

Focus on Youth:
Canadian Youth Arts Programming and Policy
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Focus on Youth: Canadian Youth Arts Programming and Policy

Introduction

Youth arts is a distinctive type of artistic practice that does more than include youth in existing artistic frameworks; instead it recalibrates the framework to position the needs of specific, localized youth communities at the very centre of the artistic practice. The capacity of local youth arts programming to foster positive youth development is an emerging area of interest for both policymakers and practitioners. Culturally relevant, locally based programs that use media, visual and performing arts programming have demonstrated promising results in positive youth engagement. Evidence indicates that youth arts programming is an effective mechanism to build individual skills, promote community engagement and provide broader social and economic benefits. A review of the current literature on youth arts in Canada, interviews with youth arts practitioners and an analysis of funding and support practices demonstrate both a high demand for local youth arts programming and the need for a multi-level, cross-sectoral, coordinated policy and funding framework for the Canadian youth arts sector.

Youth Marginalization in Context

There is considerable research documenting disturbing trends of youth¹ disengagement across Canada, with some youth communities experiencing disproportionately high rates of social exclusion and marginalization (Gaetz 2004, Jenson 2000, Juteau 2000, Omidvar and Richmond 2003). Despite overall gains in income for Canadians over the past decade, recent immigrants, visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples, lone-parent families headed by women and persons with disabilities are over-represented in the lowest income groups (Canadian Council on Social Development 2006). Youth who experience poverty, racism, homelessness, unemployment, under-education, gangs, addiction and abuse face an increased risk of encountering criminal justice, health, and social service agencies as youth and adults. These issues are not internal to specific communities, but are produced in connection with broader political, economic, social and cultural conditions.

Political trends since the mid-1990s have contributed to conditions of economic vulnerability through a reduction of overall funding for social services, restructuring of social programs, and a downloading process from federal to provincial and municipal governments who are left to pay an increasing portion of the cost of providing social services while having limited means to raise revenue for their growing demand (McKeen and Porter 2003). An erosion of the social safety net, such as highly restrictive qualifications for employment insurance, the shift from welfare to workfare, and a lack of affordable housing and daycare, has thus had disproportionate economic, social and psychological effects on low-income adults and children (Browne 2003). These effects are exacerbated by the interplay of poverty with other social processes, such as racism, to compound problems of exclusion and marginalization.

¹ Definitions of youth vary widely depending on policy jurisdiction. This analysis defines youth as those individuals ranging in age from 12 – 29 in the interests of capturing the full range of Canadian youth programming and policy that includes a focus on the arts.

The retrenchment of funding for social services and the shift toward marketization and privatization in the delivery of remaining services has also severely damaged both the amount and types of arts and recreation programming available. Arts and recreation programs are now often subject to user fees, making them inaccessible to many. A lack of funding has left community recreation infrastructures in serious disrepair, so even when barriers to participation such as user fees or transportation costs are removed, suitable facilities to house the programming are difficult to find (Browne 2003).

Youth Arts Programming – Effects and Outcomes

As an artistic practice that is expressly argued to have instrumental social value in promoting positive youth engagement, stakeholders supporting youth arts in Canada come from a range of sectors. This has produced a cross section of research and recommendations that demonstrates the value of youth arts programming at individual, local and broader social scales.

In 1999, the Department of Justice held the **Arts and Recreation Sector Round Table** discussions as part of the *Youth Justice Renewal Initiative*. The discussions emphasized the contribution that youth arts programming makes in establishing positive peer and mentor networks, and how participating in an optional youth arts program encourages and reinforces youth to make positive choices as autonomous individuals.

Wright et. al (2004) designed and evaluated the impact of local arts programming for select youth populations from low income, multicultural communities in five sites across Canada over a nine-month period in the National Arts and Youth Development Project (**NAYPD**), followed by the *Edmonton Arts & Youth Feasibility Study* in 2005, which, although much smaller in size and in duration, demonstrated positive findings similar to those of the NAYDP. Both studies make a significant contribution to the empirical evaluation of youth arts programming in Canada, and continue to show that after participating in a locally designed, structured after school youth arts program, participants demonstrated improved problem solving and social skills, a decrease in anti-social behaviour (such as substance abuse or aggression), and improved artistic ability (see also Wright et. al 2006, Wright et. al 2006a).

Browne's (2003) research on the impact of integrated service delivery for single mothers and their children demonstrates the positive impact that recreational and arts programming has on both participants and the broader social system. Through active outreach in offering free, accessible arts and recreation programs to children, Browne's research shows that arts and recreation programming serves a cost-effective preventative function for multiple sectors; participation in arts and recreational programming results in a marked reduction in encounters with other social services, such as medical specialists, children's aid, psychologists, social workers and probation officers.

Warner's qualitative research with youth groups supports conclusions reached in quantitative studies about the beneficial contribution youth arts makes to youth engagement. *Youth on Youth: Grassroots Youth Collaborative on Youth Led Organizing in the City of Toronto* highlights the importance of youth-led, culturally relevant arts programming as an effective tool for attracting and sustaining youth participation in positive activities. In *Towards a New Youth*

Program/Policy Remix: Fresh Arts and the Case for Community-based, Youth Urban Arts Programming, Warner's research team conducted interviews with program participants in the Fresh Arts program that ran in the GTA from 1992 to 1997. **Kardinal Offishall**, a successful Canadian hip hop artist, attributes much of his success to the personal and professional skill set he developed as a program participant.

... I learned how to make music while in the Fresh Arts program...all the things that artists might have to pay a lot of money for people to do, we learned how to be self sufficient and how to be independent and...that is how my whole career got started on a major level. (Warner 2006: 17)

To summarize, key themes in the literature reflect that youth arts programming:

- Is an effective outreach tool; arts programming appeals to a diverse range of youth populations and engages youth for sustained periods;
- Stimulates learning motivation, has a positive impact on academic performance, and cultivates creative thinking and problem solving abilities;
- Improves individual self-esteem, confidence, and conflict resolution skills, decreases anxiety and depression, and provides opportunities for developing new friendships and positive social networks;
- Supports healthy and supportive community environments for youth engagement, promotes intercultural exchange, mentoring and role modeling with both community leaders and peers, enhances community participation and positively impacts residents' perceptions of their neighbourhood;
- Provides employment skills and training, promotes investment in the community and has a positive financial impact on social services through improvement in crime, health and education indicators. (**Creative City Network** of Canada 2007)

Despite the grim political landscape that has eroded support for youth arts programming, local youth arts organization have demonstrated marked determination and resourcefulness in meeting the needs of local youth communities across Canada. The success of local youth arts organizations in Canada is largely a result of the capacity of the youth arts practitioners to develop community and political support networks. Before the implications of the current funding and policy support system are analysed, a brief description of the work of established Canadian youth arts practitioners is provided to underline the tremendous need for policy makers to demonstrate a solid public commitment to youth arts in Canada.

Keys to Success – Best Practices

Regent Park Focus Youth Media Arts Centre engages youth from the Regent Park neighbourhood of Toronto to operate **Catch da Flava** Newspaper, **Catch da Flava Radio**, E.Y.E. Video, **Regent Park Television**, **Music Recording Studio** and a **Photography Arts** program. In 2004/2005, Regent Park Focus had a total of 163 members, aged mostly 12-19, from 26 different countries and speaking at least 17 different languages at home. In addition to participants contributing to the program through becoming youth instructors themselves, many have continued on to college and university programs ranging from media production to

engineering and political science, as well as to careers in film, television, radio design, telecommunications, journalism, youth outreach and municipal politics (Regent Park Focus 2007).

Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Programming (**SCYAP**) has been widely recognized for their **Urban Canvas** project, now in its 7th year. Urban Canvas runs full time Monday to Friday for 39 weeks and is designed to equip local marginalized youth with commercial arts skills training, practical experience and a portfolio through participation in community arts projects that include public murals and art exhibitions. The program incorporates social services as well as artistic and cultural elements through providing life skills training, mentoring, crisis intervention and employment and/or education transition support. SCYAP reports that 50% of past participants found immediate employment and 40% returned to formal education (Lechman 2007, SCYAP 2007).

An illustrative, though not exhaustive, list of other local youth arts organizations from across Canada includes **Urban Arts, Sketch, beatz to da streetz, FYI, REMIX Project, Common Weal, Arts Umbrella, Broadway Youth Resource Centre Art and Media Gallery, 4 Unity Productions,** and **iHuman Youth Society.**

Key themes emerge from the literature and interviews with local youth arts practitioners to identify best practices for local youth arts practice as including:

- A high level of youth involvement; programming must be youth-focused and, where possible, youth-led. Youth need to be consulted and preferably participate in the articulation of issues facing the community, defining program objectives, as well as the design, implementation and evaluation of the programs;
- Active local youth recruitment and outreach strategies that includes removing barriers to participation such as providing transportation, food, and offering programs in a safe location;
- Programming that is culturally relevant to the participants, and locally based in meeting community needs;
- Leaders and mentors who are demographically representative of the local youth population, preferably drawn from within the local community;
- A focus on artistic excellence, employing artists who receive training and support in working with local youth populations;
- Structured programs with clear stages and measurable goals for the participants, while maintaining enough flexibility to adapt as required;
- The support of community leaders and champions from the policy and stakeholder communities;
- An established, trusted relationship with the local youth community. This means a sustained community presence, programs that run for an extended period of time, with sufficient resources for long term planning, staffing, professional development and program evaluation.

Funding support

Funding support for youth arts in Canada comes from a mix of public and private stakeholders in health, social services, crime prevention, employment/job training, community development and cultural sectors. While a diversity of funders helps to mitigate organizational vulnerability which can stem from over-reliance on one source of funding, an analysis of the existing funding practices for local youth arts in Canada indicates the current framework contains three characteristics that function to inhibit, rather than facilitate, the continued success or growth of the sector.

First, many funding programs within the arts and cultural sector have criteria that make them inaccessible to youth arts organizations. A focus on professional artists and emphasis on traditional art forms may restrict both the types of programming that can be funded, such as hip hop or graffiti, as well as the ability for local youth arts organization to draw from local community resources or former graduates as sources of expertise.

Second, funding from partners supporting youth arts is largely project based. This constrains the ability of practitioners to establish long term planning goals, and may have the effect of shaping programming to meet the objectives of the funders rather than the community. Project based funding rarely includes sufficient resources for program evaluation, which has implications for the collection of meaningful data on the long term effects of local youth arts programming and subsequently, political and funding support. Finding project based funding from multiple sources puts significant administrative strain on limited staff resources, and often does not provide for ongoing professional development for practitioners. The lack of organizational stability that results from project based funding also results in low-wage, precarious employment conditions for staff and contributes to high turnover and staff burnout (Hessenius, 2007). A lack of core funding also leaves organizations extremely vulnerable to shifts in the political climate.

Third, despite the emergence of a cross-sectoral body of evidence of the value of local youth arts practices in addressing the complex needs of marginalized youth in Canada, the absence of a coordinated, comprehensive policy framework for the youth arts sector limits the ability of policy and funding partners to network with respect to innovative approaches, objectives, funding structures, research, evaluation techniques and best practices.

Lessons to be learned? International approaches to policy and funding for youth arts

Other countries have made significant progress towards a multi-level, cross-sectoral, coordinated policy framework for youth that both maximizes youth arts programming as a policy instrument and promotes cultural engagement as an important component of positive youth development, social inclusion and citizenship practices².

² For a more thorough examination of international approaches to youth arts policy frameworks, see Zemans and Coles (forthcoming) "One Hundred Musicians! Youth Arts Policies in Canada" In Robin Wright (Ed.). *Art Programs for Positive Youth Development in Low-Income Communities*. Wilfred Laurier Press.

In 2003, the [Australia Council for the Arts](#) released *Young People and the Arts*, the first national arts policy directly targeting young people involved in the arts as well as artists who work with youth or produce work for young audiences. The policy addresses the challenge of combining the goals of artistic quality with the reality of skill development for young artists through defining youth arts as, “work that involves creatively skilled and unskilled young people and children who participate in projects (usually on an unpaid basis) as creators, presenters and managers. In youth arts the creative development phase, or process of working collectively is considered just as important as the outcome” (Australia Council 2003: 18). There is a focus on engaging youth in new artistic experiences, on networking between communities, practitioners and funders, and on support for youth arts that encourages community cultural development and cultural representation (Australia Council 2003: 18).

Various initiatives in the United Kingdom also provide valuable examples of networking and policy advocacy for the youth arts sector. The English National Youth Arts Network, or [ENYAN](#), was launched in 2006 as a member based network designed to connect workers in the youth and arts sectors across the UK. ENYAN’S objectives include advocacy for local youth arts in England, with a particular focus on creating opportunities for at risk youth to engage in creative and cultural practices. ENYAN’s services include a website; [UPSTART](#), an online youth arts magazine; a national professional development program; a national forum for advocacy and lobbying; as well as networking opportunities at local, regional and national levels (ENYAN 2007).

Conclusion

Youth arts is a vibrant, if low profile, component of the Canadian arts and cultural sector. Local youth arts programming in Canada would flourish with efforts to initiate a multi-level, cross sectoral, coordinated policy framework that includes: core funding for organizations; a single window application process; a national youth arts information, professional development and advocacy network; and youth representation in both policy formation and funding bodies. Policymakers from the arts and cultural sector are well positioned to be leaders in developing a policy framework where cultural engagement has both instrumental and intrinsic value, with cultural ministries and agencies as strategic partners in situating cultural objectives as an important component of broader social and economic goals.

The cultural sector in Canada is already demonstrating leadership through the development of the streamlined, youth-centered funding program [ArtReach Toronto](#), which brings together multiple stakeholders from public and private sectors to provide multi-year funding commitments to local youth arts practitioners. In support of the argument that demand for local youth arts practices exceeds the available supply, this and similar funding models, such as Ontario’s [Youth Challenge Fund](#) or [GetOut!](#), part of Vancouver’s Youth Legacy Program, receive an overwhelming number of applications from local youth organizations that use the arts as a central component of their programming activities. However, repeated unmet demands for assistance with capacity building also indicate the distance that the policy community has yet to go in demonstrating a solid commitment to public support for these programs.

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