
Thinking Matters Symposium

2022 Thinking Matters Symposium

A Model for Equity in Arts Education for Youth in Greater Portland, Maine

Catherine Scheirer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking-matters-symposium>



Part of the [Art Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Scheirer, Catherine, "A Model for Equity in Arts Education for Youth in Greater Portland, Maine" (2022). *Thinking Matters Symposium*. 31.

https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking-matters-symposium/2022/poster_presentations/31

This Poster Session is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thinking Matters Symposium by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

Catherine Scheirer | Dr. Sarah Lockridge, Ph.D., Faculty Advisor
Department of Geography-Anthropology | University of Southern Maine

Introduction & Method

Time and time again, participation in arts activities such as dance, music, theatre, and visual arts is proven to have significant positive impacts on participants, regardless of age, experience, or background. Even though the arts have been acknowledged as critical for mental, physical, and emotional health, especially for children and adolescents, research has shown a consistent correlation between a lack of arts opportunities for underprivileged students as linked to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographical location. These inequities are driving academics, educators, policymakers, parents, and community members to identify and strategically address the key barriers preventing equitable availability of quality arts education for marginalized students across the country. My research project takes into consideration the key barriers to arts education and attempts to provide a practical preliminary model that can hopefully be applied to overcome patterns of inequity in access to arts education in any community. The findings are based on identifying key themes arising in the qualitative data collected via in-depth ethnographic interviews held with gatekeepers from both the Children's Museum & Theatre of Maine (CMTM) and the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine (BGCSM). These gatekeepers identified the following barriers: financial difficulties, lack of transportation, ethnic relevancy, and arts education awareness, as well as a lack of time due to demands around family commitments. Most importantly, the gatekeepers shared how they are working to address each of these barriers and what they hope to see in the future of arts education. The data from these interviews resulted in the following model for equitable access to arts education: inclusiveness; relevancy; funding, grants & policies; and the role of community.

Analysis: The Pieces of the Puzzle

Inclusiveness

For both organizations, the student population is diverse in terms of age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographical location, educational level, learning style, and levels of interest. As one gatekeeper states, addressing inclusivity requires that they work towards "engaging a broad spectrum of learners and being a place where everyone feels like they belong." This means providing a wide range of opportunities at varying levels of difficulty whereby attendees can explore their interests and talents in an accessible and meaningful way. Additionally, each organization engages the parents or caregivers by hosting programs whereby children and adults in their lives are actively learning side by side.

Relevancy

Students in Maine today are more diverse than ever and represent different races, ethnicities, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, both organizations want their programs to be relevant to all of the students participating in their programs. This often means drawing from the diverse music and arts traditions that exist in the Greater Portland community and beyond. At the BGCSM, children and adolescents have been able to learn about different dance styles, music genres, and create visual arts that reflect their interests due to exposure to a wide spectrum of cultural traditions. The CMTM has hosted several local music groups representing ethnic music genres such as Passamaquoddy and Guinean drumming. Additionally, staff at CMTM work hard to include art projects and art exhibits that include a variety of ethnicities and cultures. A staff member states, "[W]hen [visitors] are here, it is really important for us that they see themselves literally on our walls..." This is a goal that can be clearly seen in the beautiful works of art on their walls, created by students and local artists depicting individuals of all shapes, sizes, and skin colors.

Analysis: Continued

Funding, Grants, & Policies

While visitor admittance, enrollment, and other fees do exist, both organizations firmly believe that no one should be turned away because of financial issues thus the presence of scholarships and other forms of financial aid. Scholarships are offered on a sliding scale, as are enrollment and entrance fees. By providing "pay what you can" performances in CMTM's "Maddy's Theatre, an informant states that "financial issues become much less of an issue for students and their families." It not only increases student participation but also allows families to attend and learn more about arts opportunities available to them. In an effort to maintain these scholarships, certain staff members spend a significant amount of time writing grants and advocating for education policies that support arts education.

Student Autonomy

At the BGCSM, students are given room to discover their artistic potential for themselves thus allowing them to find their true interests and talents. This autonomy is essential as it helps motivate and encourage students, making what they choose to pursue their own style as individual artists. The CMTM has found similar value in student autonomy, particularly in Maddy's Theatre. At the time of the interviews, they were collaborating with the BGC Riverton Clubhouse by going to the clubhouse itself -thus overcoming the barrier of transportation- and helping the students create and rehearse their own projects. Ultimately, the students perform their work at Maddy's Theatre for a night whereby parents and caregivers are invited to see the artistic growth of their children.

Community

In order to effectively address equitable access to arts education, the gatekeepers from both organizations also stressed the value of community organizations working together in a supportive capacity. They identified the powerful relationship that exists between BGCSM and CMTM in coalition with other local groups with similar goals with a BGCSM gatekeeper stating, "We make it work as community partners." In addition, local artists and music groups collaborate with these organizations, drawing from a variety of art and music genres, often opening a whole new world for their students and helping them find their own voice. Also, entire families participate by contributing time and funds to help grow the overall impact of non-profit arts programs. The result of such a community-wide connection is truly the epitome of the adage "stronger together" and is considered by many to be the lifeblood of an equitable arts education.

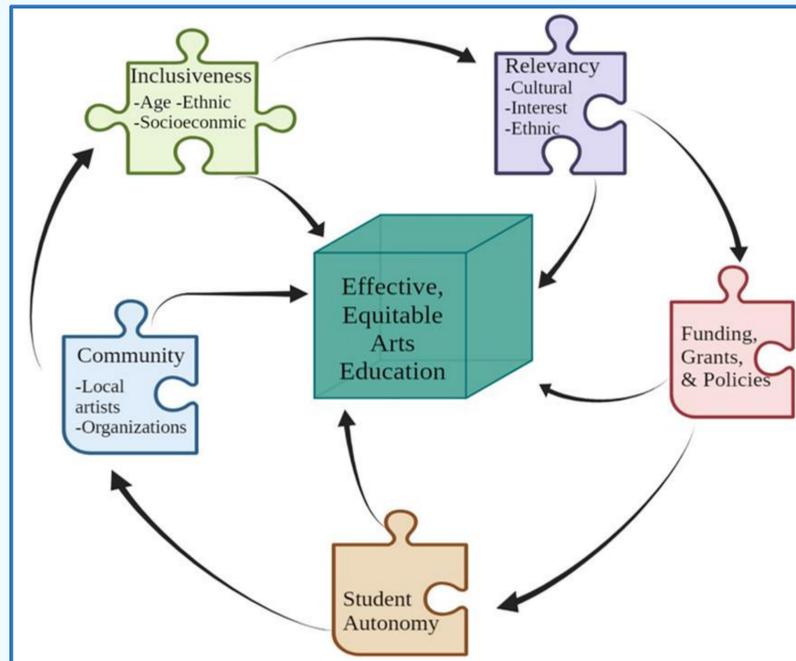


Photo courtesy of the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine



Photo courtesy of the Children's Museum & Theatre of Maine

Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank the incredible staff at the Children's Museum & Theatre of Maine and the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Maine for their participation and for their amazing work in local communities.

Considerations for the Future

"It's never going to be done, there's always going to be new partnerships or new need or things that are always going to be developing." –Gatekeeper, CMTM

Just as students are constantly learning and developing skills in the arts or in other fields, educators must also always be on a forward continuum. Both organizations were hopeful for a future of equitable access to the arts but seemed to emphasize an increasing need for addressing cultural relevancy in their programming as well as a desire to offer programming to people of all ages. More specifically, the BGCSM hopes for more staffing and time in the future in order to focus even more on the arts, pursue greater outreach opportunities, and gain more funding. The CMTM shares a similar need for continued grants and funding from a variety of sources as it is critical to maintaining the high quality of their programs and for future growth. Both groups emphasized that achieving equitable access to the arts is indeed an ongoing passionate pursuit as years of inequity cannot be undone overnight. Nevertheless, amazing steps have been taken not only locally by the BGCSM and CMTM, but also nationwide thus creating enormous headway in providing effective and equitable arts education for an increasingly diverse student body in the Greater Portland area and beyond.