knowledge will emerge, providing new insights into how to better construct and execute our programs. However, I have in part attempted to show here that such development happens precisely because there is a commitment to the evaluative process itself. Although the way forward is at times vague, I believe our best touchstone for trusting that our evaluations will bear fruit is the value of “creative inquiry and expression” that underpins CYD itself: we must be creative in our evaluative methods, involve youth in their application, and advocate for the necessary resources to support its growth. This requires flexibility, adaptability, collective support, and cooperation amongst our peers, the youth we serve, and our communities. However, what remains most crucial is to inspire a spirit of creativity in communicating the unique stories of programs that seek to ignite the “human spark” that is at the heart of Creative Youth Development.

¹¹ America's Afterschool Storybook. Afterschool Alliance. <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/storybook/gallery.cfm>

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