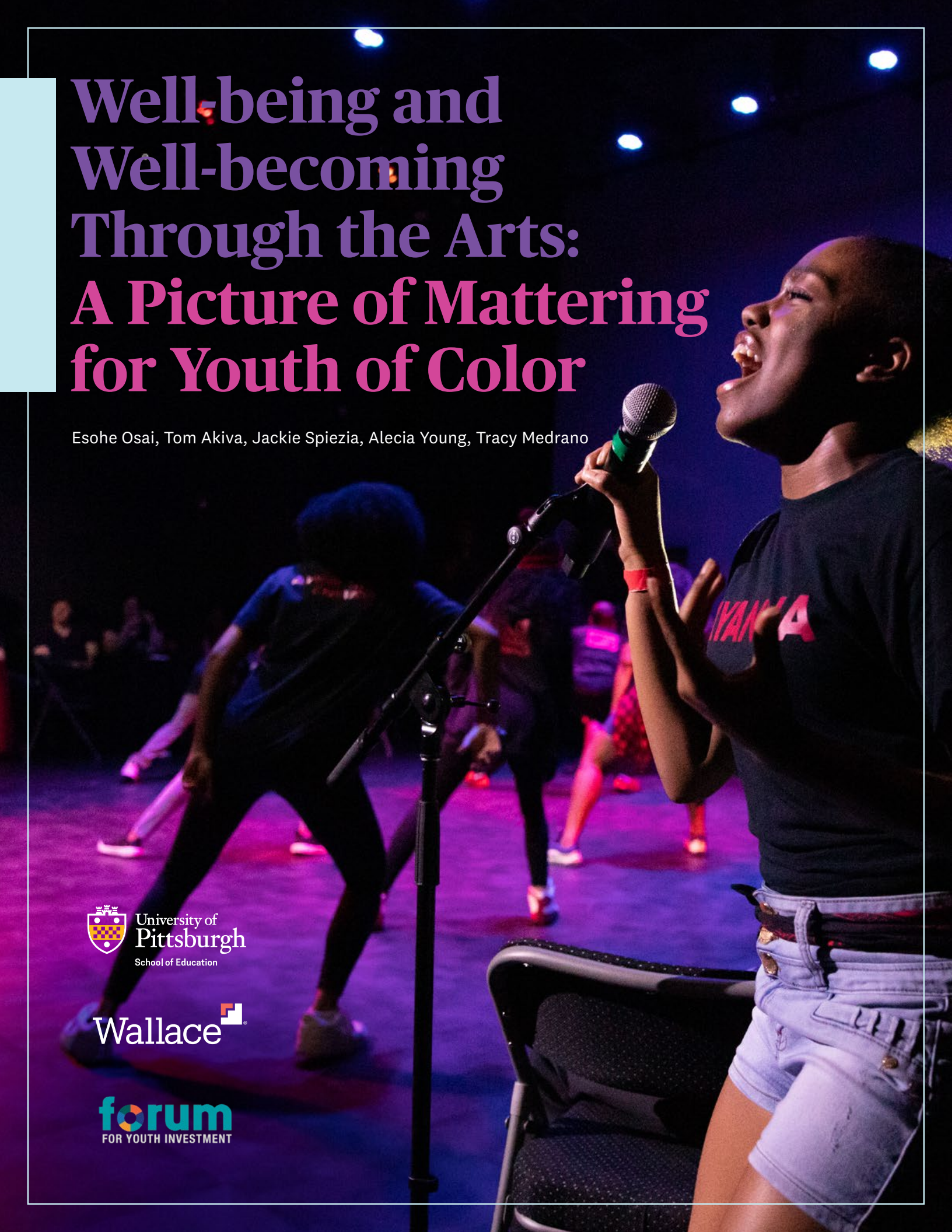# Well-being and Well-becoming Through the Arts: A Picture of Mattering for Youth of Color

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Wallace

forum
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

Acknowledgements

Photos in this report represent high-quality Pittsburgh-based arts programs. These photos are not from programs in the study.

Photo: Sean Means

A technical appendix with additional details about our study can be accessed through this QR code:

Cover Photo: Mark Simpson

Well-being and Well-becoming Through the Arts: A Picture of Mattering for Youth of Color

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Executive Summary

The arts can provide valuable and culturally affirming developmental spaces for youth of color in the U.S. The arts are central to culture and represent important learning capacities that enhance development. Despite what we know about the power of arts learning (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014), youth of color are less likely to have access to high-quality arts programs in their schools (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). Fewer arts learning opportunities in schools led to the proliferation of community-based programs that fill the gap related to arts learning. Many programs also offer culturally rooted experiences that reflect the experiences of youth in communities served. For decades, such programs have offered culturally sustaining, high-quality arts programs during out-of-school time (See Bushnell, 1970). Fortunately, these community-based programs provide arts learning experiences that can support youth development and provide culturally centered experiences that can enhance identity development for youth of color. However, these programs have yet to be conceptualized and researched in any systematic way.

Culture-centered, community-based youth arts (CCYA) programs may provide vital spaces to support the well-being and well-becoming for youth of color. We define CCYA programs in a three-part way: They are *community-based youth development* programs that offer *high-quality arts learning* and *center the racial/ethnic cultures* of youth-of-color participants. This study delves into the fundamental components of CCYA programs, their impact on participants, and how they may foster holistic development. We describe CCYA programs that integrate community-based youth

Culture-Centered

High-Quality Arts Learning

Community-Based Youth Development
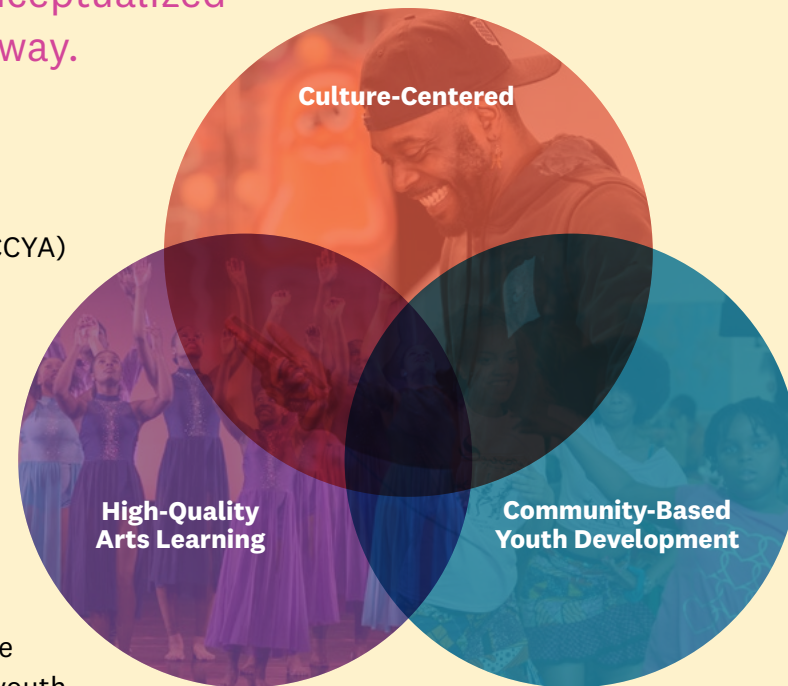
development with high-quality arts learning that centers the racial and ethnic cultures of participating youth. Our study findings show that the convergence of these elements can promote both well-being and well-becoming for youth of color. **Well-being** is holistic wellness in youth's present lives, which includes mental/psychological, physical, and social dimensions of life satisfaction. **Well-becoming** represents young people's present experiences shaping and leading to consideration of a desirable future state.

First, it is important to distinguish the community-based aspect of CCYA programs. Community-based youth programs can offer powerful developmental opportunities outside of traditional school settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). These programs create connections by fostering intergenerational relationships and bridging organizations within the local ecosystem. Second, CCYA programs offer arts-centered experiences that bring the power of creative learning (also called creative youth development) to the forefront . High-quality arts learning experiences in CCYA programs emphasize process over product, nurturing creativity, advancing artistry, and embracing exhibition opportunities. Culture-centeredness is the third essential tenet of CCYA programs, celebrating the cultural wealth of youth while promoting equity and empowerment (Yosso, 2005; McGee, 2019). By intentionally highlighting and centering identities in various ways, these programs create inclusive environments that affirm racial and ethnic identities. They prioritize representation in leadership roles and employ culturally sustaining practices to empower youth, fostering critical dialogue about power and oppression within artistic contexts.

Our research team consisted of individuals from the University of Pittsburgh School of Education and the Forum for Youth Investment. We conducted an 18-month, multi-method study of 35 CCYA programs across eight U.S. cities—Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Louisville, Newark/Paterson, Oakland, Tacoma, and Washington, D.C. Using interviews, focus groups, youth surveys, and program visits, our team developed an understanding of how these programs support well-being through the arts. Stories represent a central data collection method in this study, and the youth, teaching artists, and programs directors provide evidence that speaks to how CCYA programs allow for deep engagement in high-quality arts, support racial affirmation, and provide opportunities for belonging. Throughout the report, data from multiple phases of the study corroborate findings related to the benefits of CCYA programs. For youth of color in the study, well-being is a multifaceted phenomenon that ultimately supports opportunities for youth to matter. In addition to well-being, we noticed a story of well-becoming through stories of young people who developed pathways into desirable young-adult identities. Our study identified seven characteristics of CCYA programs that seem to be important ways they support youth well-being and well-becoming.

Photo: Sean Means

1. **Nurture Artistic Skill:** Programs provide creative communities where youth can develop skill and confidence in an art form of interest under the training of skilled and invested teaching artists.

2. **Cultivate Creative Restoration:** Programs engage youth's minds and bodies in creative expressions that allow them to experience feelings of joy, centeredness, and flow, while disconnecting from stressful or challenging realities in school and in life.

3. **Establish Artful Sanctuaries:** Programs create sanctuaries in which youth connect in relationship with artistically oriented peers and caring, artistically skilled adults.

4. **Foster Generative Connections:** Programs foster connections to neighborhood and community assets that provide avenues to perform/exhibit art, network, collaborate, and share resources.

5. **Highlight Meaningful Pathways:** Programs foster youth's future possible selves through identifying and highlighting various arts-connected and non-arts-connected pathways into adulthood, in support of becoming an adult who appreciates and values the arts.

6. **Promote Cultural Visibility:** Programs center racial and ethnic ways of being that acknowledge, affirm, and celebrate the past, present, and future of people of color, which connects youth to something bigger than themselves.

7. **Emphasize Equity Intentionality:** Programs disrupt systemic racial and economic barriers limiting access to meaningful arts experiences for youth of color.

In addition to learning about the programs themselves, we investigated community-level factors that may influence the development and operation of CCYA programs. That is, we sought to better understand the context in which CCYA programs operate, with an eye toward differences across cities and community-level factors that may support programs. Through this multi-city analysis of ecosystems, we found that:

a. **Social and cultural histories, including racism and marginalization, shape CCYA programs.** Large socio-cultural patterns that aren't necessarily arts-specific, such as gentrification, transportation infrastructure, and regional demographic shifts, along with the contexts of schools and school districts, affect CCYA program development and operation.

b. **Support for teaching artists varies across communities.** The city ecosystems we investigated varied in how they address teaching-artist professional status, supports, and opportunities—which, in turn, has an impact on the whole learning ecosystem.

c. **Communities vary in how they address program access.** Ecosystems differ in how and the degree to which they make program access visible, and what is in place to help youth and families learn about, get involved in, and get to programs.

d. **A healthy ecosystem is diverse.** Community leaders valued diversity of programs, emphasizing the importance of having a variety of program types and sizes.

e. **Programs and communities are intertwined.** Community leaders emphasized the importance of CCYA programs' interactions, noting that communities can support programs, programs can support communities, and programs can network, collaborate, and interact with each other in ways that strengthen the learning ecosystem.

Culture-centered community-based youth arts programs can provide youth of color with opportunities for belonging, identity affirmation, and skill development, ultimately fostering well-being and positive developmental trajectories. Our study demonstrates that youth often experience positive emotions, joy, and a sense of accomplishment, enhancing their confidence and sense of significance through engagement in the arts. CCYA programs intentionally integrate cultural connections and promote representation, offering a pathway for youth to envision a more just society while feeling valued and seen.

Our study suggests that youth in culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs have experiences that support mattering. Mattering is feeling valued by self and others (Marshall, 2001). It is a sense of significance or importance (Elliott et al., 2004). Experiences of mattering inform well-being and can shape youth's self-concept and future aspirations. This happens through the transformative power of the arts as experienced in community-based youth programs that center youth of color. As a limitation in our study, programs represented a purposeful sample not representative of the general population of youth arts programs. Additionally, our study does not delineate specific mechanisms for the identified well-being outcomes. Additional studies can more thoroughly and systematically understand the outcomes for youth in these programs. Further research might help us understand the impact of these programs in communicating the message of mattering to marginalized youth.

What are culture-centered community-based youth arts (CCYA) programs?

Conceptualizing Culture-Centered, Community-Based Youth Arts Programs

Youth of color need developmentally appropriate spaces in which to create, express, exhibit, and enact their multifaceted identities. Unfortunately, educational spaces that serve youth of color often stifle expression and creativity through emphasis on standardized tests and academic achievement (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006). The removal of arts from schools attended by youth of color can dehumanize youth by limiting the vision for learning to academically rigorous curricula that address perceived failures in educational proficiency. Community-based youth programs offer a space that research continually finds to be psychologically safe (and brave) and that prioritize adult-youth relationships—i.e., a supportive space both for art exploration and well-being. Community-based programs that emphasize high-quality arts learning (also called creative youth development; Montgomery, 2016) are uniquely valuable because of what we know about arts as enhancing human capacity for learning (Halverson, 2021). Art is a cultural artifact, and our society needs spaces that celebrate and nurture the arts as a cornerstone of the human experience. Artistically inclined or interested youth, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or school district, deserve spaces in which to develop interests in the arts and grow as artists.

As arts learning opportunities decreased in schools that serve Black and Latino youth, programs burgeoned to meet the holistic needs of youth through arts programming that was humanizing, culturally sustaining, and responsive to the needs of communities of color (Akiva et al., 2024). This response represented the freedom dreaming (see Kelley, 2022) of people who saw the creative potentialities of youth and carved out space to nurture and cultivate creative abilities. Importantly, these programs developed in ways that emphasize and celebrate arts that exist in the cultural diaspora. For example, many programs that serve youth of color emphasize cultural representations of arts, such as hip-hop,

Culturally sustaining suggests aspects of learning (in the arts and other disciplines) that embrace cultural expressions and ways of being that exist outside of often dominant Eurocentric modes. This stance eschews deficit narratives of communities of color and embraces practices that uplift and promote culture (Paris, 2012).

Photo: Sean Means

Photo: Sean Means

ballet folklorico, or African dance. Communities of color often "remix" mainstream American arts, such as the Hot Chocolate Nutcracker, developed by a dance company that serves youth of color in the Los Angeles area. Alternately, these programs might create spaces for youth of color to be highlighted in less accessible arts forms, such the Detroit-based Sphinx Organization that celebrates representation in classical music. These are examples of the types of environments that celebrate culture and support belonging for youth of color.

Research has demonstrated the value of community-based programs, which exist outside of schools and are connected to the neighborhoods and communal spaces that serve families and communities (Gootman & Eccles, 2002; Vandell et al., 2015). Research also shows that the arts, as an avenue for creative learning, can support agency and awareness and lead to deep engagement within communities (Montgomery, 2016; Ngo et al., 2017; MacDonald et al., 2020). Accordingly, youth of color may benefit greatly when arts learning happens in **culture-sustaining environments** that center their identities and experiences as central in the learning experience. Integrating culture, community, and the arts, we sought to understand programs that engage youth of color in creative communities that foster youth thriving and future possibilities. In this study, we examine **culture-centered, community-based youth arts (CCYA)** programs as vibrant spaces for arts-involved youth of color.

Figure 1 shows the conceptualization of CCYA that emerged in this study—three components coming together to produce **well-being** and **well-becoming** for young people of color. We see well-being as incorporating multiple dimensions of holistic wellness in youth's present lives and well-becoming as young people considering and shaping their future state (Pollard & Lee, 2003; Cassidy, 2017). CCYA programs are defined by three distinct components: they are community-based youth development programs that offer high-quality arts learning and center the racial/ethnic cultures of youth of color participants. The convergence of these three components, as depicted in concentric circles, represents the specific type of program conceptualized and operationalized in this study. Though each stand-alone component can support youth well-being, when all three elements are at play, youth of color may experience well-being and well-becoming in profound and healing ways.

Well-being is holistic wellness in youth's present lives, which includes mental/psychological, physical, and social dimensions of life satisfaction.

Well-becoming represents young people's present experiences shaping and leading to consideration of a desirable future state.
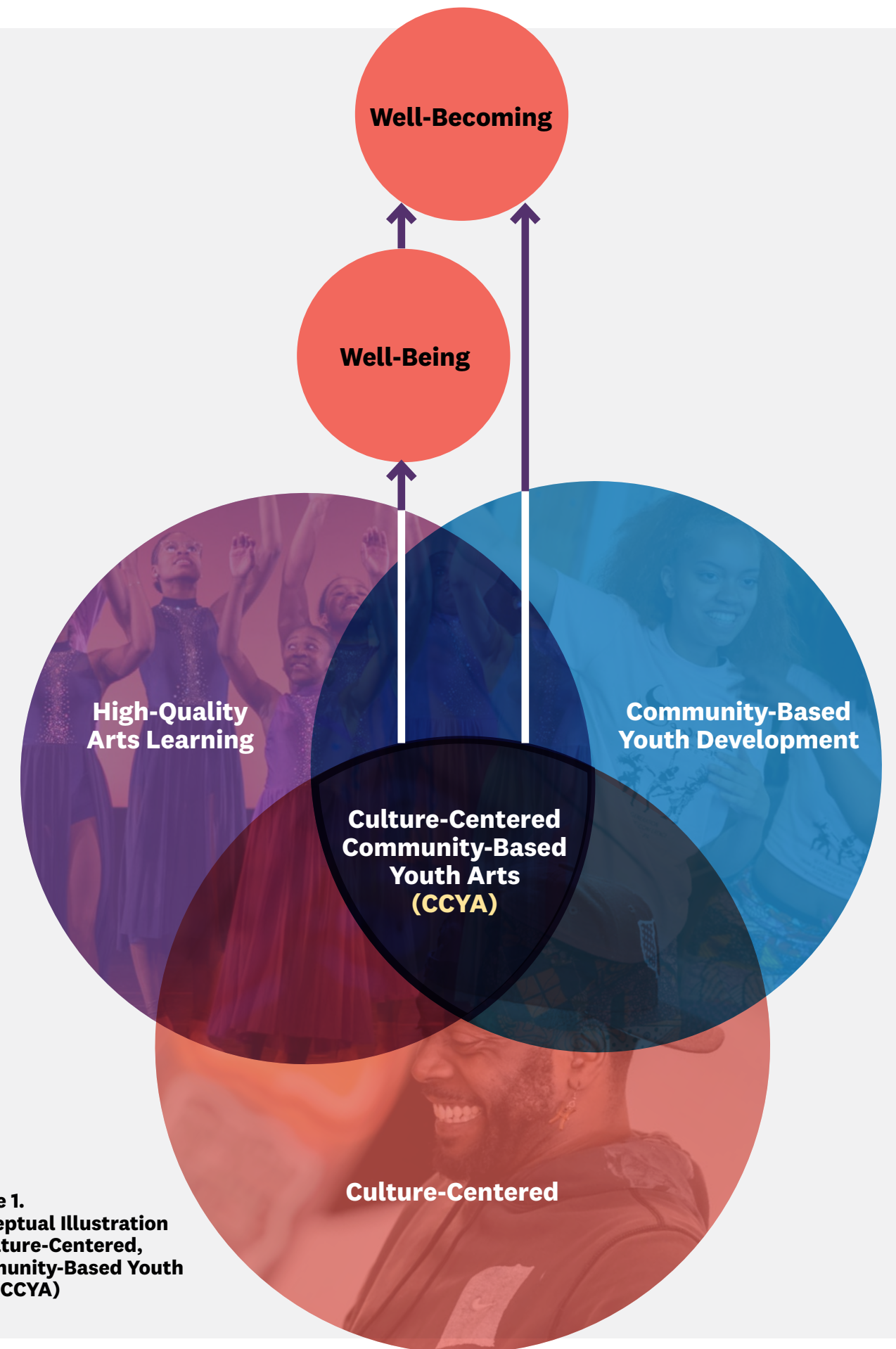
Photo: Sean Means

**Figure 1.
Conceptual Illustration of Culture-Centered, Community-Based Youth Arts (CCYA)**

Elements of Community-Based Youth Development

By community-based, we mean programs in the neighborhoods or communities in which young people live (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Community-based youth programs are usually operated by nonprofit organizations and may or may not be connected to larger, national groups (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs of America). They typically offer afterschool, weekend, and/or summer opportunities. Baldridge et al. (2017) note that "groups of color in the United States have long formed physical spaces to educate and protect young people from racial hostility as well as and to affirm their culture and identity." The idea of community-based is bidirectional for arts programs: Youth arts programs contribute to a community (through performances, exhibitions, public art) and a community shapes youth arts programs (Fuqua, 2008).

By youth development, we refer to the rich scholarship and practice base associated with the positive youth development movement. Positive youth development, as an approach, is defined by the federal government[1] as "an intentional, prosocial approach" that "recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths." Youth development programs are known to be strengths-based (versus problem focused), relationship-based, and holistic. More recent conceptualizations of positive youth development acknowledge a social justice lens as central to understanding and conceptualizing positive youth development programs (Larson, et al., 2020).

Photo: E.A. Smith

Community-based youth development programs serve young people through engaging programs that typically offer interest-based learning and development experiences. As positive developmental settings, they represent many potential benefits to participating youth, including physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, and integration of family, school, and community efforts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Though community-based youth programs serve young people in out-of-school time settings, they sometimes closely affiliate with schools and even offer enrichment programs as part of the school day. This provides an entry point for programs to identify and engage youth who are often in schools with limited budgets for arts opportunities. One program leader from Tacoma said:

That was really important to have those local partnerships so that we don't have to be the hub for everything, but there's already a hub and how do we join into that, and then, with even smaller community-based organizations, we partner with other folk-led dance groups and mentoring groups. We let them utilize our space and come in and talk with our kids, and that's how they expand their programs. Our door is pretty much just open to anyone who's willing to partner with us. As long as their focus is youth of color and creating safe spaces, I will allow them into my space. The parents trust me, so because of that, we're allowed to maneuver in a way where we can partner with anybody.

Photo: Aimee Obidzinski

Photo: Sean Means

Community-Based Youth Development is the integration of positive youth development frameworks within the context of youth programs, which are typically operated by nonprofits rooted or embedded within the communities they serve. The concept acknowledges interdependence between positive and healthy youth outcomes and healthy communities. Programs aligned with community-based youth development can play an important role in ensuring that youth are prepared to become well-rounded, engaged citizens as adults.

1   https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development

Photo: E.A. Smith

Elements of High-Quality Arts Learning

The technical skill sets developed through high-quality arts learning opportunities can blossom in the presence of nurturing creative communities. Culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs train arts-interested youth through instruction in creative expression. The most notable throughline in our exploration was each program's commitment to **artistic excellence**. High standards were often associated with creating safe spaces for youth to receive feedback and develop a good rhythm of creative work within their respective mediums. High-quality arts learning experiences emphasize process over product and are designed to support development in the arts. A program leader from Tacoma shared, *"We do survey our youth apart from their parents and just try to gauge where they're at, how they're doing, and then what are the holes and how can we fill them."* Program staff utilize a strengths-based approach in working with youth, recognizing a youth's potential and providing a nurturing accountability for continued growth in the arts. Standards of excellence varied across disciplines, though many programs emphasized the importance of youth simply doing their best and staying committed to the process. One program leader from Oakland expressed:

> *If I had a wish, I'd want them to see themselves as powerful change makers, and that their voice matters, and that this isn't where it stops. A class with us isn't where it stops. It's only a tool that you take with you to open the doors and change the things you want to change in your world, and that you do have power and you matter.*

Youth in these programs were consistently enveloped in a professional atmosphere, including but not limited to practicing teaching artists, valuable resources, and expensive equipment. Youth shared experiences of gaining confidence through recitals or culminating exhibitions. It is possible that the confidence youth spoke of supports identity development, as youth learn their potential and begin to identify as competent and capable. For example, one youth from Detroit shared:

I would say for me, this goes back to the personal growth part because I started this when I was in ninth grade and I was a little freshie. I was a baby. And I was very afraid because I was in a new environment with new people and I was becoming a new person. And I didn't always know how to express that new person that I was. But I think that being a part of this program has given me the confidence and the voice to say … I am becoming who I want to be. I think that's very important.

As evidenced in our study of CCYA programs, art learning goes beyond just an expression or an exhibition. It is an experience that supports the process of becoming, as developing skill in the arts shapes a young person's sense of self.

Elements of Culture-Centeredness

Culture is meaningful, as it can have emotional, experiential, and instrumental value—especially for those connected to non-dominant cultural identities in the U.S. For this study, we consider cultural identities linked to African American/Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Native American experiences in the U.S. Often, due to cultural affinity, culturally specific art forms, and the racialized patterns of segregation, CCYA programs primarily serve youth from a single racial/ethnic community. Though CCYA programs affirm the racial/ethnic identities of youth of color served in the program, they also invite young people to learn about genres of art that have roots in diverse cultures. For example, a program might teach hip-hop dance to Latinx youth, emphasizing the role that Black art expressions have in our society. The centering of culture becomes an avenue to consider a range of artistic expressions in a way that acknowledges the presence and contributions of people of color. The process of creating art in CCYA programs is a communal experience, often intergenerational, and can be healing for participants. One participant from Chicago shared:

> *I think that being here, besides obviously learning dances, something really interesting is how we learn the history behind it. So [it's] not just, okay, you're going to do this dance. It's like, you're [learning] … why it's important to people here in Mexico, where it came from like [why] dance [is] this way in this specific region. And I think it's super interesting to see that it's more than just a dance. It has meaning to it.*

Photo: Sean Means

Youth in programs that emphasize culture report feeling a sense of connection, of belonging, and of being valued. The culturally sustaining aspects of programs communicate that youth's identities and experiences are meaningful. A youth from Chicago expressed:

I think culture wise, being an African American, I think the different types of dances that we do definitely contribute to the way my identity, culture shows up here. And then also seeing other people who look like me as well and who hold a lot of value in this space.... We're always able to speak our minds and contribute.

In our conceptualization, the centering of culture supports well-being. This showed up in our study through programs that taught arts rooted in cultural identities and programs that taught various types of arts but in a way that highlighted and promoted the existence of people of color in the art form. For example, a CCYA program in Detroit taught hip-hop dance to Latinx youth and connected the practice to social and emotional learning outcomes. A program in Atlanta taught classical music to Black youth, but intentionally highlighted Black composers, as a way to center culture. Programs that support students' development of **critical consciousness** also operate in culturally sustaining ways. Such programs see the arts as a way to support students' critical consciousness and to promote social justice concerns relevant to marginalized communities (Love, 2019a). Ibrahim et al. (2021) found that high arts involvement was linked to the development of critical consciousness, especially in the case of youth of color. A review by Maker-Castro et al. (2022) identified associations between critical consciousness and well-being for youth of color. Our study highlights that culturally sustaining practices in arts learning appear in multiple forms that support youth identities for youth of color and ultimately promote well-being.

Photo: Sean Means

Critical consciousness is the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems.

About Our Study

This study was completed by a combined research team consisting of individuals from the University of Pittsburgh School of Education and the Forum for Youth Investment. Each research activity described involved individuals from either or both of these organizations. Our study of CCYA programs took place in eight U.S. cities, each with unique learning and development ecosystems for youth arts. The selected cities represent a cross-section of the U.S., including the West, South, Midwest, and East regions. We began with an ecosystem mapping process for each city, relying upon web research and an interview with a community leader (i.e., leaders of afterschool intermediaries, arts intermediaries, or the directors of large programs) in the arts for each city. We sought to understand a topic that has not yet been discovered in research but exists in practice. Therefore, we identified programs that were particularly strong examples of the phenomenon that we sought to understand. This could be considered a critical case or theoretical sampling technique (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which we selected programs based on their potential to add to our understanding of CCYA experiences for youth of color. Theorizing related to CCYA programs intersected with our ecosystem mapping to eventually guide us to a handful of youth arts programs from each city. These community-based programs each met the following criteria: (a) a focus on high-quality training in youth arts (dance, theater, visual arts, vocal music, instrumental music, literary arts, or digital and media arts); (b) youth served are a majority youth of color; and (c) program founded and/or led by person(s) of color.

After identifying potential programs, we reached out to and recruited program leaders (founders, executive directors, or program/education/project directors of CCYA programs) and interviewed them to learn more about their organizations' practices, goals, and strategies. In our next phase of the project, we visited the sites and conducted

90-minute, cross-age workshops with four to six youth, and two to three teaching artists per site. These workshops began with a brief intake form to gather background information about the participants. Although in research terms the workshops functioned as focus groups, they were highly interactive and designed to be more like youth development activities. We used a story-telling method to learn about youth and teaching-artist experiences within their programs, and a card-sorting activity to better understand their perceptions about the benefits of the arts. Storytelling was a central methodological approach used in our design, allowing participants—as experts of their own experience—to unpack the salient aspects of their participation. This approach is informed by transformative evaluation, which was developed as a method to understand the role of adult leaders in youth programs (Ord et al., 2018). Following the site visits, we developed a youth survey that programs then distributed to all youth to gather more insights about youth participation patterns, including how frequently they attended, and for what reasons. We included questions about racial identity, social justice perspectives, and how teaching artists influenced their experience. For the final phase of the study, we invited teaching artists from the programs to participate in a 60-minute virtual focus group, organized by city [more information in the appendix].

A total of 35 youth arts programs participated in the study. Four programs per city participated from Tacoma, Oakland/Bay Area, Louisville, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., and five per city participated from Chicago, Newark/Paterson, and Atlanta. Profiles of each city are included throughout this report.

To learn more about our sample, please refer to the technical appendix.

Strengths and Limitations

For this mixed-methods study, we sought to identify strong programs that exemplified a specific phenomenon—the experiences of youth of color in youth arts programs that align with our CCYA theorizing. Our selection procedure did not necessarily yield a representative sample of the general population; however, it led to rich descriptions of program experiences that represent a specific youth development opportunity in the arts. In addition, we were limited in the number of programs we could include, as well as by our knowledge of the cities and the intricacies of their art scenes. Project facilitators traveled to certain cities in accordance with the timeline of our study. With fewer time and resource limitations, we would have conducted multiple focus groups with each site and spent more time with programs by attending classes, performances, and rehearsals to learn more about each program's unique dynamics.

Figure 2.
Total Number of Disciplines Offered

- Music **20**
- Dance **20**
- Digital & Media Arts **12**
- Visual Arts **14**
- Literary Arts **12**
- Theater **15**

City	Program Name	Dance	Music	Theater	Visual Arts	Digital & Media	Literary
Tacoma	Program A	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Program B	●					
	Program C	●		●			
	Program D	●	●	●			
Oakland/ Bay Area	Program A	●		●			●
	Program B	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Program C		●	●	●	●	●
	Program D		●		●	●	
Chicago	Program A				●	●	●
	Program B	●					
	Program C	●					
	Program D					●	●
	Program E	●	●	●			●
Louisville	Program A	●					●
	Program B	●		●			
	Program C	●					
	Program D	●			●		
Detroit	Program A	●	●		●	●	
	Program B		●	●			
	Program C	●	●		●	●	
	Program D						●
Washington, D.C.	Program A	●	●		●	●	
	Program B		●				
	Program C		●	●	●	●	
	Program D			●			
Newark/Paterson	Program A	●	●	●	●	●	
	Program B	●	●	●	●	●	
	Program C	●	●	●	●		●
	Program D		●				
	Program E		●				
Atlanta	Program A		●				
	Program B	●	●	●		●	
	Program C		●				
	Program D						●
	Program E				●		

Table 1.
CCBA Programs and Disciplines

How do CCYA programs support well-being and well-becoming?

Relevant Frameworks for Understanding the Link Between CCYA and Well-Being

In this study, we are giving a name to a relevant phenomenon that exists across the U.S., yet has received little scholarly attention. We posit that CCYA programs are valuable elements in the learning and development ecosystems in communities. As youth engage in arts learning rooted in culture and youth development practices, they can access culture, creativity, and connections that shape both their present and future. Engagement in the arts can be an access point to both well-being and well-becoming, ultimately supporting opportunities for youth to matter. We consider well-being and well-becoming from both scholarly and grounded perspectives to explore outcomes for youth of color in CCYA programs.

Scholarship on well-being occurs across multiple disciplines. One particularly useful understanding of well-being comes from positive psychology. In the PERMA model, Seligman (2011) describes well-being with five components: *positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning,* and *achievement*. While not claiming to be exhaustive (Seligman, 2018), the elements of PERMA are broadly relevant and represent an empirically tested theory of well-being that is relevant for youth in the arts. Studies demonstrate associations between arts learning and each of the elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (see Villegas & Raffaeli, 2018; Froh et al., 2010; Dworkin et al., 2003; Malin, 2015; Catterall & Dumais, 2008). Notably, psychological theories of well-being do not attend to race or equity directly; however, studies have found linkages between aspects of racial identity and psychosocial well-being. One such study suggests a link between Black Cultural Strength[2] and psychosocial health, an indicator of well-being (Johnson & Carter, 2020).

Our study of CCYA programs emphasizes the connections between youth arts experiences, culture, and well-being. This necessitates an understanding of how broader frameworks identify outcomes that promote well-being for youth in the arts. Extensions of well-being show up through the artistic excellence, creative pathways, and culture sustaining aspects of program

2   In this study, Black Cultural Strength was a latent factor that consisted of Black racial identity, racial socialization, racism-related coping, communalism, and spirituality.

Photo: Sean Means

experiences. Youth and adults in our study spoke at length, both prompted and unprompted, about how these well-being components show up through youth arts programs. For example, one participant from Detroit spoke about achievement, saying:

At the end of the day, [achievement] just feels like a really deep and personal one that's at the root. And then, everything else is evolving around that, like the feeling good and the learning the skill, and the building relationships. But at the end of the day, it's just like, you and your dance, and you and your art and your painting that you made, and you did it.

Artistic excellence and well-being. Achievement as a well-being outcome that occurs through the arts is particularly notable considering the proliferation of literature that investigates academic achievement as an outcome of arts learning (Catterall, 2009; Hetland and Winner, 2004). In contrast, Eisner (1998) situated the arts as a cultural experience with credence and importance on its own, apart from academics. He suggests that we avoid promoting arts learning as relevant for instrumental outcomes (like academic achievement), but instead as offering a framework on the value of achievement in the arts, which is connected to well-being. Similarly, Greene (2013) cautioned against the educational standardization movement, arguing that the arts—which are critical for learning—can't be standardized, and standardization efforts have the effect of burying and pushing arts out of schools (p. 251). Greene (1995) argued that encounters with the arts are the best way to "release the imaginative capacity" for young people (p. 379). Eisner (1998) suggests that, through arts education, youth experience transforming their ideas into art and become more aware of the aesthetic qualities in art and life. He argues that more appropriate outcomes are things like expanded willingness to imagine possibilities, a desire to explore ambiguity, and an ability to recognize and accept multiple perspectives. Eisner and Greene emphasize high-quality arts learning as a critical developmental exercise that broadens one's sense of self, as part of a culture—useful in supporting our understanding of students of color in out-of-school time arts experiences.

Creative pathways and well-being. The Connected Arts Learning framework (Peppler et al., 2023) suggests that arts learning should be interest driven and focused on relationships and should connect youth to future opportunities. The framework is rooted in a community cultural wealth perspective (Yosso, 2005) that recognizes and celebrates the community strengths young people from historically minoritized groups can draw on. Similarly, we suggest that a key aspect of CCYA programs is culture-

Tacoma

Tacoma has multiple city-wide initiatives to support arts and culture through the Office of Arts and Cultural Vitality. One of these is Tacoma Creates, which supports young people in gaining arts, culture, heritage, and science experiences. Government support for arts education reflects Tacoma's history, with the theater district constructed in the early 20th century, housing a large array of companies, such as the Working Class Theater. Tacoma is also home to the Tacoma Art Museum established in the early 20th century, the Tacoma Opera, Youth Symphony, and Puget Sound Revels, an organization focused on communal and participatory theater.

While Tacoma continues to grow in cultural and arts local programming, low-income communities of color still experience lack of access to the arts. One program leader explained:

You name a center, we have it for different types of groups in Tacoma. On the other side of that, on the flipside is that Tacoma is outwardly not a segregated city, but it is, and it's segregated by finances and by skin color, if we're honest. People who live in most marginalized communities don't have access to get to these cultural centers, so we had to have people who are willing to go into their communities and make a difference.

centeredness—i.e., drawing on cultural wealth to provide arts history, forms, and experiences. Whereas the Connected Arts Learning framework is general about setting, we define CCYA programs as community-based youth development spaces, which have a role in larger learning ecosystems. Our definition of CCYA emphasizes artistic excellence, both as a motivating aim and as a learning context. Aligned with Connected Arts Learning, such experiences utilize relationships and tap into young people's interests.

Culture sustaining and well-being. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) is a strengths-based framework that supports our understanding of optimal learning and engagement for youth of color in U.S. schools. Though we focus on community-based settings, we draw from this framework, as it is relevant for learning through the arts. Culture and art are inextricably connected. All learning is a cultural experience (Nasir et al., 2020). Therefore, culture is an important anchor for learning in the arts for youth of color. Referring specifically to Black-Centered arts as a form of culture-sustaining arts learning, Akiva et al. (2024) wrote: "To 'center' Black arts… (1) is a means to intentionally recognize culturally specific forms music, dance, and other creative expressions that signify the Black experience; (2) privileges the inclusion and representation of Black people in any artistic endeavor" (p. 637). Based on Chicana culture, Folklórico dance has been described as a tool for empowerment that supports youth's critical consciousness, addresses historical oppression, and centers culture and well-being (Salas, 2017; Torres, 2022). Student experiences in culturally sustaining programs likely support identity coherence and affirmation, as youth are allowed to be seen in their cultural identities. Experiences that enhance cultural identity are humanizing and promote well-being for people of color (Johnson & Carter, 2020).

In sum, the PERMA well-being framework (Seligman, 2018) provides an overarching understanding of psychosocial well-being and its relevance to the experience of young people in CCYA programs. Eisner (1998) and Greene (2013) underpin our understanding of high-quality arts learning. The Connected Arts Learning Framework (Peppler et al., 2023) corroborates the value of creative pathways in arts learning ecosystems. The Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy approach (Paris, 2012) contributes to our centering of culturally sustaining learning through the arts. These interconnected frameworks lay a foundation for our understanding of youth well-being in the context of culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs.

Photo: Sean Means

Characteristics of CCYA Programs

Over the course of 18 months, our research team engaged in a multi-method study of culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs. Our study aim was to better understand and describe CCYA programs. Through conversations with youth, teaching artists, program leaders, and community leaders, we were able to capture a clear image of what well-being looks like in these thriving creative communities. We draw from these concepts in our grounded theory on well-being and well-becoming through the arts. A program leader in Detroit said:

> *Art provides some freedom that perhaps may not be explicit in some other fields. It pushes this aspect of creativity and that at least the way we frame it, that self-expertise, so that it's not about measuring up to these particular artificial standards. It's about exploration and joy and leaning into the creativity and that experience. I think that's important, because when you think about well-being, you want to feel confident, you want to feel knowledgeable, everybody wants to feel like they have a purpose or they have value—things like that.*

Community-based programs that integrate arts learning and culture-centeredness serve as unique developmental contexts for youth of color. The stories of youth, teaching artists, program leaders, and community leaders informed what we identified as characteristics of CCYA programs. In this report, we explain how each CCYA component contributes to the characteristics of community-based programs that foster engagement in the arts for youth of color. Based on our conceptualization of CCYA programs, we identified that:

- High-quality arts learning nurtures artistic skill and cultivates creative restoration to coach and support youth toward a more grounded and developed version of themselves.

- Community-based youth programs establish artful sanctuaries, foster generative connections, and highlight meaningful pathways—creating a foundation of safety and healthy relationships between youth and their broader community networks, all of which can propel youth into adulthood opportunities.

- Culture-centeredness promotes cultural visibility and emphasizes equity intentionality to support equitable access and positive change.

Well-being and Well-becoming Through the Arts: A Picture of Mattering for Youth of Color

Well-being and, as an extension, well-becoming occur through program structures and youth experiences that prepare youth as active and thoughtful future citizens in their communities. Taken together, these processes appear to support learning and youth development for youth of color to experience opportunities to matter as they develop into more confident and connected versions of themselves.

Table 2. Culture-Centered, Community-Based Youth Arts Program Characteristics that Promote Well-Being

High-Quality Arts Learning	1. **Nurture Artistic Skill:** Programs provide creative communities where youth can develop skill and confidence in an art form of interest under the training of skilled and invested teaching artists.
	2. **Cultivate Creative Restoration:** Programs use arts to engage youth's minds and bodies in creative expressions that allow them to heal and rejuvenate as they experience feelings of joy, centeredness, and flow, while disconnecting from stressful or challenging realities in school and in life.
Community-Based Youth Programs	3. **Establish Artful Sanctuaries:** Programs create sanctuaries in which youth connect in relationship with artistically oriented peers and caring, artistically skilled adults.
	4. **Foster Generative Connections:** Programs foster connections to neighborhood and community assets that provide avenues to perform/exhibit art, network, collaborate, and share resources.
	5. **Highlight Meaningful Pathways:** Programs establish youth's future possible selves through identifying and highlighting various arts-connected and non-arts-connected pathways into adulthood, in support of becoming an adult who appreciates and values the arts.
Culture-Centeredness	6. **Promote Cultural Visibility:** Programs center racial and ethnic ways of being that acknowledge, affirm, and celebrate the past, present, and future of people of color, which connects youth to something bigger than themselves.
	7. **Emphasize Equity Intentionality:** Programs use intentional efforts to disrupt systemic racial and economic barriers limiting access to meaningful arts experiences for youth of color, while using arts to promote equity and justice.

Oakland/Bay Area

The city of Oakland has a multi-ethnic and cultural community with, according to one community leader, a "history of [the] community [being] entrenched in its art." There are many art galleries and cultural institutions, such as the Bedford Gallery, and an array of street murals featuring local artists. In addition, the city is home to museums dedicated to preserving and showcasing African, Italian, and Asian American arts, among others. According to program leaders, the general Oakland community is dedicated to the arts and supports it through funding. For example, according to a program leader:

… We have the DCYF, Department, Children, Youth and Families. They're one of our biggest funders and one of most of these programs.… However, this funding source can be 'precarious,' thus many organizations come together to strategize and advocate for more cultural and arts funding at the city level.

Oakland also faces some challenges. One leader explains that there is a "geographic split between North Oakland versus East Oakland versus West Oakland, and East Oakland and West Oakland are more similar … but it's hard to get from one community to another." As a result, some art and cultural program providers may move with the communities they serve, especially with the economic challenges, as the leader went on to say: "I can't live in Oakland. I couldn't afford a place in Oakland as a single mom. That's real. A lot of our families are having to move out."

1. Nurture Artistic Skill

CCYA programs seek to nurture artistic skill through high-quality arts learning as a method of bringing youth potential to light. This most prominent process emphasizes the importance of wrapping youth in an environment of professional teaching artists, real-world learning scenarios, and intentional coaching that fosters the confidence to grow through creative risk-taking. This is led by a strength-based approach by program staff who recognize a youth's potential and engage youth in a dedicated relationship of accountability. One program leader from Chicago said:

Again, a lot of the work that I feel that we do at [program name] is really getting to the root around what does success look like, what does excellence look like, and how do we push you beyond, and recognize when you're saying you did your best.… I also have to work with my instructors (teaching artists) to say, 'Okay, you're a professional. You dance professionally. They (the youth) are not. So somehow how do we rethink to get them to do what it is that you want them to do and to fully engage them so that we have their trust, we have their buy-in, and they're willing to go all the way for us?'

Participants also recognized the efforts their programs put toward facilitating learning. One youth from Atlanta said:

… I always enjoyed playing my instrument and felt content to play during school hours. And [program name] allowed me to play more often, and it allowed me to play music that I haven't played before. And it's not too rigorous such that it's like a chore to learn, but it's still enough that I feel like I'm being challenged.

Across each artistic discipline, participating youth expressed how difficult moments were met with encouragement and support from caring teaching artists and staff. This support, grounded in healthy relationships and mentorship, engages youth's inner confidence to push through creative discomfort as a resilience practice. Done in repetition, this cycle of challenge-perseverance-accomplishment appears to create the confidence needed to perform at a high level. Standards of excellence appear to vary across disciplines, though many programs emphasize the importance of youth simply doing their best and staying committed to the process. Programs exemplify a mix of techniques, including an emphasis on targeted progress within a specific discipline, exposure to a broad spectrum of techniques, and grouping youth based on ability, not grade level. As youth shared group experiences that often culminated in a final recital, exhibition, or client deliverable, participants appeared to gain confidence and resilience as a transferable skill they might access beyond their creative disciplines. One program leader from Atlanta said:

A lot of our performances are free for the community.… We want our kids to have an experience to perform. And the more they do it, the more confident they get through the process because we still have kids that get nervous.… So our idea was that the more they do it, the easier it gets.

2. Cultivate Creative Restoration

Additionally, programs appeared to cultivate creative restoration through arts participation, as many youth recounted experiencing positive feelings that were joyful, and rejuvenating compared to non-arts learning environments, such as school settings. At CCYA programs, learning is fun, and youth are emotionally engaged in the process of creating. This depiction of an enjoyable arts learning environment intentionally guided the opportunity for youth to authentically, creatively express themselves. Also related to high-quality arts learning, programs are a creative home away from home that nurtures creative skill development. One youth from Washington, D.C., noted, "You can just come somewhere and clear your head for a few hours and just detox from everything." Art engagement supports positive emotions. Doing art within the contexts of relationships built through culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs was especially powerful.

In some cases, restoration happens through embodied experiences in the arts. This is especially true with dance programs, which inherently contribute to physical wellness and restoration. A youth in Louisville said, "When I dance … it clears my mood just because I like [dancing.] [And] it also is good for your [physical] health." Young people in this study often described arts as being an outlet or a source of release. Many specifically contrasted their experiences in CCYA programs with the stressful experiences felt while in school. For example, one participating youth said:

I see myself … honestly, I'm really proud of myself, because I found something that I love to do really young, and many people don't know what they love yet, or what they want to do. And I'm lucky that I found it when I was young, and I can actually do something with it, like a program like this, and do something with it and express myself. And I look forward to it every summer … because during school I have no time. I was stressed out, and I didn't paint anything, and I didn't make art until I had break, like Winter break, or like Spring break, and I did something then. But this helps it a lot, and helps me be creative and do something I like.

Photo: Sean Means

Creative restoration is unique to experiences in the arts. A youth from Oakland described it by saying:

> [B]ecause a lot of things that we do … are forms of art [they] are very calming to do. It depends on the form of art, and everybody's different, but … it's a lot less stressful than a lot of other things that you could be doing.

3. Establish Artful Sanctuaries

Programs seek to establish artful sanctuaries, as they are intentionally designed as an affirming, positive, and uplifting space for youth to feel safe. This sense of safety is often named as the foundation for many other experiences within CCYA programs. For example, creative risk-taking beyond a youth's comfort zone requires a practice of vulnerability. Being vulnerable extends from a sense of safety and trust where youth are affirmed that they can excel beyond their current skill level. One youth participant from Oakland said: "I feel safe and happy and I treat everyone here, like if they're my second family. And I care about most people here more than my real family." Learning new instruments, performing in front of larger audiences, or attending to client demands can make youth feel emotionally exposed. However, the groundwork of a program's feeling of sanctuary entails a protective factor for youth to sit with discomfort and receive the coaching to grow through hard moments. This is also connected to a youth's ability to use creative mediums to explore identity and the world around them. Improvisation through creative expression, in theatrical spaces and beyond, occurs often because youth feel there is no right or wrong way to tell their own stories. As many programs incorporate group performance and exhibition components, youth report growing confidence in expressing themself within a safe, like-minded community of supportive youth and adults. One youth from Chicago said:

> I think something that differentiates this program from others is … how we grow together. So it's like when one person accomplishes something, it's an accomplishment for everybody. We learn harder things together and we're able to advance and experience things as a group and not just as individuals. It's a great support.

Photo: Sean Means

Chicago

Chicago is a richly diverse city with various ethnic and cultural enclaves and neighborhoods, including Chinatown, Little Italy, Greektown, Humboldt Park's Puerto Rican community, and the historical Bronzeville African American neighborhood, among others. Bronzeville was a cultural hub for African American artists, jazz musicians, and vocalists, such as Nat "King" Cole and Louis Armstrong, and was subsequently linked with activism and advocacy, particularly in the 1960s.

Chicago's history and support of the arts continues to have real-life implications today. Some program leaders observe that support for programming at the city level has an incredible impact in providing access to youth. One leader explained:

> … Luckily we have had Mayor Lightfoot going out, has been a big advocate for the arts. She and the state of Illinois have given lots of grant money, which we were blessed to be recipients of some … all the recipients gathered and were honored … Mayor Lightfoot spoke and the deputy mayor spoke and the person … in charge of the budget. And was saying that they're finding new ways now to give to arts and arts education because they really realize the importance of it.

While support for arts education from the city administration has been lauded as excellent, leaders also express similar challenges to other major cities. Specifically, the segregation of communities of color and how this impacts access to funding. According to one leader:

> … We have a very segregated city, and a lot of the city, communities of color are located in certain areas, predominantly. I know the demographics have been changing over time, but ever since I was in college … Chicago's been known to be one of the most segregated cities in the U.S. So, I feel like that might also be reflected in the investment that they have made to the different communities of the city.

Thus from the creation of the Fine Arts Building, in the late 1890s, to the World Music Festival, and the various art, theatre, and music programs serving young people, Chicago continues to be a diverse and ever-expanding cultural hub, and the investment of local leaders, councils, and administrations is reported to be a necessary foundation to its continuation as an arts and culture center.

Stories we heard suggest that peer relationships and the opportunity for creative expression cultivate a sense of belonging that allows youth to feel seen. Student connections, to each other and their art, invite moments of flow, groundedness, and restoration that make their CCYA program a creative haven. A youth from Washington, D.C., said:

I remember I was practicing with two of my friends and I was improvising solo in a solo, and they just let me go and go and go…. One of my teachers would be like, 'You had me break down the song. What is it about? What does this mean to you? What feeling or story have you experienced in your personal life that connects you to this?' And both of my friends knew what it was for me, and they had experienced something similar. So when I was soloing, they were comping. So they were playing along, just helping out, supporting it. And there was times where I would be so into [it], my eyes would be closed, and we were still connected. I could pull from them, they could pull from me. And it was just super locked in. It just felt like we were expressing things that we might not have expressed to anybody before.

Photo: Mark Simpson

When youth get to connect with like-minded peers who share an appreciation for the arts, as well as adults who "get it" and support that passion for creativity, programs can become sanctuaries, defined as youth spaces that are both safe and affirming of identities (Akiva et al., 2017). Sanctuary is a feature of effective youth development spaces; however, artful sanctuaries are unique to youth who experience belonging within the context of creative nurturing.

4. Foster Generative Connection

Community-based youth arts programs seek to foster generative connections between the program, its youth, and the broader community. Community connections and relationship building serve several, overlapping, purposes. First, connections through local and regional partnerships provide access and opportunities for youth to experience new things beyond their typical networks and routines. This occurs through school year or summer program field trips, where youth see their art form exist within practical and professional spaces beyond their program walls. For some programs, off-site excursions serve the purpose of creating products for various clients. For others, field trips are meant to increase the youth's network so they might build relationships with local professionals, resources, or educational opportunities. Second, fostering generative connections serves the purpose of maintaining regular contact with performance and exhibition opportunities. For performance-based programs like music, dance, and theater, these partnerships root their respective disciplines in real-world, pre-

professional experiences. Also related to high-quality arts learning and the CCYA process of nurturing artful skill, regular performances and exhibitions provide the practice, repetition, and critical reflection for youth to grow in confidence and ability. Likewise, family and friends' support to commit to programs can encourage youth to continue their creative journeys. One program leader from Tacoma said:

We had some groups that were performing up to 12 times a semester … for [community] events in schools, museums, social events, festivals, fairs. So a program like that plays an important role for students who are living in a lower income situation. Oftentimes, they live their whole life within one ZIP code…. And so if we can offer programs that'll get kids performing on college campuses or at the Capital of Olympia, which [are] all … things that have happened, we're widening that world.

5. Highlight Meaningful Pathways

Programs seek to highlight meaningful pathways toward well-becoming as a mechanism of supporting youth through sensitive growth periods of creative development. Whether this is a teacher's encouragement to persist through learning a new musical piece, a youth practicing challenging choreography outside of their normal repertoire, or managing client relationships for a creative project—program designs intentionally cultivate transferable skills that can be used beyond and after the program ends. These sensitive moments, and the skills gained through them, are seen as essential to youth development. One youth participant from Chicago commented:

I think it just gives people more…. It opens their eyes more to the opportunities in the field … like if they go into this program, they see, 'I can make a living off of doing graffiti, drawing' … and then they see this, and see how they can do it … properly, and not get in trouble for it. Then they actually try and pursue that. Because … when I came here, I didn't think about how much you can make off of doing graffiti and stuff, until I got more into it and I started to learn, and I was like, 'This is actually fun. But it does take a lot [of], like effort, if you wanted to get successful in it'….

Photo: E.A. Smith

Louisville

The city of Louisville is home to major arts festivals, major dance and performing arts organizations, and independent theaters, and has a rich history of independent and alternative music. While the presence of such organizations reflects Louisville's diverse arts ecosystem, one program leader expresses how the city's "uniqueness … is really the resilience," what encompasses the arts in the city is best viewed through how it engages with the arts in challenging times. Specifically, as a city with a minority population of people of color, one leader told us:

For us to [have] went through all the things that we've went through as a city and to still have an arts space where you really have thriving dance companies or thriving dance studios that are run by people of color, I think that speaks volumes.

Furthermore, the importance of the arts is also present in local initiatives, such as Imagine Greater Louisville 2020. Communities were asked to reimagine the future of the arts in the city, about 500 community members shared their ideas, and five priorities emerged to advance arts and culture in Louisville; these include, among others, access for all and highlighting the rich diversity of the city. Such city support impacts local arts and cultural programs. One leader imagined how the community can support the arts and culture ecosystem for youth:

I think it impacts it, or I think it affects it in a way that could be better. When I look at spaces in areas that I work, they're not always conducive to what we would love to offer. I think things should be more intentional about creating state-of-the-art types of spaces versus renovating 100-year-old buildings that need a new heating system, things like that. I think it's important, and I think it's time for everyone, the city government, philanthropists, to look at supporting in a way that's of quality and not refurbishing.

The majority of the programs we spoke with include an intentional college and/or career component to help youth build identity coherence between current activities and what might be next. Program leaders often emphasize the importance and value of seeing youth for who they are and who they might become, and how the program might contribute to this growth. One program leader from Detroit said:

Strategic partnerships with institutions as well as individuals … help us to both illuminate and then steward young people or walk with young people along those pathways. For example, we have a relationship with the University, and a lot of the young artists have gone there and the faculty kind of knows our organization. And for a long time, there was a theater scholarship for our students. So if they chose to go to the University and pursue theater, then they automatically qualified for a scholarship.

6. Promote Cultural Visibility

CCYA programs also cultivate culture-centeredness and promote racial and ethnic awareness and appreciation, which is important for healthy adolescent development. As learning objectives are rooted in cultural practices, arts learning remains nimble through the incorporation of flexible program structures that reflect the fluid landscape of represented cultures. By using culture keepers from the community to teach creative practices to youth, or hiring teaching artists from communities of color, programs aim to build confidence and comfort around cultural identity. Program leaders describe artistic content as an intentional way of affirming racial and cultural experiences. An illustration of this can be found through disciplines like African drumming, step, or hip-hop, where programs primarily serving Black youth weave culture-specific content reflective of the diaspora. Other programs serving Latino/a youth use native language and historical references to ground performing arts content into ancestral lineages. These types of experiences further support a sense of safety, racial affirmation, and connection to youth's home cultures. One youth from Chicago described experiencing a cultural awakening, noticing how their identity has shifted because of the program. She said:

I just feel closer even to my grandma who passed away. I just feel I'm closer because I get to understand more of our culture because growing up I kind of would shut it down because growing up I was told I was white passing or I was too white or I'm just white to them. But in reality, now I understand my culture.

Racial and ethnic representation is a key feature of identity visibility. In a teaching-artists focus group, a participant stated:

> *It's really important for the kids to see mentors and teachers that they can relate to and people that they can connect with. We have a large Hispanic community, Latino community, and I had one family come up to me and the mom spoke English as a second language. So of course, I was speaking with her in Spanish, and she was telling me how her kids were so happy that they could have someone that gets it.*

Some programs thread the intersectional lenses into learning modules. For example, concepts of adultism, sexism, and gender invite youth to reflect on roles of power and privilege and their individual experiences in the world. In a teaching-artists focus group, a participant said, *"We do a lot of work in looking at power and non-power relationships and using it as a lens to unpack their experiences in sexism and racism and colorism and classism."* Some programs used theatrical dialogue, improv, and discussion to support the social-emotional capacity for youth to transfer program learning into other phases of their lives. The practice of building muscle memory to make "different decisions," having hard conversations, or impacting positive change in the world helps youth build confidence regarding their individual leadership ability and using their voice for social justice.

7. Emphasize Equity Intentionality

CCYA programs emphasize the importance of making sure everyone has an opportunity to participate and intentionally removes barriers to engagement. An intentional emphasis on equity and access is core to cultural sustaining approaches (Paris & Alim, 2014). We consider equity in youth arts with an emphasis on race, resources, and reach (Akiva et al., 2019). In other words, when programs emphasize equity, they consider racialized realities of participants or potential participants, they ensure that resources limitations do not hinder involvement, and they are intentional about trying to reach youth who may not have easy access to a program—instead of waiting for marginalized youth to just show up. Similarly, programs noted an intention to disrupt barriers that might limit access and opportunity to youth of color. This process is related to the mechanism of fostering generative connections with the community, as a program's local relationships cultivate increased access to network resources for their youth.

Photo: Aimee Obidzinski

Detroit

The city of Detroit is a majority African American city, about 80%, with a rich arts history, especially among communities of color. Neighborhoods such as Midtown Sugar Hill have historically hosted musicians from all backgrounds to gather in the 20th century. This neighborhood is also part of a long-term revitalization plan by the National Endowment for the Arts to revitalize city spaces through public art.

This is particularly important, as there is still, according to one community leader "inequity in neighborhoods across the Detroit area." It also includes many music and arts centers, such as the Detroit Institute of Art, which is dedicated to showcasing African American art and is rooted in a history of developing visual artists the early 20th century. Detroit also is known for its musical heritage—Motown Productions featured artists such as Diana Ross, Jackson 5, and The Supremes. The history links to Black identity. One program director said:

> *I think in addition to just being Black…[we tell stories about] Detroit as a whole. We have shows about Motown. We have shows about areas like this Black Bottom, and just other things that have to do with Detroit and Detroit history, and so you get a better sense of pride and understanding in a lot of the things because it's not just, 'Hey, we're going to do a show about this group that was in Motown,' but we actually get to talk to people that are still alive that are from Motown. We actually get to research the areas that we are doing a show about, and so we gain a better understanding of where we came from as Detroiters.*

Presently, the city supports arts and culture through various initiatives, such as Detroit Arts, Culture, and Entrepreneurship (ACE) office, and the YDRC (Youth Development Resource Center). According to one youth program leader:

> *The YRDC has been a huge resource in terms of understanding positive youth development principles and bringing them into our program and assessing the program. That's really been a platform that we've used to build out our practices the past few years.*

Notably, programs were intentional about being accessible to families who have barriers to involvement, whether related to economic disadvantage, language differences, geographic limitations, or other factors. Disrupting barriers was related to a program's ability to create opportunities for youth to access arts experiences despite the realities or marginalization that would otherwise limit access. One example of this is that most programs in our study offer highly reduced, if not cost-free, programming for youth.

One program leader from Oakland said:

There was one mom [who] came in and was interested in one of our classes and I was like, oh, you can go on online and register. She [was] like, "We're living in our car, so I can't really do that." It was just a huge learning opportunity for us to figure out how we [can] allow space in an uplifting way…. We never want someone to feel that they're begging for aid … or begging for a space. We now reserve a number of seats for families who [will] just walk in and that has really worked better and is changing that dynamic of who's at the center again….

Connections between CCYA Characteristics and Well-Being-Related Outcomes

The identified characteristics of CCYA programs represent mechanisms of well-being for youth of color in the arts. As demonstrated through the descriptions of characteristics and accompanying quotes, young people in these programs experience a particular developmental context that affords opportunities for mattering. Stories and program descriptions from youth, teaching artists, and program leaders helped us formulate this picture of well-being through the arts. Our research team engaged in an extensive coding process as we read through 84 transcripts from engagement with over 200 people across 35 programs in eight cities. The quotes in this report represent a small sample of a rich data set of stories and experiences shared by participants. The stories shared were rife with evidence of well-being and well-becoming. Across all programs in our sample, youth, teaching artists, and program directors referred to deep engagement in high-quality arts, relationships between youth, connections between youth and teaching artists, artistic exhibitions, belonging, racial affirmation, racial representation, positive emotions, developmental trajectories, identity processes, and more. Table 3 makes connections between the seven characteristics of CCYA programs, our meaning-making process for the emergence of well-being, and relevant outcomes identified in our framing of CCYA programs (see section 1).

Photo: Sean Means

Table 3. CCYA Program Characteristics and Well-Being-Relevant Outcomes

| Characteristic	Descriptions and Connection to Well-Being-Related Frameworks				
	Description	Psychological Well-Being	Artistic Excellence	Creative Pathways	Culturally Sustaining
Nurture Artistic Skill	CCYA programs support artistic skill development, with requisite opportunities for flow, imagining possibilities, and achievement in arts.	●	●		
Cultivate Creative Restoration	CCYA programs use arts to engage youth's minds and bodies in creative expressions that allow them to heal and rejuvenate as they experience feelings of joy, centeredness, and flow, while disconnecting from stressful or challenging realities in school and in life.	●	●		●
Establish Artful Sanctuaries	CCYA programs are creative communities that prioritize experiencing art together. Spaces functions as a medium for connecting with others and self-exploration, as youth make art with and for their communities. They provide opportunities for cultural belonging.	●		●	●
Foster Generative Connection	CCYA programs facilitate broader community connections, which supports belonging and expose youth to developmental opportunities.	●		●	
Highlight Meaningful Pathways	CCYA programs intentionally provide opportunities to explore future selves, whether in the arts or other relevant pathways that facilitate adulthood transitions.	●		●	
Promote Cultural Visibility	CCYA programs provide opportunities to highlight cultural identities, which promotes meaning and connection to something bigger than oneself.	●			●
Emphasize Equity Intentionality	CCYA programs center experiences and needs of youth in marginalized communities, which promotes feeling seen, valued, and cared for. They also promote social change.	●			●

Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., has a rich history of arts, culture, and heritage. One leader explained:

D.C.'s a great city. It has a lot of good history. I think people think of D.C. as a federal city because everything, the White House, the Capitol, everything's here, but it definitely is a local city and there are great creative and artistic cultures and history.

Washington, D.C., is home to various organizations, such as The Smithsonian, the National Theater, Constitution Hall, and others. However, these arts and culture spaces remained racially segregated throughout the early 20th century. The Howard theater and Shaw neighborhood were spaces for prominent African Americans, and The U Street Corridor center for African American culture was known as Black Broadway. Over the past few decades, the city has seen radical shifts in demographics, having previously been 71% Black or African American in 1970, whereas now that number is only at 41%.

Presently the history, art, and culture of communities of color is represented through various institutions. At the Smithsonian there is now the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Anacostia Community Museum, home of Frederick Douglass, among others. Other communities of color have created spaces for arts and culture through their local neighborhood, such as the Latino community in Columbia Heights, and the Indigenous people of the American Indian Society of Washington, D.C. Also, support for artists of color continues to grow through various initiatives and organizations, such as the Arts Institute for Creative Advancement's apprenticeship for disconnected youth to learn a trade in the technical aspects of theater. One program leader shared how D.C.'s ethnic makeup influences the program's programming and support for youth of color. They said:

[The] thing that's interesting about D.C. is that for a long time it was called Chocolate City because it was majority Black. I think being very interested in and responsive to and supportive of the local Black art and culture, our kids deserve that celebration. So that affects what we offer, how we program, who we hire to teach. … I think that's the answer … that we have to pay really close attention to what our kids want and like.

Photo: E.A. Smith
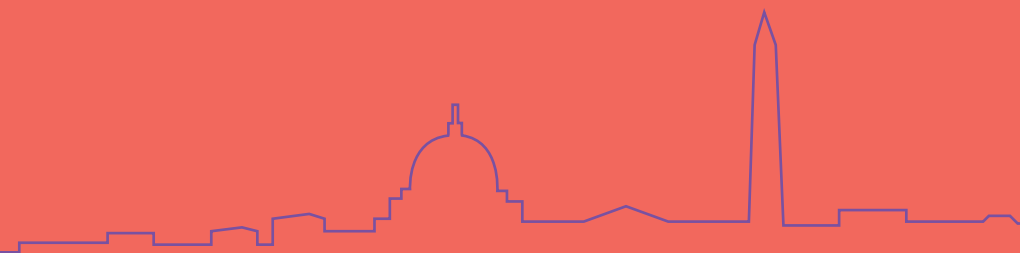
How do ecosystems affect the development and operation of CCYA programs?

As this report has shown, CCYA programs appear to be beneficial to the well-being and well-becoming of participating youth from marginalized communities. How can communities ensure the availability of CCYA programs and support their efforts? In this section, we use a learning and development ecosystem perspective to try to better understand the context in which CCYA programs operate. By ecosystem, we mean the "collection of people, places, and possibilities that constitute an environment full of learning and development opportunities" (Akiva et al., 2022, p. 14). In a biological ecosystem, factors like soil condition, humidity, and temperature can greatly affect the growth and quality of crops. So, too, in a CCYA ecosystem, we wondered what factors would affect the richness of the CCYA program opportunities for young people.

Although an ecosystem can be any size, from microscopic to planetary, we primarily consider the city level—and in this section we sometimes use "community" and "city" interchangeably. We did find some evidence that the neighborhood-level ecosystems are salient. For example, in Atlanta a teaching artist described how a music ecosystem can develop in one neighborhood (musicians live there, instrument repair shop and performance venues are there) and not in another—and youth who don't live in an arts-rich neighborhood may not have any access to these resources. However, given that many initiatives happen at the city level, we focused there. With our focus on CCYA programs, we were attentive to the arts and education sectors, as well as other sectors that may affect youth arts. In short, we sought to understand how the histories, structures, and patterns of the local landscape of each city might affect the evolution and operation of CCYA programs in that city.

For these analyses, we primarily relied on interviews with community leaders representing arts programs, based on the assumption that their roles lend themselves to an ecosystem perspective. That is, their jobs involve working with multiple programs, support organizations, and cross-sector

relationships. Their purview goes beyond individual programs to the CCYA program ecosystem. We sometimes supplement with evidence from focus groups or program leader interviews. Analysis is focused on dimensions of CCYA ecosystems that seemed both important for CCYA programs and that vary across cities. We found the following:

a. Social and cultural histories, including racism and marginalization, shape CCYA programs. Large socio-cultural patterns that aren't necessarily arts-specific, such as gentrification, transportation infrastructure, and regional demographic shifts, along with the contexts of schools and school districts, affect CCYA program development and operation.

b. Support for teaching artists varies across communities. The city ecosystems we investigated varied in how they address teaching artist professional status, supports, and opportunities—which, in turn, has an impact on the whole learning ecosystem.

c. Communities vary in how they address program access. Ecosystems differ in how and the degree to which they make program access visible, and what is in place to help youth and families learn about, get involved in, and get to programs.

d. A healthy ecosystem is diverse. Community leaders valued diversity of programs, emphasizing the importance of having a variety of program types and sizes.

e. Programs and communities are intertwined. Community leaders emphasized the importance of CCYA programs' interactions, noting that communities can support programs, programs can support communities, and programs can network, collaborate, and interact with each other in ways that strengthen the learning ecosystem.

Photo: Sean Means

a. *Social and cultural histories, including racism and marginalization, shape CCYA programs.*

Does the arts history of a community shape the availability and types of arts programs available to youth of color? We found little evidence that it does in direct ways. For example, we thought we might hear statements along the lines of "jazz was big in our city and now we have a lot of jazz programs for youth." We did not, however, find many examples like this in our interviews with community leaders. Rather, community leaders identified socio-cultural patterns or events that shaped CCYA programs but were not specific to youth or arts. Interviewees discussed things like funding, gentrification, and neighborhood changes. Many of these histories were rooted in race, racism, and marginalization; community leaders described CCYA programs existing within historical and ongoing structures of systemic oppression, and how communities respond to these structures. In Detroit, leaders described the impact of having an inadequate transportation infrastructure in a large area. That is, Detroit does not have a subway or elevated rail, and the city is spread out over a large geographic area, making transportation to and from youth programs a continual and significant challenge. In Atlanta, an interviewee noted, "Atlanta is a place of Black entrepreneurship" as a factor affecting CCYA programs. In D.C., the city currently has an illiteracy rate over 30% and has seen sizable demographic shifts over the past few decades (71% Black or African American in 1970 versus 41% now). Such shifts affect the type, nature of, and location of CCYA programs.

Community leaders described how youth programs must navigate changing funding priorities and must be "nimble"; i.e., changing how they describe their programs in response to changes in local funding priorities. Long histories of racism lead to disproportionate funding patterns and struggles for CCYA programs, and communities respond in various ways. One community leader from Louisville spoke about how white-founded organizations for people of color receive more money, "because they had the capacity to receive that funding and get it out there." This community leader went on to say that in response to this issue, a program leader founded a company to support Black-owned nonprofits.

Across the board, community leaders noted the importance of representation among program staff and leadership. This includes an organization's team reflecting the ethnic and cultural identities of youth, professional teaching artists that echo the artistic excellence of current creative industries, and an investment to employ artists from local neighborhoods. This combination of values helps maintain healthy adult-youth mentorship that builds trust and social belonging. One interviewee said, "I think it's key that the participants, the youth in the program, see someone who looks like them or like their family in a position of leadership and success and authority."

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It can be difficult to identify direct links between specific historical events or patterns and the development or operation of CCYA programs, but such links likely exist. In Tacoma, an interviewee noted that they "sit on Puyallup Tribe land, so there's a whole rich culture of arts that sits and comes just specifically from that." This interviewee went on to describe the influence of a local military base before she continued:

> ... *We have a lot of folks that are coming in and out of our space that bring that culture and that creative arts piece with them.... Whether that's through dance, theater. Whether it's through art, psych, visual arts, or spoken word, or entertainment. It shows up in so many different ways. So I would say yes, that's unique. One, it's embedded in our culture and the land we sit on. Number two, we have a lot of folks that come in and out of our space just through the military that bring some culture with them too.*

Finally, a key part of social and cultural histories is the school and school district(s) context, which came up again and again for its key role in the evolution of CCYA programs in an area. For example, community leaders in Detroit noted that the nature of the public school district (which experienced bankruptcy and state control for decades) affects the development and operation of CCYA programs. A Chicago interviewee referred to Chicago Public Schools (CPS) as "a huge vendor" for youth arts programs. This interviewee went on to say that "CPS, over the years, has deprioritized the school-based funding for ... all the enrichment stuff. Very neoliberally, you have, then, all the [community-based organizations] filling that gap, as vendors to CPS, providing ... structured art opportunities within the school." He emphasized that this did not lead to youth coming to youth programs but to teaching artists working within school classrooms. Interviewees described the impact of school closings (which can both negatively and positively affect participation in CCYA programs). In general, across city ecosystems, interviewees described youth programs operating in a market environment, responding to needs and filling in gaps.

Implication: CCYA advocates should help CCYA programs respond to racism, marginalization, and community-specific needs like transportation. Community leaders can help CCYA programs work with the local schools and school district landscapes.

Newark/Paterson

Paterson and Newark are ethnically diverse cities, Paterson's population is more than 60% Hispanic/ Latinx, and Newark is almost 50% African American. Newark is known for its history of arts and culture, in particular the emergence of jazz. It is home to The Newark Museum of Art, Newark Symphony Hall, and Arts High School, major influences in early 20th century arts and culture in the city. Paterson is also home to arts and culture centers, such as the Paterson Museum and the Wellmont Theater. It is also home to many community-based arts and music programs; however, according to one program leader, one of the challenges is that "[t]hey are very scattered." However, leaders find support from individuals at local schools: "The reason we're in the school that we're in is because the public school music teacher there is very supportive of us. It's an important relationship with us. Actually, we're very lucky we have a formal relationship," one leader explains.

Furthermore, major universities and their corresponding arts and music programs provide access for youth and individuals to engage in culture and the arts. For example, one program partners with a local university to support youth in the arts, and said:

> *We partnered with the college because they also have a Cali Pathway Project, which is opportunity for underrepresented youth to be fully supported in their musical development and receive a full tuition scholarship to the John J. Cali School of Music at Montclair State.*

b. Support for teaching artists varies across communities.

The ways a community supports teaching artists, both financially and professionally, was an area of focus for most community leaders.

One community leader emphasized the importance of full-time roles/wages for teaching artists being connected to their retention. Several program leaders echoed this point, for example, one said:

[We work] really hard to make sure that our teaching staff is receiving a fair and competitive wage. There's a lot of things that will drive people out of being teaching artists and into other careers, because you can make more money doing other things. It can be hard to do part-time work in just the afternoons. So we're always trying to find ways to keep our wages competitive and to add additional work in the non-afterschool hours so that working for us is more sustainable for someone, and that's a really challenging thing. So basically serving the students by better serving the instructors

Several community leaders emphasized the importance of professional development for teaching artists as something that can be offered community wide. For example, one described providing support for teaching artists to participate in a statewide professional learning initiative, or supporting their attendance at local conferences about arts learning and/or youth development.

In teaching-artists focus groups, participants identified several items that inform the experience of being a teaching artist and their professional needs. First, many described the artistic skill-building they do with young people as a core aspect of their work. For example, a teaching artist described violin instruction: "I help them with their skills in terms of performing, which is proper bow hold, just the fundamentals and note reading, and to perform comfortably the rhythm and the tone all at the same time…." Second, teaching artists described the importance of helping youth develop both well-being in general and critical consciousness specifically. For example, one stated, "We do a lot of work in looking at power and non-power relationships and using it as a lens to unpack their experiences in sexism and racism and colorism and classism." Community-wide professional development for teaching artists might include both how to teach art (i.e., what Shulman [1986] called pedagogical content knowledge) and how to support well-being and critical consciousness development.

Implication: Teaching artists are the engines of CCYA programs and their health (financial, professional, artistic) determines the health of programs. CCYA advocates should work to ensure that teaching artists have the wages, benefits, and professional supports they need to keep CCYA program strong.

c. Communities vary in how they address program access.

Program access involves how youth and families learn about, enroll or get involved in, and get to programs.

Communities vary in how youth or families learn (or do not learn) about program offerings. Some, for example, have online citywide program finder platforms; others do not. Schools and teachers can also play an important role in helping children, youth, and families know about relevant opportunities. One community leader from Louisville said:

I mean, I think honestly, word of mouth, a lot. I think for folks who spend a lot of time in a community center, that's how they find out about things like whether it's happening in the community center; it's a flyer that's been shared in that environment. There's a lot of sharing of information, informal sharing of information, in that way.

Transportation was mentioned by multiple interviewees as a key aspect of program access. This often arises in research about out-of-school time (see Afterschool Alliance, n.d.). Lack of a strong city public transportation infrastructure, for example, can prevent youth from accessing programs. One community leader from Atlanta said, "So things like transportation and so forth. Those are the stronger programs that understand there might be barriers to access beyond just money." How a community addresses program access—and the intentionality of these efforts—can make a big difference for the health of CCYA programs.

Photo: Sean Means

Cost of attendance is also an important factor that can be a barrier to program access. Most CCYA programs we studied had some sort of subsidization options for the cost of attendance (e.g., through foundation grants), as the true cost often exceeds what families can pay—especially if teaching artists are paid a competitive wage.

Finally, communities vary in their intentionality around identifying neighborhoods or areas with limited access. Some of this connects to the social and cultural histories described in the first finding in this section. For example, focus group participants described how arts organizations (that may offer CCYA programs) often evolve in arts districts or neighborhoods with an arts ecosystem. Other neighborhoods then have fewer programs.

Implication: CCYA advocates should support efforts to make programs visible, such as program-finder efforts. They should also support efforts to identify and reduce community-wide and neighborhood-specific barriers to participation.

Photo: Sean Means

d. *A healthy ecosystem is diverse.*

A healthy CCYA ecosystem includes a diversity of program types and sizes—two factors that go hand in hand. Cities that have diverse types enable some programs to deeply specialize in an artform or arts education strength. Cities that have diverse program sizes (rather than most of the resources being taken up by large programs or cultural organizations) are also able to provide a wide range of options for young people who are arts curious or interested in deepening arts learning is specific areas.

Community leaders often extolled the virtues of diverse types of arts programs in their cities. For example, in response to an invitation to describe the landscape of arts programs that serve youth of color, a community leader from Detroit said, "I feel like it's a pretty robust and diverse landscape. And when I say diverse, I mean everything from [a street dance academy] to…a poetry organization." Another from Tacoma responded similarly: "I would describe the landscape as pretty rich, diverse when it comes to the type of [art programs]. Tacoma's a very creative community already just in general. And a lot of that does come from because we have a very diverse culture of folks that are in this space."

Community leaders valued small programs for their ability to be nimble and large programs for their capacity. Capacity was valued as it impacted an organization's ability to serve youth through the number of disciplines offered or the number of program locations throughout each city. Organizations with greater capacities can hire more artists and offer the economic impact of full- or part-time employment. They also can exist in multiple locations in community spaces or within school buildings. A greater operational capacity makes a program more accessible, reducing transportation challenges or reaching a greater number of youth where they live or learn. Having larger programs in a community allows smaller, more specialized programs to exist and be responsive to community needs.

Implication: Although it is easy for community funding to end up with large arts organizations (who have infrastructures that support fundraising), CCYA advocates should work to ensure support for small and large programs and a diversity of program types.

Atlanta

Atlanta has many arts and culture-specific organizations, programs, and events. One program leader explains,

… Atlanta, I think this is one of the most thriving arts-based communities. This city is very rich in the arts, very rich. And I think we have one of the largest arts foundations in the state and in the region in the south….

These include high-ranking performance venues and theaters, such as the landmark Fox Theatre and the Ray Charles Performing Arts Center at Morehouse College. Atlanta also has a vast selection of diverse galleries and libraries, such as the Apex Museum and Auburn Avenue Research Library, focused on the dissemination and preservation of African American history and culture. The city has also been at the center of major dance and music developments, especially in jazz, blues, hip-hop, soul, and other artistic heritage associated with communities of color. This artistic heritage is visible through the various youth-serving arts and culture-based programs, which include music, arts, and dance.

However, while there is rich history of art and culture in Atlanta, program leaders have observed significant disparities in access for youth of color. This is particularly poignant, as more than 60% of Atlanta identifies as a person of color. One program leader candidly explained:

Why is it that 85% of our kids are African American? And if you go on the north side, it's the opposite where you might have 85% of the kids are Caucasian. And so what is the opportunity that we are providing for these families? And what is going to be your approach to not just being there and teaching, but also going above and beyond? Because you know that our families really need that … I think that the landscape is, there is a landscape. I know that I'm not the only Black person that decided that it would be nice for Black youth to have arts programming or cultural programming.

e. *Programs and communities are intertwined.*

Community leaders described both program-community interaction and program-to-program networking and collaboration.

Community leaders described strong programs as both contributing to and benefiting from their local neighborhoods or communities. For example, many CCYA programs contribute to their local geographic community by offering performances or exhibitions. Some create public art like murals. And programs that are embedded in a community contribute in larger ways over time. For example, one community leader from Louisville mentioned how youth graduate from programs and are starting their own branch program, with support of the established one.

Community leaders also noted that bonds between organizations were important. These norms around community connectedness and around program leader networking are dimensions that a city coordinating body can affect. One community leader who feels that there is not strong cohesion among organizations in their city noted the importance of organizations working together and wishes that there would be more collaboration.

Finally, community leaders also described how programs can work together to provide a network of support for young people; i.e., what Osher et al. (2020) refer to as a "web of support." Their descriptions of networks extended from more formal relationships with the school each youth attended to more informal networks with the youth's families. For example, one program leader described this as follows:

They go to school, but they're plugged into my afterschool program.… They might be cousins [with program staff], they live in the community. You're going to run into them. They're not all these people that you just can't touch or you just can't imagine being able to connect with. The strength of being able to impact young people is how you engage them in their own community.

Implication: CCYA advocates should support opportunities for program adults to network, celebrate teaching artists, and meet to develop collaborations. Advocates can also recognize the importance of community embeddedness for CCYA programs and support efforts that strengthen program-community ties.

The Complete Picture: Mattering Through the Arts

Youth of color have distinct developmental needs that ideally lead them to engage in opportunities that support traditional notions of youth thriving (Lerner, 2005; Benson, 2007), affirm their marginalized cultural identities (McGee, 2019), and avoid the obstacles that systemic inequities often place in their path through education systems that are not built for them to thrive (Love, 2019b). One unfortunate consequence of inequitable systems is that youth of color are less likely to experience arts learning opportunities in their schools (Morrison et al., 2022; Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). Because the arts are central to culture and represent important learning capacities that enhance development (Eisner, 1998), arts opportunity gaps are detrimental to the development of youth of color. Fortunately, community-based programs provide arts learning experiences that can support youth development and provide culturally centered experiences that can enhance identity development for youth of color (Akiva at al., 2024). This study lays the groundwork for a conceptualization of such spaces as culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs to support development through the arts for youth of color.

CCYA programs integrate high-quality arts learning, community-based youth development practices, and culturally sustaining approaches to provide rich arts learning experiences that center the identities and experiences of youth of color. Through conversations with youth, teaching artists, program leaders, and community leaders, our research team captured the stories of such programs. The stories communicated the unique importance of CCYA programs for youth of color. At their core, these spaces allow young people to be connected in creative community and learn skills through the arts, all while being meaningfully affirmed in their cultural identity. The seven characteristics of CCYA programs that we identified support enhanced well-being through the arts, specifically for youth of color.

CCYA programs afford youth of color an opportunity to belong, to be seen, and ultimately to become. Aligned with Montgomery's (2016) conceptualizations of creative youth development, these programs combine skill building in the arts with the development of life skills that facilitate a successful transition into adulthood. Experiencing CCYA supports well-being and well-becoming, positively contributing to youth's current state and helping youth identify pathways to future possible versions of themselves. The number of hours and amount of resources CCYA programs put into

serving youth and communities of color represent a strong commitment to enhancing equity. Descriptions of well-being in CCYA programs resonated with both positive youth development theories and critical perspectives that enhance power for marginalized youth. Relationships were central in these youth development spaces. Youth told us they felt positive emotions while connecting with peers and caring adults and doing art. Words like joy, flow, and happiness defined the feelings of engagement in the arts. Participants experienced an excitement that kept them engaged in programs, often multiple times per week and over many years. Feelings of (non-academically connected) achievement emerged as an essential artifact of arts engagement. Through developing skills, youth experienced confidence, which enhanced a sense of accomplishment and significance.

Importantly, programs were intentional in seeing race, which enhanced meaning for arts-involved youth. Affirmation, representation, and opportunities to create change emerged as culturally sustaining elements that supported well-being and well-becoming. When youth experience well-being and well-becoming in culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs, the result is a sense of mattering. Mattering is feeling valued by self and others (Marshall, 2001). It is a sense of significance or importance (Elliott et al., 2004). Mattering is the opposite of marginality. Experiences of mattering shape youth's understanding of their role in the world and influence their self-concept and ideas of who they might become (Marshall, 2001).

Our ecosystem exploration situated CCYA programs across diverse landscapes representing various regions of the U.S. In each of the unique city ecosystems, socio-cultural and historical elements laid a foundation for the emergence and development of CCYA programs. Important non-arts factors, such as funding and neighborhood features, shaped the contours of programs in the cities. Racial realities emerged not only as a feature of these ecosystems, but also as a motivator for the existence of the programs. Programs we studied were unapologetic in their mission to provide opportunities in the arts for youth of color. The lack of arts programming in schools made them necessary and central parts of the out-of-school time scene. Race was central in having teaching artists representative of youth, culturally centered arts taught in programs (e.g., folkloric dance, spoken word), and curricular content of programs highlighting people of color across various genres of art. Variation in key dimensions across ecosystems also emerged, related to teaching-artist opportunities and supports, program access, organizational capacity, and community embeddedness.

Through our research engagements, we heard stories about how programs were life-changing for many young people. We also heard from and about teaching artists, who are the engine of these programs. We took a broad approach with this study, which allowed us to observe a diversity of

Photo: Sean Means

Well-being and Well-becoming Through the Arts: A Picture of Mattering for Youth of Color

programs across art forms and explore many aspects of CCYA programs. However, we just scratched the surface of the important roles these may play for youth development.

Important research questions for future studies emerged.

- What draws youth to participate—and how might more youth have access to what can be powerful experiences?

- How do arts and culture intertwine over months and years to shape identity development?

- To what degree might art-fueled well-being serve as a protective factor for young people experiencing obstacles and marginalization?

- How can teaching artists be better supported to nurture youth in these programs?

- How might the city-level levers we identified be utilized to enhance arts ecosystem health in a city?

- Our study took place in eight urban environments; how might CCYA programs in suburban or rural communities be similar or different?

- Lastly, our research did not uncover meaningful differences across art forms and their connection to well-being, but differences might be uncovered with another research approach. Are there differences in art forms and their connections with well-being?

Based on our findings, **our recommendation is for CCYA programs to get more attention—in research, policy, funding, and practice, and for increased support of teaching artists.** CCYA programs clearly serve an important role in today's learning and development ecosystems. Teaching artists, like most out-of-school professionals, are generally underpaid, leading to high turnover and likely a dilution of program strengths. It's critical to find ways to elevate these programs and teaching artists.

The opportunity to be seen. To be centered, not marginalized. The opportunity to grow and develop creative skills. The chance to feel a sense of accomplishment in something as beautiful as the arts. The chance to imagine a more humanizing and just society through the arts. These are all connected to well-being and well-becoming. Through our engagements with the programs in this study, we saw unmistakable images of youth who were seen, heard, and known. Through this research, it was clear that culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs are communicating the message of mattering to youth of color and using the arts to amplify that message.

Pittsburgh-based programs were photographed for this report. Photos do not represent programs in the study.

Alumni Theater Company—ATC operates a year-round program providing talented Black youth in grades 6-12 with high quality performing arts training and a platform to express their ideas. Addressing racism is integral to their work and members are passionate about using their art to be heard. ATC is a space free from stereotypes and otherism, where members can openly share their experiences growing up as Black teens in Pittsburgh, and in turn create art that speaks to their peers and the community at large. [Theater]

https://www.alumnitheatercompany.org/   Photos by: Mark Simpson

Hill Dance Academy Theatre—HDAT's mission is to provide professional level training in Black Dance traditions, history, culture, and aesthetics that engages and empowers students to pursue careers in Black dance, has remained the core focus and intentionally drives the curriculum, programs, performance and development of faculty and students. A culturally responsive arts ecology and the holistic approach to the arts is designed to engage, serve, and provide opportunities to students who aspire to careers on the concert stage. Throughout the year HDAT offers students opportunities to attend outside performances, conferences and festivals, travel and perform locally and nationally. HDAT focuses on dance teachings and studies steeped in a learning environment that supports the discipline of dance, and the development of the dance body while linking Black cultural traditions and history to excellence in preparation and performance. [Dance]

https://www.5678hdat.org/   Photos by: E.A. Smith

Sankofa Village For the Arts—SVA is a community-based, cultural arts organization in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania that serves predominantly African Americans. They deliver culturally responsive, African-centered programs and services to children and youth, parents and families, and community members, including professional groups, arts organizations, and practitioners in the creative and performing arts. Focusing on African and African American contributions, history, and culture, SVA has experienced early success in its outreach to Pittsburgh's African and African American communities. [Dance, Music]

https://www.sankofavillage.org/   Photos by: Sean Means

The Legacy Arts Project, Inc.—The LAP's mission is to preserve, promote, and create Africana arts that honor the history, heritage, and cultures of Africa diaspora in ways that advance healing and wellness, education, and community empowerment. The project founder, Linda 'Imani' Barrett, wanted to bring together artists from the community to gather and share in expression. The LAP has been a space used to cultivate and share a variety of art forms bringing the community together to grow. [African Drum, Dance, Theater, Spoken-word, Visual Arts, etc.]

https://legacyartsproject.org/   Photos by: Sean Means

Level-Up Studios—Level Up Studios is Pittsburgh's only Hip Hop/ Street Dance Exclusive dance and creative arts studio. Level Up focuses on enriching the educational and artistic experiences of youth and teen learners along with adult practitioners looking to strengthen their skills, knowledge, and confidence. With a passion for community reinvestment, Level Up Studios aims to make art, music, and movement accessible in life, not just in the classroom by offering reduced-price programs and scholarships for youth learners in low-income communities, and by partnering with other youth-serving organizations. [Hip Hop/Street Dance, Audio Recording Services, etc.]

https://www.leveluppgh.com/   Photos by: Aimee Obidzinski

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