

Meeting the Needs of Young People During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through Program Adaptations in Creative Youth Development Programs

Denise Montgomery

Abstract: Creative Youth Development (CYD) is a holistic approach to engaging young people through the arts and creativity to support them in thriving in all aspects of their lives. Young people consistently rank culminating events – performances, exhibitions, youth summits, screenings of their films – as a powerful motivator and key aspect of their involvement in creative youth development programs.

This article features insights from a qualitative research study in the United States that explored how CYD programs adapted culminating events to the largely virtual program environments of 2020. Findings include challenges organizations faced in 2020; strategies for adapting culminating events during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from centering core principles of youth leadership and prioritizing connection with young people to creative strategies for engaging youth, including positioning new event formats as opportunities for youth to co-create entirely new experiences and events; and implications for the youth development field.

Keywords: adapt, arts, culminating, holistic, pandemic

Introduction

Creative Youth Development (CYD) is a holistic approach to engaging young people, typically ranging from ages 8 through 18 and up to age 24, through the arts and creativity to support them in thriving in all aspects of their lives. Creative youth development is distinct from arts exposure programs and traditional conservatory programs in a number of ways, including: the emphasis on youth leadership and amplification of youth voice; immersion in a creative community with traditions and rituals that support a sense of belonging; the deep relationships with caring adults that includes reciprocal learning; hands-on skill building and original creative expression; provision of wraparound services such as mental health counseling that are commonly part of CYD; and in dosage, with CYD programs often involving 6 or more hours per week of involvement by young people. Many CYD programs in the United States enjoy longevity of participation among youth, regularly spanning three to seven years of active participation. Creativity and belonging are central components of creative youth development, and participation in CYD programs is transformative in the lives of young people.

Some exemplary creative youth development programming in the United States includes programs at these organizations: IHood Media in Pittsburgh, PA; A Reason to Survive (ARTS) in National City, California; Artists for Humanity in Boston, Massachusetts; David's

Harp Foundation, in San Diego, California; Destiny Arts Center in Oakland, California; Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit in Detroit, Michigan; Spy Hop in Salt Lake City, Utah; and VOX ATL in Atlanta, Georgia.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced CYD programs to rework their program models, and organizations that maintained programming largely did so in virtual settings. A key consideration for many organizations in adapting CYD programming was that young people consistently rank culminating events – performances, exhibitions, youth summits, screenings of their films – as a powerful motivator and key aspect of their involvement in creative youth development programs (Montgomery et al., 2013). The essence of the challenge was how to adapt CYD programs' culminating events to online programming while maintaining what is powerful and engaging about these events: the excitement of reaching a focal point in the creative process; the thrill of performing live or of showing creative work at a public event; the gratification of audience connection; and the sense of shared endeavor in working toward a common goal with peers.

Through their innovative approaches to adapting programming to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, CYD programs demonstrated the creativity that is in their DNA. These programs also demonstrated steadfast commitment to maintaining connection with young people at a time when connection was tenuous and constrained in many realms of young people's lives.

Even prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, students in the United States experienced among the highest rates of loneliness in the country, with 47.9% of students reporting loneliness (*U.S. Loneliness Index*, 2018). Globally, anxiety and depressive symptoms among young people doubled during the pandemic, as 20% of youth experienced anxiety symptoms and 25% of youth experienced depressive symptoms (Racine et al., 2021).

CYD's holistic approach is particularly needed and powerful at this moment with the ongoing, as of this writing, COVID-19 global pandemic and with the aftereffects of a pandemic characterized by heightened social isolation and incidence of mental health diagnoses and challenges among youth (Murthy et al., 2022). Creative youth development programs foster belonging and connection among youth participants and with artist mentors as central components of CYD. Belonging is an essential component of mental health (Allen, K. et al., 2022). CYD programs' prioritization of and approaches to supporting connection and belonging among young people contribute to youth mental health and well-being, making the strategies identified through this research useful in ongoing efforts to support youth mental health and well-being through creative youth development programs.

Methodology

This applied research project sought to understand the challenges CYD programs faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify strategies for CYD programs and other youth programs with regard to adapting events to virtual environments. The research was designed in consultation with CYD practitioners, funders, and others involved in the field of creative youth development.