



The Qualities of Quality

Understanding Excellence in Arts Education

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Executive Summary

MANY CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES have little or no opportunity for formal arts instruction, and access to arts learning experiences remains a critical national challenge. In addition, the *quality* of arts learning opportunities that are available to young people is a serious concern. Understanding this second challenge – the challenge of creating and sustaining high quality formal arts learning experiences for K-12 youth, inside and outside of school – is the focus of our recent research initiative, *The Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education*, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and conducted by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The study focuses on the character of excellence itself and asks three core questions:

- (1) How do arts educators in the United States – including leading practitioners, theorists, and administrators – conceive of and define high quality arts learning and teaching?
- (2) What markers of excellence do educators and administrators look for in the actual activities of arts learning and teaching as they unfold in the classroom?
- (3) How do a program’s foundational decisions, as well as its ongoing day-to-day decisions, affect the pursuit and achievement of quality?

These questions were investigated through three strands of research: Interviews with leading arts practitioners, theorists and administrators; site visits to exemplary arts programs across a range of settings; and a review of published literature. Sources in each of these areas were selected through an extensive nomination process in which several hundred arts educators and administrators across the country, working in a wide

variety of contexts and art forms, nominated candidates in each area. This report presents our findings and offers a set of tools to help arts educators and their associates reflect on and discuss the character of high quality arts learning and teaching in their own settings.

Some of the major themes and findings of the study include the following:

The drive for quality is personal, passionate, and persistent. For most of the people surveyed in this study, ideas about what constitutes quality in arts education are inextricably tied to their values and to fundamental issues of identity and meaning. Though people differ in their specific visions and concerns, a commonality among almost all with whom we spoke is that the drive for quality is persistent and far-reaching. This drive is ever-present in all aspects of their educational work and shapes their goals for young people. For example, most educators we interviewed wanted young people to have experience *with* quality – with excellent materials, outstanding works of art, passionate and accomplished artist-teachers modeling their artistic processes – and experiences *of* quality – powerful group interactions and ensemble work, performances that make them feel proud, rewarding practice sessions, technical excellence, and successful expressivity.

Quality arts education serves multiple purposes simultaneously. The question of what constitutes high quality arts education is deeply linked to the question of why we should be teaching the arts. It is not surprising that when arts educators talk about excellence they also express ideas about the fundamental purposes of arts education – ideas about what students ought to learn through the arts and why these outcomes are important. Our informants mentioned many purposes, and most of them cluster into a handful of broad areas. For example,

many arts educators believe that one of the important purposes of arts education is to foster broad dispositions and habits of mind, especially the capacity to think creatively, and the capacity to make connections. Many also believe that arts education should help students develop aesthetic awareness and visual observation skills and provide venues for self-expression and self-exploration. It is notable that most of the people with whom we spoke believe that good arts programs tend to serve several purposes simultaneously. Though arts programs differ widely in their contexts, goals, art forms, and constituencies, a hallmark sign of high quality arts learning in any program is that the learning experiences are rich and complex for all learners, engaging them on many levels and helping them learn and grow in a variety of ways.

Quality reveals itself “in the room” through four different lenses. When you ask arts educators what they take to be the signs of high quality arts education, they are as likely to point to features of the experience in the setting itself as they are to broad purposes and outcomes. These experiential elements are what you would expect to observe or infer if you opened the door onto a classroom, studio, or rehearsal hall and looked for markers of quality.

There are multiple kinds of markers, and one way to look for them is to examine the experience through four different but overlapping lenses: *learning*, *pedagogy*, *community dynamics*, and *environment*. These lenses all focus on the same experience, but each one brings a different dimension into view. The *learning* lens focuses on what students are actually doing in the classroom – the kinds of projects and tasks in which they are involved and the character of their engagement. The *pedagogy* lens focuses on how teachers conceive of and practice their craft – how they conceptualize the teacher-student relationship, and how they design and implement instruction. The *community dynamics* lens reveals the nature of the social relationships in the classroom, including relationships among the students themselves, between students and teachers, and among the teachers and other adults who are present. The *environment* lens focuses on concrete

elements such as the physical space of the classroom, the materials and physical resources available, and the kind of time students are given – hours as well as years – to engage in arts learning.

Foundational decisions matter. Foundational, program-defining decisions that give a program its identity and provide the parameters within which quality is pursued. These decisions include (1) *Who teaches the arts?* (2) *Where are the arts taught?* (3) *What is taught and how?* and (4) *How is arts learning assessed?* Scholars have written extensively about these decisions, and they often take sharply opposing positions. In practice, however, the ways in which high quality programs answer these questions tend to be nuanced and contextualized, often embodying high principles and pragmatic concerns at the same time.

Decisions and decision makers at all levels affect quality. Many decision makers play a critical role in the quality of arts learning experiences. These include people quite distant from the classroom (e.g., administrators, funders, policy makers), those just outside the room – notably program staff and parents, and those who are “in the room” (students, teachers, artists). Decisions made by those “in the room” have tremendous power to support as well as undermine the quality of the learning experience. This is especially true of students, and it is important for students to be as aware as possible of the potential impact of their choices on their own and others’ learning experiences. This may seem obvious, but the role of student choice is often overlooked in discussions of quality, and it invites greater attention.

Reflection and dialogue is important at all levels. An overarching theme across many of the findings of this study is that continuous reflection and discussion about what constitutes quality and how to achieve it is not only a catalyst for quality but also a sign of quality. In other words, thinking deeply about quality – talking about it, worrying about it, continually revisiting ideas about its characteristics and its indicators – is essential both to the pursuit of excellence in arts education and

to its achievement. Another overarching theme is that a misalignment of ideas among decision-makers about what constitutes quality often complicates a program's pursuit of quality. Alignment is easy to ignore, and achieving alignment among decision-makers at all levels often requires far more basic investigation, dialogue, and negotiation than is given.

In what follows, we offer several tools to help decision makers address the twin challenges of reflection and alignment. The tools are designed to be used by individuals or by groups in workshops or other collegial settings. Their purpose is to help arts educators and their associates build and clarify their visions of high quality arts education, identify elements of quality in their own programs, reflect on the relationship between quality and a program's foundational decisions, seek alignment between a program's beliefs about quality and its practices, and seek alignment across decision makers at all levels who help to shape a program's pursuit of quality.



Quality as Seen Through the Lens of Community Dynamics

When asked to describe salient characteristics one might observe in a quality arts learning experience, many interviewees shared thoughts about the dynamics of the community in the learning setting – the ways in which people treat each other, learn with and from each other, and feel about being together. Most often, these ideas featured strongly in conversations about creating a safe learning space built on trust and respect and in which students are enabled to be creative and to experiment, both as artists and as people. and in which students are enabled to be creative and to experiment, both as artists and as people. The centrality of relationships in high quality arts learning was a theme resonant across many interviews on our site visits; the development of healthy relationships among all participants in the experience was also seen as critical to the quality of the learning experience. We heard, too, repeated references to arts learning communities as “a family” or as “a home away from home,” both in relation to school programs, like the art department at New Trier High School, and in out-of-school programs, like Will Power to Youth, AMI, Marwen, and others.

From these discussions of relationships, safety, and community, we identified three elements that emerged with frequency and intensity:

- Respect and trust among all participants, along with a belief in student capacities
- Open communication
- Collaboration

While these elements by no means comprise a complete map for designing a positive social climate in a classroom or workshop, those we spoke to deemed these most critical – even foundational – to a quality arts learning experience. Certainly we can begin to appreciate the significant role that social interaction – and the awareness of the impact of the relational element in education – has on the quality of an arts learning experience.

At this point, though, the intersections of the various elements across lenses become more obvious. For example, discussions of mentorship are as visible through the lens of community dynamics as they are through the

lenses of learning and teaching. It is also important to note that in naming this lens, we use *community* to refer to all of the various settings in which arts learning may occur – rehearsal halls, performance settings, art studios, museum galleries, community sites, and more.

1. Respect and Trust Among All Participants, Along With a Belief in Student Capacities.

Reading Shakespeare’s plays is a challenge for just about everyone. Learning them well enough to perform them without a script is exponentially more challenging. For the teen actors participating in Will Power to Youth in Los Angeles, this is their job. They are employed by the program and get their paycheck for being actors. It doesn’t seem to take them very long to realize that this may not be the easiest way to make a buck. What we saw, however, when we observed a rehearsal, was a group of teens who were exhibiting many of the signs of a highly functional team working under serious deadline pressures – their performance before 1,000 people at an education conference was only two rehearsals away. They were patient with each other, supportive, responsive to their director, disciplined, frustrated at moments, but committed to their work.

It seems the high stakes of this authentic learning experience were the catalyst of that all-too-rare phenomenon – the creation of a community. Many of the people we spoke with identified a palpable sense of community in the learning space as an important and observable element of a quality arts learning experience. But high functioning teams and supportive communities do not simply form; they have to be born in the heat of some shared commitment, challenge, and/or identity. The authenticity found in much high quality arts teaching and learning provides a powerful environment for forming communities. But respect for and trust in the capacities of young people is the bedrock of these experiences. If the directors of Will Power to Youth did not deeply and profoundly respect the capabilities of young people, they could never have made the commitment to perform at a conference many months prior to actually meeting the students with whom they would be working on the performance. They had to have confidence that these young people could handle the artistic challenges and the intense psychologi-

cal and social dynamics of performing in public.

The students, too, had to have confidence in their teacher-directors and in each other. When a young person new to artistic work loses confidence in him or herself (which happens with great regularity), they have to have some faith to fall back on. For many, this faith seems to be found in the group's support, kindness, high expectations, and confidence in them.

To engage fully in artistic work and learning – to express ideas freely, to innovate, to explore unreservedly, to receive and give honest critique – it is essential to believe that one's work and perspective will be respected and that the group is committed to one's success. As Kristin Congdon puts it, "Good teachers are people who really know how to respect students and to see them as knowledge-bearers and not as people who are empty vessels." Respectful teaching allows for mistakes and shows genuine interest in students' ideas, interests, and background knowledge. Many people we spoke with talked passionately about how the quality of students' arts learning experiences depends upon their being a member of a classroom community in which they are valued as artists, as students, and as human beings.

Many also noted respectful student-to-student interaction as being a hallmark of quality. Its signs, they say, include students working at being mindful and cooperative with one another, collaborating and supporting each other, and learning to appreciate each other in new ways. Further, trust and respect among adults in the classroom is also considered important. Many educators, particularly those involved in partnerships and collaborations, place great emphasis on the presence of mutually respectful adult-to-adult relationships. One such relationship, for example, is between a teaching artist and a classroom teacher. When visibly demonstrating respect for and interest in each others' work, they convey to students the sense that the artist, the artwork, and the teacher are all important, increasing the likelihood that students will value the experience.

In Minneapolis, as in Los Angeles and so many other sites, our observations revealed the beautiful dynamics of artistic communities of young people and adults. Teens Rock the Mic (TRTM), a small, community-based

spoken word program that has closed since we conducted this study, provided opportunities for youth to work with peer and adult poets and space for them to perform their work. While poetic and performing arts skills and techniques were honed through TRTM, equally essential was the emphasis placed on empowering youth to develop and engage their self-awareness, their confidence, and their voice. This process began with a fundamental respect for a young person's contributions. "There has to be a trust in place and a belief in the assets in the room," explains former TRTM director Melissa Borgmann, "that there is intelligence, that there is promise, that there is magic."

Administrators, artists, and educators at TRTM placed a high premium on youth voice and contribution to the learning experience. Stacey, a teaching artist at TRTM, noted that "It's not 'I'll show you how to do this, here's how you write fiction, here's how you write poetry,' it's valuing what each student is bringing to the table, respecting the student as expert." When educators model this genuine trust, it is infectious. Students who feel respected by their adult mentors begin to trust and believe in each other – the foundation of a community of shared, open learning.

At Marwen in Chicago, former student Paulina Camacho recalls being inspired by the technical ability of her classmates and building relationships while sharing tips about technique and how to achieve certain effects. As those relationships developed and trust was built, students solicited each other's feedback on other qualities of their work, more often or as frequently as they asked for teacher feedback. Just as teachers serve as models in engaging arts learning experiences, so do students' classmates. Johnny Saldaña describes the relationships he envisions: "I'm seeing from the learners a collective – a community – that has been built."

2. Open Communication

In many ways, all work in the arts is, ultimately, about perception (seeing, hearing, sensing), recognition, and response. Arts education enjoys a beautiful alignment in this regard – creating/perceiving works of art and learning with and from other people are both activities utterly dependent on open communication. Engagement with art works provides a powerful focus for sharing im-

portant thoughts and feelings. Listening in this context is obviously as critical as speaking or sharing one's work. And the communication in high quality arts learning settings goes in all directions – among students, between teachers and students, among teachers, and between everyone and works of art. The themes of communication and dialogue emerged frequently in our interviews and the practice of careful listening was evident in our observations. In some cases communication was discussed as an integral part of behind-the-scenes work prior to or outside of a class or workshop – for instance, teachers collaborating on lessons in advance, coordinators staying in touch with logistical information. But dialogue in the classroom – often verbal, but sometimes communicated more visually, as in many dance classes – was considered a cornerstone of quality.

Ongoing and respectful dialogue – including raising questions, offering ideas, considering others' ideas, expressing feelings, sharing work, engaging in constructive critique, and reflection on processes and products – were all noted as visible in quality arts classrooms and indicators of the health of the classroom as a learning community. Sandra Jackson-Dumont, former director of the Expanding the Walls program at Studio Museum of Harlem and current education director at the Seattle Art Museum, discussed the cultivation of meaningful dialogue by and with the teens as critically important in the creation of a safe space where young men and women are treated as adults and learn to engage in conversation about art and life from their own perspective and personal history. Teachers in this program do not “teach down” to the teens, says Dumont. Rather they “embrace the challenging questions or problems that arise from the work and lives of the teens. Teachers move through and beyond challenges through dialogue.”

At Will Power to Youth and Urban Word, as well as several other programs, we heard conversations about the responsibility of each member of the community to accept responsibility for his or her words and actions and to notice the effects she or he is having on others. At Will Power to Youth, we were told about specific moments in which the pressures of upcoming performances led to frustrations and words that hurt feelings, creating oppor-

tunities for both individuals and the group to address the issue of responsibility for one's actions. In those moments, the question of quality becomes particularly complex and delicate. What to do? Stop, potentially losing critical rehearsal time, and deal directly and openly with what was said and how it was heard? Or press on with rehearsal and hope that the fabric of the community won't be irreparably torn? While either choice may be legitimate and could work out perfectly well, the very fact of the choice poses a challenge to the group.

In any specific setting, the best choice in a situation like this depends on the core purposes, values, and principles of the program. Whatever the decision, creating and sustaining a community with open communication among all members and with explicit acknowledgement of the core values of honesty and respect was emphasized by most of our interviewees as essential to quality art education experiences.

3. Collaboration

Each art form has its own possibilities and requirements for both solo and group work. Whether in performing or visual arts, there are approaches that emphasize each in different ways. Musicians, dancers, and actors can perform solo or in ensembles. Visual artists can produce work alone or in collaboration. Murals, installations, and animations, for example, are often the work of a collective. But virtually all artistic enterprises, even the most solo, like most poetry writing, for example, involve the participation of others at some point. In arts learning experiences, the work always involves others.

Students spoke to us about the challenges and pleasures of collaboration. To be part of a group that is functioning well is exciting and satisfying, providing an opportunity to make or engage with works of art in ways that are, quite simply, beyond the capacities of any individual. The feeling of being part of something bigger than oneself offers an identity and sense of purpose to one's efforts that helps many young people sustain commitment to their own learning through their commitment to being a full contributor to the work of the group.

Teachers we spoke with emphasized the multiple values of collaboration. Louise Music, director of the Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership in Alameda County,

California, spoke about these values, citing “making connections between themselves and others, understanding about interdependence [and] the fostering of compassion. Those are life skills that we think all children, all of us, need to develop, need to cultivate.” Others spoke of the authenticity of collaboration in doing artistic work and still others discussed the interesting dynamics around ownership in collaborative efforts. There was general agreement that in walking into an arts classroom, studio, or rehearsal hall, one of the most powerful indicators that a high quality arts learning experience was occurring was the nature of interaction among the students and the degree to which their work together was productive collaboration.

Others spoke about how collaboration must take place “outside the room,” as well as “in the room.” Steve

Tennen, Executive Director of Arts Connection in New York City, reflecting on his early work directing arts education programs, noted the deep ways in which the nature of the collaboration between adults creating arts programs influences students’ learning.

It was really about how you create this conversation between the artists and the teachers and all of those who were in the program to make this thing work better... It was getting them to trust and getting them to talk openly about what their own concerns were in their classrooms, what their concerns were in the arts classroom, and what their goals were – what they wanted to get out of this... And so it was conversation and team building between the artist and the teachers, between the teaching artists and the other teaching artists, between myself and the principals, because if the principal didn't buy originally, it wasn't going to happen... The quality of the arts experience really depends on the quality of the relationship between the classroom teacher and the artist.