

YouthSites: Histories of Creativity, Care and Learning in the City

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Oxford University Press, 2023 (part of the Oxford Social Justice and Youth Community Practice series)

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“This is a book about a sector that is not recognized as such, organizations that do not like being institutionalized, forms of education that exist outside the main-stream curriculum, types of aesthetic expression that are often unrecognized, visions of civic participation that run against the grain, and opportunities for socially marginalized young people who are frequently denied them.” -- p. 1, YouthSites

This opening statement from YouthSites summarizes the challenges of the research conducted by the authors, but also the need for this research. Since the 1960s, individuals and organizations have searched for ways to meet the needs of marginalized youth who were not being served in more formal learning situations. Over the years, these efforts have adapted to changes in economic circumstances, governmental policy, and populations, and evolved from initiatives into more permanent organizations and structures. The primary goal of Youth Sites is to summarize this work and make a case for the existence of a “non-formal youth sector.” Organizations which exist on the margins of more formal learning opportunities are not often viewed as a sector, even though they exist in many (if not most) major cities and interact with education, arts, and urban youth provision services.

Section 1 of the book is devoted to outlining the research parameters, as well as discussing the history of youth arts programs and defining the kinds of experiences youth have in these programs. Some of the many challenges encountered by the authors include building complete pictures of these organizations (given that for many years they were not structured in a way that required good record keeping); dealing with the fact that they are not overseen by one governmental agency or other institution; and attempting to find commonalities between the cities and countries represented. It is often difficult to track participation, because so many kinds exist, including drop-in, membership, and limited term classes or workshops. Overall, however, the authors were able to define a list of intended outcomes that were consistent among the organizations studied: learning life skills, well-being, training (including internships, mentoring and networking), community cultural development, visibility for young peoples’ ideas and projects, and broader social benefits such as reduction in anti-social behaviors and increased engagement in the community.

The nature of funding has changed over time, placing emphasis at various times on governmental support, private philanthropy and entrepreneurship. The authors spend a significant amount of time in various chapters explaining how neoliberalism has affected attitudes toward urban youth and the arts, government spending, and learning standards. The

pandemic was, of course, an additional factor in the ability of organizations to deliver services to youth, although many of the sampled organizations showed great creativity in engaging youth during this time.

Section 2 is devoted to summarizing the history, programming, and leadership of organizations in these cities. Each chapter presents an issue, such as the definition of education, the need for making spaces for urban youth, and the aesthetics and creativity of YouthSites programs. The authors then choose one organization from each city as an example of the issue at hand. While the examples were fascinating, they didn't always prove that there were consistent conclusions to be drawn from the examples. This may be intentional; having already defined the sector as existing on the margins, many of the studied programs were initiated by entrepreneurial individuals and organizations who saw a need and tried to fix it, rather than by developing programs for youth in existing, more mainstream organizations.

For me, one of the most useful parts of the book was the appendix, which lists dozens of organizations with charted comparisons of the type of student they served, neighborhood, mission, art forms, date founded, number of students, turnover percentage, governance and key funders. This side-by-side comparison did much more to clarify the similarities and differences between programs than the chapter narratives.

For this research, the authors chose to focus on three cities: London, Toronto and Vancouver. While I understand that the authors chose communities with which they were familiar, this limited scope falls short of presenting a complete picture of the issues at hand. It's hard to draw conclusions when examples from the United States are omitted. Granted, I may be exposing my own prejudices as a resident of the United States, but I found it difficult at times to extrapolate information to my own situation, given that the governmental and charitable systems in the United Kingdom and Canada are so different from those in the United States. And although I recognized many of the authors' conclusions as valid based on my own experience, I couldn't be sure that all were applicable to my situation or those of students and youth workers in the United States. Similarly, the focus on urban areas neglects the important work that is being done in rural areas, isolated communities and on reservations. Certainly, urban youth have a set of challenges that often need intervention, but rural communities are dealing with their own issues: youth flight, un- and under-employment, and lack of access to broadband internet and other technological necessities in the 21st century.

The authors are absolutely correct in stating from the beginning that the lack of scholarly research on non-formal arts learning opportunities for youth made their task difficult. With their meticulous research, they have added considerably to the conversation, and established a template for others to follow. My hope is that the baton is passed to scholars from other countries, particularly (but not limited to) the United States, and can thus be expanded and refined in the future.

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