

The Role of Arts in Strengthening Learner's Identity and Community Relationships

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Abstract: This study examines how arts education fosters identity development and strengthens ties between learners and their communities. With arts often marginalized in schools due to budget cuts or an emphasis on standardized assessments, after-school or summer programs funded by nonprofits increasingly supplement arts learning. Focusing on an Out-of-School Arts (OSA) program in Los Angeles, this study investigates how art-making practices support personal growth and community connection. Through life-history interviews with two alumni, both women of color who participated in the program 7–10 years ago, the study highlights how arts practices that honor learners' cultural backgrounds promote empowering identities and community bonds. Findings emphasize the importance of arts as a medium for learners to connect with their communities and build shared understanding, showing how such programs offer vital opportunities for cultural engagement and identity construction.

Introduction: The role of arts in learner's identity and community relationships

Much of the research on after-school or afterschool arts programs has used a deficit lens, showcasing the importance of the program by highlighting the student's learning limitations and associating it with their low socioeconomic status and ethnic background (e.g., Catterall et al., 2012). This perspective fails to acknowledge student's cultural knowledge and strengths that shape their learning and identity development (Kane et al., 2021; Renkly & Bertolini, 2018; Yosso, 2005). To design conducive learning spaces for learners of color, research needs to address their achievements within the pedagogical practices that strengthen their cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Art from this perspective plays an important role as its representation reveals the human condition and their stories, particularly art making by communities of color brings stories and experiences into visibility that are often invisible in the institutions (Desai, 2019).

This study therefore looks at the practices that create opportunities for learners to connect with their community and build their identity through creation of artwork. By examining an out-of-school (OST) arts program in Los Angeles, this study illuminates the often-overlooked aspects of arts education that contribute to learners' personal growth and community engagement. Our research questions focus on: (1) In what ways does participation in arts practices contribute to the construction of learners' identities? And, (2) How does arts learning in out-of-school (OST) programs facilitate the development of relationships between learners and their community?

Background: Arts, learning and identity

A piece of art cannot be fully understood by examining only the relationship between an individual's imagination and the artwork; art is representation of social reality, which is constructed as the learner makes meaning within a sociocultural setting (Ullán, 1995). Understanding learning within the arts from this perspective cannot happen just by accessing the final work. It involves analyzing the entire creative process: how a learner becomes intrigued by the subject, interacts with people and artifacts in its context, and constructs understanding, which is then visually expressed in their work (Greene, 1995).

Scholars such as Cole (1996) have highlighted the central role that a community's cultural practices play in learning; where culture is a set of community norms, expectations, and ideas that shape learners' actions (Nasir & Cooks, 2009). These cultural practices can either facilitate or obstruct various forms of participation (Nasir & Cooks, 2009). However, learners are not just shaped by cultural practices; they also exercise agency, actively engaging in and contributing to the social space (Nasir & Cooks, 2009).

Thus, Learning is conceptualized as *the process of identity formation through shifts in relationships of the learner with people and objects in the setting* (Nasir & Cooks, 2009) showcasing the dynamic interplay between learning, identity, and cultural practices. This perspective highlights that individuals are not merely a passive recipient of cultural knowledge, they are active participants, who are constantly negotiating and creating meaning about the world and themselves through participation. Making identity fluid, both shaping and being shaped by the social context in which individuals engage.

Considering the importance of the cultural practices within the institution and its relation in defining learner's identity, it is crucial for the arts practices to move away from classical European art values, and instead

aim at empowering learners' ethnic identities and strengthen their community relationships, thereby making learning culturally sustaining, especially for communities of color (Kane et al., 2021; Paris & Alim, 2014). This involves creating a space for co-constructing learning grounded in dialogue with diverse community members to produce artwork (Desai, 2020). Where the subjectiveness of art allows learners to enter the practice with their strengths, and also allows everyone else to express their unique perspectives (Desai, 2020).

From this context, arts education is not just about the acquisition of technical skills; it is about the process and ways in which learners interact within their artistic culture to develop their artwork. The relationships they form in the process impacts their work and supports formation of their identity. Hence, in this study we analyze the practices of the community based Out of School Arts program that supports the collaboration of learners with their peers and family members and the ways in which it impacts their identity.

Data and methods

This study is part of the *Tracing the Enduring Effects of Community Arts Programs (TEECAP)* project, which examines how out-of-school-time (OST) arts programs shape learners' identities, careers, and community relationships. Using a narrative approach, life history interviews were conducted with former participants of these programs, allowing them to reflect on their experiences and share their artistic journeys as stories (Czarniawska, 2004). This method not only provides insight into their artwork but also highlights the influence of social and cultural practices within and beyond the program (Bresler, 2001). Through these narratives, the study explores how identity is constructed and transformed through engagement with the arts.

Research setting and the participants of the study

The study focuses on *V Arts*, a community-based arts organization in Los Angeles dedicated to empowering marginalized communities through artistic expression. Historically, dominant visual arts narratives have centered around financially dominant classes or church values, but with time arts became a medium to express social concerns, as seen in works like Duchamp's *Fountain*. Therefore, *V Arts* serves as a rich context for examining how visual arts education fosters identity formation and social connection. Nine former learners, aged 24 to 27 and identifying as Black, Asian, White, and Latinx, were interviewed about their experiences in the program, which they attended between ages 10 and 16. This study focuses on two case studies: Zia, a 27-year-old Black woman working as a social service mentor, and Joy, a 27-year-old Latina woman in film production. Both extensively used arts to explore their lived experiences, relationships, and evolving social realities. Examining their cases highlights how they leveraged their lived experiences to strengthen their personal and professional identity respectively.

Data analysis

Zia and Joy's interviews were coded using Dedoose, followed by analytical memo writing (using narrative analysis approach (Reismann, 2005) and visual mapping of learners' artistic journeys. Each interview resulted in 5-6 units of analysis, where each unit ranged from one page to 3-4 pages.

The unit of analysis were the instances of artistic events specifically happening within or due to the Out of School Program initiative, which would involve the engagement or interaction with their environment, home or institutional community members that create a supportive network for learning. Giving us details on the practices of art making along with the learner's emotional engagement with it. Each unit within interviews was then coded again using Dedoose for potential codes, which was then formed into categories, followed by a core idea to form the story for this study (Gibbs, 2007). Grounding the findings in the data (Charmaz, 2006). This iterative process led to the emergence of two primary themes: (1) *Identity Formation Through Personal Narratives in Arts*. And, (2) *Negotiating Connections with Community Members through Engagement with Artwork*.

Through this analysis, I am projecting the process of how experiencing art making in an OST arts program creates a sense of vulnerability among learners, strengthening their identity and connections with their community people. The emphasis has been on narratives of learners and ways in which they made meaning of arts during their practice at the program. And how this practice led to their exploration of self and others.

Positionality

Being an international student from India and not identifying racially with any of my participants, the only aspect that connects me with them is the history of studying in schools with colonization history and European descendant practices. Where my community cultural practices were not reflected in schools and made me distant from my own community. And so I center learning around relationships and identity, I focus on practices within institutions to understand the ways in which it impacts the learners and their home community.

Findings

The artwork of participants at V Arts extensively centers on the learner's personal stories. Their artwork transcends mere creativity, becoming an in-depth exploration of personal histories, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. This process of art-making provides a unique space for participants to express aspects of their identity that might otherwise remain hidden or unexpressed. The learner's identity in relation to others evolves as they engage with people through arts.

Identity Formation Through Personal Narratives in Arts

The sense of self among individual learners doesn't develop in isolation but is very much impacted by the ways they identify themselves within a group. This then directs their work and also their sense of belongingness in a place. Zia, a 27-year-old Black woman reflects on connections among students due to their common identities and ways in which it shapes their artwork:

"There are a lot of visual projects that have come from V Arts youth, that are very deep. And are showing experiences that otherwise don't get as much representation. One of my classmates made an art book talking about their mom's experience of being a nanny. So, a lot of kids are immigrants or are first generation Americans. So it's like, this is my project. It's your formula, you're really showing all of these different stories."

The way one identifies themselves in the program with others often becomes the basis of their connections with them, and this also influences the subject of their artwork. Learners depict their lived realities through art, representing their personal interpretations and emotions connected to those experiences. The program's practice of encouraging learners to focus on their own communities as subjects of art transforms art into an active medium for meaning-making. Through this process, learners not only bring their identities into their work but also strengthen them by having a deeper understanding of self within a larger societal context.

By being the protagonist of their stories they are empowering their identities, counteracting the feelings of marginalization they might otherwise experience in society. Making art in this context is not just an individual act but one which is socially constructed and depends on what is valued in the community within which we practice. Zia's narratives here explicitly states their subject of the artwork:

"One of the projects I did for over a year was about my pregnant mom who was African American and my step-dad who was also African American. In 2014 there were a lot of protests, in response to some very publicized killings of black men. I did this whole year on projects and that's what I know how to do, is to document and to reflect. I was talking about my mom's pregnancy, Like how one night we went to see the ultrasound. While walking ten miles in the street and talking to my family about the joy of a new life, but also, the fear around it. On one page, it's my step-dad, talking about his son being born but also feeling scared with what's going on."

Zia builds the artwork with a story of her pregnant mom who along with other family members is happy for the unborn child but at the same time is concerned about his/her safety due to the racial discrimination that exists in society against Black community. In this work, Zia is not only looking at herself as a learner within the program's community but as a Black person who is disturbed and tensed with the ongoing social racial injustice. This case study demonstrates the transformative power of art in providing a space for self-expression and identity exploration, particularly for individuals who are often socially marginalized due to their citizenship or ethnicity. By encouraging personal narratives in artistic practice, programs like V Arts can play a crucial role in fostering identity development and social consciousness among young artists.

Negotiating connections with community members through engagement with art

Personal narratives have emerged as the most significant subject matter for learners's artwork within the program. Building upon our earlier analysis of Zia's connections with peers and family through her art, we now explore how the public display of such deeply personal work creates new forms of engagement and emotional responses between the artist and the audience. While creating art based on personal stories can be liberating, allowing for emotional expression and identity construction, the public display of such intimate work presents challenges. Artists often feel vulnerable, uncertain about how audiences will respond or interpret their deeply personal creations. However, this process of emotional negotiation offers an opportunity for artists to better understand their audience and overcome fears of self-expression.

Specifically for communities of color, the participation of family members is particularly empowering; given that historically, institutions have been primarily shaped by White culture (Paris & Alim, 2014). These broader engagements with the artwork contribute to creating more inclusive works and spaces. Joy, 27-year-old Latina woman reflects on her experience of sharing personal work:

“I think, early on, we got used to being okay sharing personal stories and knowing that it was okay to be vulnerable and, hoping there wasn’t any judgment. It was always nerve-wracking for me because you were sharing some very personal work. They’re sometimes work that my own family hadn’t seen before. So that always made me nervous, but it always went fine.”

Joy's statement highlights the vulnerability inherent in sharing deeply personal artwork. The nerve-wracking experience of exposing parts of oneself that even close family members haven't seen underscores the intimate nature of the work. This vulnerability, confronted as the audience engages with the work, leads to a phase of emotional negotiation. This process helps the artist develop self-belief and trust in their artistic expression, while also building trust in the audience's capacity to understand and appreciate their work. These experiences of vulnerability and trust emerging from artistic practice foster new forms of connections with community members. Joy further reflects on her film's reception:

“So my mom and family went to see it. They told me that they saw it, and it was great. Usually, some people like it, which is good. That one is probably like my, I don’t want to call it successful, but I think it’s just gone to different places and was seen by a lot of people. So I’d say that one is like the highlight of my film career.”

Here, Joy associates the success of her film with its wide viewership and positive reception, particularly from her family. This illustrates how art's subjectivity creates spaces for families to share their perspectives, which Joy values in understanding her own work. Such participation from family and others strengthens Joy's connection with them, as their understanding and appreciation of her work reinforces her sense of identity and achievement as an artist.

These experiences demonstrate how the sharing of personal narratives through art can create profound connections between artists and their communities. The process of creating and sharing such intimate work not only contributes to the artist's ongoing identity development but also fosters new forms of understanding and engagement with diverse audiences. This underscores the potential of art as a powerful medium for personal expression, community building, and cross-cultural understanding.

Discussion

This study contributes to the socio-cultural analysis of arts education by illuminating the intricate relationship between learner's identities and their participation in cultural arts practices. Our findings reveal that the process of creating visual art, particularly when centered around personal narratives within a community that values it, serves as a powerful catalyst for identity development of the artist and their relationships with the community members.

The findings specifically the Zia's narratives highlight how the time invested in critical reflection and artistic representation fosters a deeper sense of self, enhancing learners' ability to understand and articulate their experiences. Which contributes to the understanding of arts education and ways in which it can serve as a tool for understanding and self-expression, particularly for communities that are socially marginalized based on their citizenship or ethnicity. Whereas, Joy's story adds on how art exhibition spaces become the ground of the connection development between artist and the community members. The exhibition of artwork firstly creates an inclusive access for all community members as there isn't any barrier such as academic text. Making artwork, a shared meaning space, where everyone can perceive and interpret in their own way. However, the way community members interact with the art, further shapes and strengthens these connections.

This documentation of shared experiences and mutual understanding developed through artistic practices, provides evidence for the transformative potential of art in bridging social and cultural divides. In conclusion, this study advances the socio-cultural analysis of arts education by demonstrating its profound impact on identity formation, community building, and social understanding. It underscores the need to view arts education not just as a means of skill development, but as a powerful medium for personal growth and social transformation.

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