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Arts Participation as a Context for Youth Purpose

HEATHER MALIN

Stanford University

This article examines arts participation as a context for youth to develop purpose. Two analyses were conducted of interviews with arts-involved youth to explore the relationship between their arts participation and purpose, which was defined as an “intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and contributes to the world beyond the self” (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003, p. 121). First, a grounded theory analysis examined interviews with 53 arts-involved youth to understand what motivated their arts participation. Relating to others emerged as an important motivation for young artists. Second, a longitudinal analysis examined interviews with 29 arts-involved youth who were interviewed twice over 2 years. Artistic purpose was unstable. Adolescents lost meaning in their artistic activity as they transitioned from school to work, suggesting that purpose development is complicated by the challenge of pursuing an artistic career.

Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to the author at hmalin@stanford.edu

Purpose is why we believe we are here. It involves acting to contribute to the world in personally meaningful ways and, as such, is considered a developmental asset in adolescence (Benson, 1997). The Arts, as personally meaningful pursuits that also have the potential to make an important contribution to society, are a promising domain for adolescents to develop purpose. Despite this potential, arts participation has received limited attention in the literature on adolescent development, and there is very little research that examines the Arts as a context for purpose development in adolescence. The qualitative analyses reported in this article explore adolescent arts participation as a developmental context, with a particular focus on the relationship between arts participation and purpose development.

Purpose in Adolescence

Adolescence is a time when individuals begin to seek meaning in life (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1983) and set life goals (Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008; Nurmi, 1991). These tasks are necessary for establishing a positive life course in the identity formation process (Erikson, 1968). As such, adolescence has recently been investigated as the phase of life when purpose can emerge. Purpose is defined as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). This definition provides three dimensions of purpose that can be empirically investigated: (1) a stable and future-oriented

intention, (2) meaningful engagement to realize that intention, and (3) a desire to contribute to the world beyond the self motivating that intention. Adolescents can have fully realized purpose (exhibit all of the dimensions), or might have a precursor form of purpose (exhibit one or two of the dimensions of purpose), in a variety of life domains, including the Arts (Moran, 2009).

Purpose is correlated with well being and thriving (Benson & Scales, 2009) and gives forward momentum to development (Damon, 2008), motivates young people to greater levels of achievement, and supports moral identity formation (Bronk, 2011). While the advantages of supporting youth in developing purpose are well understood, little is known about the contexts in which youth develop purpose and how educators and youth development workers can support purpose development in those contexts.

Arts and Adolescent Development

This study adds to the limited research on adolescent development in the Arts by exploring how purpose emerges and develops among young people as they participate in the Arts. Arts participation refers to creating or performing in an expressive medium and includes engagement in formal settings (schools, organizations, or training programs) and informal settings (individual practice or unstructured collaboration). It is used here to distinguish from activities aimed at learning to appreciate and understand the Arts.

Some studies have examined the developmental outcomes of participation in extra-curricular performing arts programs. In these studies, arts programs were found to offer youth opportunities to explore, reflect upon, and express identity (Eccles & Barber, 1999) as well as to develop skill and mastery (Fredricks et al., 2002). Participation in the performing

arts during adolescence has been associated with positive school outcomes, including attainment of important learning dispositions (Heath & Roach, 1999) and better performance on academic measures compared with youth who do not participate in the Arts (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). The visual arts have been found to provide adolescents with a context for abstract thinking about ideas of personal significance, and are important for young people to make meaning and communicate their ideas (Burton, 2001; Graham, 2003; Wolf, 1997).

These findings indicate that the Arts offer a unique domain of opportunity for adolescents to develop purpose. As avenues of self-expression and meaning making, they are personally meaningful activities fulfilling the engagement dimension of purpose. The Arts are “acts of meaning” and “personal projects” that an individual engages in to project self and identity into the world (Bruner, 1990; Little, 1993; Malin, 2013). As meaning making, identity exploring, and self-expressive activities, the Arts provide adolescents with an important path of personal development that may also imply a way for youth to contribute to society through artistic pursuits. However, personal development does not represent a sustained or specific aspiration to reach beyond the self to contribute to the world, just as an adolescent might be contributing to the world by getting an education but is not demonstrating purpose unless their education is directed at a more defined aspiration.

As a means of creating new ideas and aestheticism for culture and society, the Arts fulfill the purpose dimension of contributing constructively to the world beyond the self. However, some have argued that this type of creative contribution, sometimes called “big-C creativity,” requires a level of cultural expertise unavailable to adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi, 1994; Feldman, 1994). It is not clear, therefore, how participation in the Arts might be a source of purpose for young people.

Research on positive youth development in the Arts is inconsistent about the psychologi-

cal implications of arts participation. The Arts provide flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and help youth learn to manage emotions (Larson & Brown, 2007). On the other hand, participation in the Arts does not predict positive developmental outcomes (Bundick, 2011; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Creative youth expressed ambivalence about purpose in their lives (Moran, 2010), and creative college students reported low scores on life purpose in middle adulthood (Hill, Burrow, Brandenberger, Lapsley, & Quaranto 2010). Additionally, the Arts have been characterized in much of the relevant literature as self-involved (Moran, 2010) and individualistic (Reker, 1991). If purpose is an aspiration to contribute to the world beyond the self, these characterizations imply that the Arts are an unlikely domain for young people to develop purpose.

These inconsistent conclusions indicate the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role that the Arts play in adolescent development and, in particular, the development of purpose. The Arts have potential as a source of purpose for young people, but the research to date does not adequately describe youth perceptions of and experiences in the Arts and, therefore, cannot fully explain what makes arts participation meaningful to young artists.

The Present Study

Following are two analyses of data from the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose study that examine purpose in arts-involved youth. The Youth Purpose study sampled broadly from public high schools and colleges and did not ask specifically about arts participation and training; rather, the arts participation data gathered depended on what young people reported from general prompts. Consequently, the picture of arts participation captured in the data is broad and represents the vastly different experiences that young artists are having across the United States. The following analyses should, therefore, be considered preliminary theory-

building with results that can be explored in more specific arts participation settings.

Based on prior research, we expected that the Arts would present challenges as a domain for adolescents to develop purpose; indeed, preliminary findings suggested that although many youth participate in the Arts, few appeared to be engaged in the Arts with purpose. Furthermore, those who were purposeful in the Arts did not sustain artistic purpose over time (Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2013). These preliminary findings present a complex picture of adolescent arts participation, suggesting that the Arts are meaningful activities in the lives of some young people, but are a limited and unstable domain for purpose development in adolescence.

The present analyses looked more deeply at interviews from arts-involved youth to examine whether and how the Arts function as a context for purpose development. The first analysis investigated the following questions: (1) Do arts-involved youth find purpose in their artistic activity? and (2) how do they describe their artistic motives and goals? The second, longitudinal analysis addressed questions of development: (1) What is the relationship between arts participation and purpose development in adolescence? and (2) What happens to artistic purpose over the course of adolescence?

Methods

Research Design

The Youth Purpose study used a cross sequential design to examine how purpose changes over the course of adolescence. We interviewed adolescents in four different age cohorts twice over a 2-year interval. Qualitative methods were used to first determine the form of purpose for each participant, and then to examine how and why purpose forms changed over the 2-year interval.

Following the analysis of purpose forms and change over time, a grounded theory approach was used to analyze the interviews with arts-involved youth to generate theory about artistic purpose in adolescence. Two analyses were

conducted with arts-involved youth. Analysis 1 examined data from one time point to learn about the motivations that drive young people to participate in the Arts and find purpose in their artistic involvements. Analysis 2 looked at changes that occurred over a 2-year interval to see what happened to artistic purpose over the course of adolescence.

Participants

We interviewed 270 adolescents aged 11-21.¹ Participants were recruited from middle schools, high schools, and colleges in suburban and agricultural California, rural Tennessee, and urban New Jersey. Schools were selected to provide a diverse demographic sample. Students from four grade levels participated in interviews: 6th grade, 9th grade, 12th grade, and college sophomores and juniors. The sample was gender balanced and had more Anglo Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans than African Americans, Filipino/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

From the full sample, we identified 53 participants who were meaningfully involved in the Arts. These were the participants who responded that participation in some art form was one of the most important things in their life. Of these 53 participants, 33 were female, 14 identified as Anglo American, 12 as Asian American, 12 as Latino, and 5 as African American.

Two years later, 146 of the original 270 participants were interviewed again. Of these, 29 were meaningfully involved in the Arts at the time of the interview. Among these 29 arts-involved participants, 18 were female, 8 identified as Asian American, 9 as Anglo American, and 5 as Latino.

Procedure

In the interview, respondents were asked to describe what was most important and meaningful to them and why, how these important things affected their lives, their goals for the future, actions they took to attain those goals, and the obstacles they experienced in pursuing goals. A semistructured format enabled interviewers to probe responses in order to fully

explore interviewees' meaning in their statements. Middle and high school students were interviewed at their schools, and college students were interviewed at various locations after being recruited at their schools. The interviews took 45-minutes on average to complete.

We used qualitative content analysis to code the interviews (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In content analysis, interview texts are coded so that the data are organized into categories that can then be analyzed for meaning. An initial set of codes was derived from the dimensions of purpose outlined in the theoretical framework above: The most important goal or intention, actions being taken to accomplish the goal, motivations driving the goal, and future plans related to the goal. Using these codes, we determined whether each individual demonstrated fully realized purpose, precursors to purpose, or no purpose.

To attain greater reliability, the unique goal content of each interview was labeled with one of 17 broad categories of intention, such as *help others*, *support my friends and family*, *make the world a better place*, *create something new*, *have a good career*, and *change the way others think*. These categories were adapted from previous studies of purpose and meaning (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1980; Reker & Wong, 1988) and tested in focus groups with adolescents.

Three coders came to agreement on 10% of the interview sample at Time 1 and attained reliability with a kappa score of 0.70 (Fleiss, 1981). For the remaining 90%, two coders coded each interview and came to agreement at each step prior to moving on to the next step. While coding the Time 1 interviews, the researchers developed a codebook to ensure that identical procedures would be used for coding at Time 2.

Following the preliminary analysis to determine forms of purpose, the interviews with arts-involved youth were reanalyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding was used to identify themes and patterns in arts participation from the youths' perspectives in order to explore the

complex relationship between youth arts participation and purpose development.

Analysis 1 Results

Of the 270 participants interviewed at Time 1, 53 (20%) described some current participation in the Arts and said that their art form was important to them. They participated in a diverse range of arts disciplines, including theater, painting, photography, filmmaking, dance, music, graffiti art, graphic design, game design, fashion design, and creative writing. Broadly categorized, there were 18 visual artists, 9 musicians, 5 actors, 4 dancers, 4 writers, 3 filmmakers, and 10 who were involved in multiple art disciplines. Of these, 17 (32%) were purposeful; that is, they exhibited all three of the dimensions of purpose. However, they did not necessarily find purpose in their artistic activity. For some of the purposeful young artists, something other than the Arts was the source of their purpose. At Time 2, 29 (20%) of the 146 people interviewed described participating in the Arts. Of those 29, only one was identified as having artistic purpose, and one other was identified as having purpose not related to his artistic activity.

The first analysis looked at interviews from one time point to generate theory about the intentions that motivate young artists and how they find purpose in their artistic activity. Only seven (16%) arts-involved youth at Time 1, and three (10%) arts-involved youth at Time 2 were assigned to one of the two intention categories that were most relevant to the Arts: *make things more beautiful* and *create something new*. Open coding was used to better understand the young artists' intentions, resulting in four new intention codes: *building community*, *sharing self with others*, *having a positive impact on others*, and *connecting deeply with others*. Together, these new codes gave shape to a prominent category of motivation in the interviews: the desire to relate to others through artistic activity.

Relating, Connecting, and Building Understanding Through the Arts

Some adolescents spoke of their artistic activity as a way of connecting with others and derived fulfillment from the positive impact that this connection had on themselves and others.

As one young actress said of acting: "It connects you to the piece of work, and then you're trying to connect your audience to that as well.... it's just the connection you feel with an audience is something you don't feel in many other things." Another spoke of the importance of the community that theater provides:

It's important to me to have a community of people that can really connect and be honest with each other.... I do musical theater because in the cast of a musical you practice every day together and you just really learn to trust people and be able to talk to people.... bringing people together to do something creative is really fulfilling.

A young musician felt music was an important way to connect with others about personal topics:

People will hear one of our songs, and they'll ask what it means, and I get to tell them... hey, that song is about my dad, or that's about my home life. And when people relate to it... that just feeds you.... all music is understanding somebody else.

Other participants saw the Arts as a way to build relationships with others by sharing their own way of understanding the world, or by providing a valuable experience to others. A young photographer said, "Photography is important to me because I like taking pictures of things that people don't notice." She did a photo project about how women see themselves, which "showed how even the most beautiful women wear makeup. We all have something to hide." She noticed something about how the social world works, and wanted to share what she noticed with others through her artmaking. In a sense, this is self-expression, often framed as a self-involved act. But here self-expression is an

act of sharing vision and awareness, of helping others to notice, and an effort to produce shared perspective. Similarly, a young professional musician talked about how he enjoyed making music as a way to impact how others feel and think:

You feel like you're changing people's minds.... Part of the reason why I wanted to be an artist to begin with is you can leave your mark on the world that way. Because other people are being affected by your art. It makes them feel certain things.... It makes [them] feel good. It helps [them] relax; it helps [them] get excited.... I remember my teacher... said when I play ballads I should aim to make people cry.... so I played this song for my friend for her birthday and she was bawling at the end and it was really cool, because it reached her.

He recognized the aesthetic value of his music but, more relevant to his sense of purpose, was the effect he could have on other people through his music.

A high school dancer explained her commitment to her art form as a way to break free from the norms of social conformity to share self with others: "If you see someone dancing, you can tell by the styles they do... what kind of person they are, what kind of personality they have. It just shows who I am when I dance, shows who I am to everyone." She also felt that dance was a vital aspect of life that she was compelled to share with others: "By working hard at dance, then it shows other people they can do the same. My purpose is to keep dancing and I think I'm supposed to show people that they can do the same." She did not just dance for her personal fulfillment; she had a purpose of enabling others to experience fulfillment through dance. Similarly, a college-aged musician found purpose in music because it was a way for him to bring joy to others lives:

Do I have a purpose? Make people smile. Not everybody is endowed with those gifts of music and the ability to make others

laugh. I play music because I can. I'd like to use my gift in a positive way and not let it go to waste.

Analysis 2 Methods

Two years after the initial data collection, 146 of the original 270 participants were interviewed again using the same protocol. After determining the form of purpose for all interviews at both Time 1 and Time 2, a new coding system was created to analyze the changes in purpose over time. This coding phase was conducted with only those participants who were found to be purposeful at Time 1 and/or Time 2. We coded these interviews for indicators of change in goal content, goal priority level, reasons for the goal, and support received to pursue the goal.

Analysis 2 Results

The second analysis sought to answer questions about the relationship between arts participation and purpose development during adolescence. First, we looked at changes in purpose from Time 1 to Time 2. The arts-involved youth in this study did not demonstrate the stability of purpose that was seen in other domains of purpose. Seven arts-involved participants who were interviewed at both time points were purposeful at Time 1, but only two of them were still purposeful at Time 2. Notably, only four of the five college-aged artists who were purposeful at Time 1 were still purposeful at Time 2. By comparison, all of the college-aged participants who were pursuing helping careers, such as nursing and teaching, and were purposeful at Time 1 still met the criteria for purpose at Time 2.

Next, the coding for future planning was analyzed in the arts-involved participant interviews, to better understand this instability of purpose. The following themes emerged in this coding: challenge in not knowing what types of jobs are available, uncertainty about the reality supporting myself with a creative job, and art is a source of joy and should not be a means of survival.

Challenges on the Artistic Path

Participants in all age groups discussed the unlikelihood of pursuing the Arts as a career.

Some thought it was unrealistic that they would find a creative job that could support them financially. A college student said, "Music is a big part of my life but it's not something I want to pursue as a career. It's too risky." This risk was a message that some got from their parents: "I really wanna be a dancer. Well, my mom tells me you can't get money with it." Others learned from society about the financial risk and unlikely reward of pursuing a career in the Arts: "Writing isn't really a good job to make money unless you write a fantasy story and suddenly you become famous." Neither this writer nor the dancer had serious long-term aspirations related to their art. While they both found fulfillment in their art form, both saw it as something to do on the side, at most, once the demands of a career filled their time.

Another limitation that young artists experienced was a poorly defined path from school to a creative career. An ill-defined path allowed some to feel that the field is open: "I don't really know what it is yet, I just know I'm kinda into drawing and 3-D modeling.... so I don't really have anything I want to do yet, but I'm open to options." To a point, an open path enabled young artists to pursue their art unfettered. However, challenges arose when career decisions had to be made. A young filmmaker was pursuing a film degree in college, but had no concept of how to take the steps needed to turn that education into a job. Her lack of knowledge about the options and how to develop them left her paralyzed at a critical point in her career development: "I really like film, but I don't know what kind of career you can take." Despite her investment in film school and the accompanying sacrifices, she was also laying groundwork for nonarts career options because she was at a loss for how to advance into a film-related career.

Those who did press forward and pursue a career in the Arts experienced challenges in the transition from school to a creative job. Like the young filmmaker just described, even those who knew what they wanted to do could not see the path from training to a creative career. There was

a perceived lack of support for that transition, and none of the early-career artists talked about having a mentor to guide them. Some found that the creative vision and relational aspects of their college artmaking were stifled by marketplace demands. Further, the arts-related jobs available to them just out of school shared little in common with the meaningful artistic activity that drove them to pursue a creative career. The need for a job caused young artists to diverge from their path to artistic purpose.

Ashley, a young visual artist, demonstrated these challenges in her transition from art student to a graphic design professional. Ashley was found to be purposeful at Time 1, when she was taking art classes and producing work for college exhibitions. At that point, she was thoughtful about her personal style of artmaking and what made art meaningful to her: "A lot of my art is... whimsical things.... I have an imagination and I think it's important to have that in the crazy world." After transitioning to a vocational program in graphic design, however, she did not speak about meaning or vision in her artmaking and, instead, focused on the monetary success of her design work: "I just started working, and I think I'm happy actually because I am busy, and I'm making my own money and that feels really good. So in that case, money did buy me happiness." She also spoke about how the transition from school to work in an art career diminished her creative drive and passion for art, because "you have to follow the guidelines. Your client is right. You're not creating art; you're creating something for them. You're pretty much communicating their art and not your own." Ashley found happiness in her work as a designer, but the artistic purpose she had before starting her career faded.

Like Ashley, several of the young people in this study found meaning in their artistic activity in college, where they were able to develop meaning and focus on how they impacted others through their art. However, their artistic purpose was stifled by workplace demands as they transitioned from school to work. Young

artists had to choose either career stability or meaningful work, resulting in unstable and uncertain purpose development in the Arts.

Discussion

What does it mean for young people to find purpose in the Arts? And how does their artistic purpose develop as they grow into adulthood? These are vital questions for understanding what artistic activity means to adolescents and for understanding how best to support young people in pursuing meaningful involvement in the Arts. This study explored these questions by using a qualitative approach to examine how young people talk about their artistic activity, the place it has in their present and future lives, and their artistic motivations.

Art as a Relational Activity

An important finding of this study is that the Arts are meaningful to young people for building relationships, for understanding others and being understood, and for connecting with and building a community. In the adult art world, the contemporary movement called *relational aesthetic* (Bourriaud, 1998) comprises artists who are similarly motivated to create meaningful human relationships through the artistic process. Artists participating in the relational aesthetic movement see themselves as contributing to culture and society by promoting connections and shared perspective among individuals. Relational activity in adolescence is viewed as an identity-formation process (Erikson, 1968; Flum & Lavi-Yudelevitch, 2002) and has not been considered as a way for young people to contribute to the world beyond themselves. Some studies have examined the relational dispositions that are developed in the Arts such as compassion and empathy (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 2000), and social capacities such as role-taking and theory of mind (Goldstein, Wu & Winner, 2009; Wright, 2006)—suggesting that the Arts provide young people the opportunity to increase their capacity to understand, respect, and value perspectives different from their own. This study adds to those findings and introduces

the argument that engagement in relational artistic activity is a meaningful effort by young people to improve society within their developmental capacities.

Intention to contribute to the world beyond the self is a critical dimension of purpose as it is conceptualized in positive youth development. Contribution has been examined in prosocial, spiritual, and civic domains (Lerner, 2004; Mariano & Damon, 2008; Sherrod, 2007; Tirri & Quinn, 2010); however, little research has focused on youth contribution in cultural domains, such as the Arts, and how cultural contribution might differ from other domains. The young artists in this study demonstrated their desire to strengthen and transform their culture by seeking not only to connect, but also to create new connections for and with their audience; not only to relate, but also to produce deeper and mutually meaningful relationships through shared understanding; not simply to express themselves, but to change the minds and lives of others through their self-expression.

Artistic Decline During Adolescence and Early Adulthood

Scholars have argued that young people lose interest in the Arts during adolescence as their creativity dips (Davis, 1997; Graham, 2003). The present study offers a new way to understand the decline of artistic development during adolescence. First, youth in this study internalized the perceived low status of the Arts in society and lack of career prospects in the Arts. These limitations were internalized early in participants' artistic lives and presented challenges to their long-term goal setting in the Arts. Although many of our artistic participants expressed artistic identity as early as 9th grade, that artistic identity formation was stunted in those who internalized the idea that the Arts are not a realistic career or are not acceptable as an adult pursuit. While this and previous studies have shown that many young people pursue arts training for personal fulfillment rather than for career purposes (Lindemann et al., 2012), some of the young artists in this study indicated

that the lack of a career path in the Arts hinders their ability to develop sustained purpose in their art form.

Implications for Practice

The finding that young artists were motivated by a desire to build relationships, connect with others, and change how others think and feel has several implications for how the Arts are taught. First, these findings support prior research that suggested arts instruction should: (1) aim to develop broad dispositions, such as perspective taking and empathy, rather than aiming only to teach narrow concepts (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 2000); and (2) focus on social and emotional aspects of the Arts rather than dismissing them for fear of being noncognitive (Blatt-Gross, 2010). Second, these findings are contrary to prior assumptions about the individualistic tendency of artists. For example, Barber, Eccles, and Stone (2001) argued that adolescent arts participation might be associated with negative outcomes (suicide attempts, psychiatric visits) because the Arts promote individuality. Our findings suggest that if youth arts programs are promoting individuality, they are doing so against the preferences of young participants and that, perhaps, more relational approaches to arts activities would be better suited to adolescent interests. Arts education that promotes community, connection, and engagement is not only good for community-building outcomes and raising social awareness (Campana, 2011; Gude, 2007; Marché, 1998), but it may also support young artists in finding purpose through their artmaking.

Participants in this study indicated that they are not receiving adequate support for setting artistic goals or for pursuing careers in the Arts. Their responses suggest that they need opportunities and training that promote the value of the Arts as a humanizing activity and as a way of building important relational capacities. They also need to receive better information about the Arts as a viable career path and the many artistic careers that can provide financial

as well as personal rewards, job stability, and work/life balance. While the field of art education has made significant progress in developing practices that train critical, creative, and social thinking, there is need for art educators to turn their attention to what happens when students leave the art room (Wilson, 2010). In late high school and college, young people need support in transitioning from school into creative professions. Currently, this path is poorly defined in many creative fields and requires a survival mentality. While adolescents may regain footing on the path to artistic purpose later in life, this study suggests that the uncertainty of the school-to-work transition, combined with artistic commitments that are already shaky due to social pressures to pursue other careers, make it tremendously challenging to find that path without adequate external support.

Limitations

The goal of this qualitative study was to generate preliminary theory about youth arts participation. Additional research is needed to further explore, test, and build on the ideas that emerged from this analysis. Ideally, a model should be produced that frames the intentions, motivations, and meaning-making processes that young people bring to their artistic activity. Mixed-methods studies that reveal, elaborate, and test models of artistic intention in adolescence would enable practitioners to better understand what young people are doing and thinking as they engage in artistic activity, and how they might be supported to find purpose in that activity.

Finally, more research is needed on the context of adolescent arts participation: the opportunities, supports, and constraints inherent to youth arts settings. The devaluation of the Arts in public schools in the United States has meant decreased opportunities for young

people to participate in the Arts and pursue their artistic interests into adulthood, resulting in the devaluation of the Arts in society. This cycle of artistic decline has shifted the context of supports and constraints for young people who are interested in the Arts. Some of the consequences of that shift were demonstrated in this study, including the loss of artistic meaning from adolescence to adulthood, and low incidence of long-term artistic goals among adolescents. Additional research is needed to understand the interaction between these outcomes and the context in which they emerge, including research on the transition from adolescent arts involvement to a creative career.

Conclusion

By examining adolescent arts participation through the lens of youth purpose, this study revealed some of the intentions that youth bring to their artistic activity and showed ways that the developmental trajectory of young artists can be impacted by the social context. The intentions, meanings, and motivations that adolescents bring to their artistic process are important factors in determining how they will engage with artistic activities—such as those assigned in school or offered in youth programs. The Arts were found in this study to be a way for adolescents to develop the capacity to connect with others through self-expression; to relate through sharing ideas, emotions, and observations of the world; and to build community through personally meaningful interaction. Our participants demonstrated the important role the Arts play in perpetuating meaningful human connection in our culture, reinforcing the need for youth to have every opportunity to pursue purpose in an art form that they love. It is vital that we find ways to clear the path for them to do so.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ Student quotations from these interviews appear throughout this article. The interviews took place in the fall of 2006.