

Designing Youth Arts Programs in Communities of Color: Building Blocks for Practitioners

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

What are Culture-Centered Community-Based Youth Arts (CCYA) programs?

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. CCYA programs have the following three components.

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 intentionally promotes practices that uplift and promote the histories and cultures of youth in programs.

Artistic excellence is the idea of art that flows from a deep commitment to the chosen craft. It implies going beyond exposure or entry-level to sustained involvement and learning over time. As art appreciation is subjective and people can differ in their views of what is excellent, the phrase is used here to reflect a goal of doing art well, developing skill, creativity, and innovation.

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.

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

Nurture Artistic Skill

Programs provide creative communities that develop skill and confidence in the arts.

Cultivate Creative Restoration

Programs engage youth's minds and bodies in creative expressions that promote positive emotions.

Establish Artful Sanctuaries

Programs create sanctuaries for connection with artistic peers and adults.

Foster Generative Connections

Programs engage deeply with broader communities through performance and resource sharing.

Highlight Meaningful Pathways

Programs support pathways into becoming an adult who appreciates and values the arts.

Promote Cultural Visibility

Programs acknowledge, affirm, and celebrate the past, present, and future of people of color.

Emphasize Equity Intentionality

Programs disrupt racial and economic barriers to arts experiences for youth of color.

How can I support youth in culture-centered, community-based youth arts programs?

Youth arts program leaders, teaching artists, and others might consider the following approaches to cultivate culture-centered, community-based youth arts.

1. Practice consistent artistic mentorship.

Teaching artists should intentionally cultivate youth' creative skills. Artists who are relevant in their craft can bring creative insights into their relationships with arts learners. This intentionality in cultivating skills can build trust. When youth artists build trust in healthy student-mentor relationships, they can be more authentic during their creative process.

2. Hold space for creative play and relaxation.

Programs can offer open invitations for students to enjoy creating without feeling rushed. Art provides space for youth to decompress and feel comfort and release. Emphasize process over product with "open studio time," where students laugh, rest, socialize, or get lost in their creative processes. Build in opportunities for youth to enjoy the arts outside of the pressure of performance or critique.

3. Encourage belonging and care.

Develop joint community agreements with staff and students, providing a framework for shared beliefs in a trusting community. In addition to framing art studio expectations, community

agreements reinforce a sense of belonging by naming collective care for all youth a program priority. This helps make a program feel like what many young people call their "home away from home".

4. Be a bridge to local resources.

Youth thrive when programs connect with neighbors, organizations, and local assets, providing avenues to network and collaborate with the broader community. This can include keeping neighbors and local organizations informed of program activities, sharing resources, or co-hosting performances for new audiences. Students begin to expand their horizons as they are exposed to new experiences, new people, and opportunities for real-world learning.

5. Help youth move toward a future possible self.

Programs should provide opportunities for youth to explore college and career possibilities. The youths' future may or may involve a profession in the arts. Help students envision their future selves and craft a personal roadmap towards that end goal. Provide opportunities for students to write their own narrative identities through exposure to future possibilities.

6. Celebrate cultural identities and histories.

Promote cultural visibility by allowing students to see themselves and their cultural identities in the program staff, community relationships,



program themes, and curriculum content. Racial and ethnic programming should not be additive but embedded in the program's curriculum. Emphasize and celebrate historical and contemporary contributions of cultural groups reflected in the program while also giving adequate attention to the cultural needs and priorities of families of the program community. Such practices can help students feel more connected to their identities and home culture.

7. Invite youth voice in the pursuit of change.

Practitioners should invite youths' perspectives on relevant social and cultural issues of the day. The arts serve as a cultural archive for how civilizations navigate challenging social issues over time. Support youth in allowing their craft to name and express opinions about the current racial, social, and economic conditions. Welcome exploration of this critical analysis and enable students to feel seen and heard through artistic selection, guest performance, community activism, or meaningful conversations.

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