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Arts education partnerships: sources of harmony and dissonance with cultural institutions' collaborative efforts

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ABSTRACT

Due to budget constraints, schools in the United States have increasingly turned to community arts organizations for support. School-community arts partnership stakeholders collaborate because of shared missions to provide students with valuable arts learning experiences. Investigations of these initiatives indicate that these partnerships improve arts learning opportunities and increase public support and resources for arts education. However, not much is known about the experiences and perspectives of the arts organizations that participate in these partnerships. Coordinating collective efforts with a multitude of institutions and interests poses challenges. In this study, we examine survey data collected from arts organization administrators who participated in a large-scale school-community arts partnership initiative. We find that these organizations are generally positive about their impacts on students' educational outcomes, but there is substantial variation in these views. We also find that organizations differ in their levels of support for these collective efforts. Sources of this variation appears to be attributable to organizations' preexisting resources and extent to which they are established. While this difference in levels of support is potentially inevitable, we find evidence that the operations handled by the "backbone" organization, i.e. the initiative's facilitators and overseers, can significantly influence organizations' levels of support for these efforts. Organizations are more likely to support these collaborative efforts when they believe the backbone organization ensures transparency with initiative operations, provides regular, effective communication, and effectively resolves competing priorities.

Introduction

Arts education maintains a tenuous role in American public education. In many countries, the arts hold a prominent place in the national education system (Bamford, 2009). However, the federal nature of the United States' school systems and lack of a strong uniform cultural identity has produced more variegated approaches. The U.S. Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) law has placed the arts alongside reading and math when

defining a "well-rounded education", but implementation fluctuates due to differing state and local policies, priorities, and resources. Implementation ranges from government-funded networks of whole-school models that vigorously incorporate the arts, such as arts magnet schools (Noblit, Dickson Corbett, Wilson, & McKinney, 2008), to schools that offer little-to-no arts education (Yee, 2014).

In addition to variation in policy implementation, childhood arts education opportunities have steadily declined since the 1980s (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). The emphasis on accountability testing in "core subjects" became widespread with the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, which requires states to issue standardized assessments with sanctions for schools that fail to make "adequate yearly progress". This policy has been linked to decreases in time and resources for the arts (Government Accountability Office, 2009). Arts experiences during childhood are strongly predictive of adulthood participation and engagement, meaning that decreases in access early in life likely has lasting effects (Kisida, Greene, & Bowen, 2014; Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011).

An increasingly popular strategy for addressing arts educational inequities is the formation and facilitation of school-community partnerships. School-community arts partnerships are typically intended to be collaborative efforts that engage cultural institutions, schools, government officials, philanthropists, researchers, and a "backbone" organization that facilitates and oversees these collaborations' operations (Bowen & Kisida, 2017; Perille, 2016). Partnerships have developed and implemented strategies for increasing student access to creative learning experiences in several large U.S. urban school districts, such as Austin (Creative Learning Initiative), Boston (Arts Expansion Initiative), Chicago (Creative Schools Initiative), Dallas (Learning Partners), Los Angeles (Arts for LA), New Orleans (KID smART), and Seattle (Creative Advantage). Prior studies suggest that partnerships increase arts resources and learning opportunities for students, but there remain important sustainability questions about these collaborative efforts. Partnerships between a myriad of stakeholders require navigations through diverse, sometimes conflicting, motivations and objectives to accomplish shared goals (Kenny, 2017). Therefore, investigating stakeholders' perspectives and experiences from working together in these initiatives provides valuable insights that pose important considerations and implications for the long-term sustainability of these multi-sector collaborations.

In this study we rely on original survey data to investigate the perceptions of leaders from arts organizations that were engaged in Houston's Arts Access Initiative. We analyse these data to identify and assess potential sources of cohesion and conflict that occur in these collaborative efforts. We find that arts organizations generally agree that the arts provide remarkable benefits for the students they serve. However, administrators exhibit substantial variation in the extent to which they perceive arts educational impacts. Organization leaders tend to see greater promise in their impacts on students' social and emotional learning, self-expression, creativity, and communication skills, and less promise with impacts on standardized test scores, attendance, and parent and community involvement.

We also find that, while arts organizations are generally supportive of these collective efforts, levels of support vary substantially. These differences appear to be partially attributable to organizations' abilities to independently provide arts educational programmes

without the supports provided in the shared initiative. Finally, we find that the "backbone" organization, i.e. the entity that oversees the initiative's operations, can have a great deal of influence over participants' support for continuing these collective efforts. Specifically, arts organizations' willingness to support these efforts depends on their perceptions of whether their overseers successfully maintain transparency, effective communication, and resolve competing priorities. We believe these findings provide valuable information regarding the challenges that stakeholders are likely to encounter in the formation, expansion, and sustainability of school-community arts partnerships.

Previous research

The earliest evidence of the impacts of these partnerships in the U.S. comes from evaluations of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), which formed in 1992, and the ten-year initiative that launched in the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1999. The CAPE investigators conducted regular surveys, classroom observations, interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and case studies, and found high levels of buy-in from principals and classroom teachers, and the students responded with enthusiasm to the arts integration unit lessons. However, the evaluators also found mixed, though mostly null, results on test score achievement gains (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999). Evaluators of the Los Angeles initiative conducted several semi-structured interviews with arts organization administrators, school district arts advisors, and teachers and principals from 11 schools, selected via a stratified random sampling strategy to investigate how well the Los Angeles school-community arts partnerships were functioning, the process and considerations by which partnerships were formed, and how these partnerships were evolving. The Los Angeles evaluators found that arts organizations and schools favoured students gaining arts exposure and appreciation as opposed to increasing knowledge or skills in the arts. Schools tended to want more professional development, while arts organizations' main objective was public awareness and arts appreciation (Rowe, Werber, Kaganoff, & Robyn, 2004). More recently, partnerships have developed and expanded in cities such as Austin, Boston, Dallas, New Orleans, and Seattle. Investigations of some of these initiatives have indicate that these efforts have the potential to successfully cultivate more partnerships between schools and cultural institutions (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Perille, 2016); expand the credit-bearing arts education courses available to students (Gibson, 2016); and increase public school arts education funding through public advocacy (Perille, 2016).

There is also an extensive body of research on school- and teacher-level interactions resulting from arts partnerships. Studies on this important aspect of community arts partnerships have shown that partnerships with artists can lead to significant benefits for teachers and their students, but are not necessarily positive nor sufficient means for ensuring that students gain quality arts educational opportunities (Kenny & Christophersen, 2018). Professional artists bring passion and expertise that can galvanize the arts in schools (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Colley, 2008). However, artists often have agenda that do not align with teachers' objectives and priorities (Boyce-Tillman, 2018). Visiting artists tend to prioritize students' exposure to the arts, and this emphasis does not necessarily contribute to schools' and teachers' student learning objectives (Hanley, 2003; Holdhus, 2018). Professional artists also often lack expertise and experience with pedagogy and struggle to

connect with students and their school communities (Holdhus & Espeland, 2013; Kind, de Cosson, Irwin, & Grauer, 2007). Moreover, policymakers may view partnerships as a cost-efficient means for substituting, rather than complementing, more-traditional learning that is provided through regular instruction from classroom-based arts educators (Hanley, 2003).

Houston's Arts Access Initiative

The Arts Access Initiative (AAI) was launched in 2013 with the mission "that every student in Houston will have the opportunity to benefit cognitively, creatively, emotionally, and academically through the arts". The AAI was designed to primarily serve the Houston Independent School District, one of the largest, most diverse districts in the U.S. At the time of this evaluation, HISD served just over 200,000 pre-kindergarten through 12th grade students, making it the largest in the State of Texas and the 7th largest in the U.S. Eighty-percent of students were from "economically disadvantaged" households, meaning that they met the federal criteria for receiving subsidized lunch. Sixty-two percent of students identify as Hispanic/Latinx, 23% as African-American, 9% as white, and 4% as Asian. Forty-five percent of these students were participating in English language-learning programmes.

Similar to the initiatives in other major U.S. cities, AAI stakeholders emphasized the goals of equity, impact, and sustainability. Stakeholders collected campus-level data in 2013 on the existing levels of arts educational resources throughout HISD. These data enabled AAI leaders to target schools that were in greatest need of support. AAI stakeholders then strategized ways in which Houston's arts organizations could band together to improve the state of arts education throughout the community.

Collective impact initiative plans were first implemented in the 2015–2016 school year. To participate, schools had to commit to the mission of the Initiative, engage in strategic arts planning with the AAI director, participate in arts-integration professional development, attend peer-network mentoring sessions, and designate a campus-level arts liaison to coordinate AAI-related efforts. Schools were also required to commit between $1 to $10, per student, to AAI programme funding, earmarked to provide arts experiences through partnerships that provided teaching-artist residencies, in-school professional artist performances, field trips, and afterschool programmes. The AAI director and staff encouraged principals to budget for a diversity of programmes such that all of the major arts disciplines were included: dance, music, theatre, and visual arts. The Houston Endowment, a local foundation, provided a $1:$1 match for the school's, per student, financial commitment.

In a randomized-controlled trial investigation of AAI's impacts on student outcomes in its first two years of implementation, we found that increasing arts learning opportunities significantly reduces the proportion of students receiving disciplinary infractions, increases writing achievement, and increases compassion for others (Bowen & Kisida, 2019). Moreover, we found that elementary students exhibited increases in school engagement, college aspirations, and arts-facilitated empathy. We also found that these effects varied substantially by student subgroups, with elementary students and those designated to receive "limited English proficiency" programme services benefitting more from these arts learning experiences.

Similar to the Chicago and Los Angeles cases, Houston's AAI stakeholders had concerns about the perceptions and experiences of arts organization and school leaders and the longer-term sustainability of the Initiative. Using the findings and insights from those previous evaluations, we developed research questions and strategies to assess the perceived successes and challenges of these partnerships, the answers of which may help ensure the longevity of such programmes. Specifically, we jointly determined that it was critical to examine arts organizations' perceptions of their educational impacts, changes in their operations as a result of participating in the Initiative, and sources of support and concern for the implementation and continuation of the Initiative.

Data collection

Thirty-two arts organizations formed the AAI in the 2016–2017 academic year, the second year of the Initiative and the year in which we collected data for this investigation. We conducted a focus with administrators from three arts organizations that lasted approximately 90 minutes. We trained a graduate research assistant who conducted semi-structured interviews with five arts organization administrators that each lasted approximately 20 minutes. Focus group and interview participants were selected via a purposive sampling strategy. We collected a diversity of administrator perspectives from arts organizations that varied in size and scope, resource levels, arts discipline (dance, music, theatre, visual arts, or multiple disciplines), and extent of experience serving K-12 schools.

The focus group and interview data were used to construct items for a structured survey that we administered to all AAI arts organization administrators. The same question topics were covered in the focus group, semi-structured interviews, and surveys. However, with the exception of an open-ended question for providing general, additional comments about the AAI, the survey entirely consisted of close-ended Likert-scaled items, where respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements and sentiments we gathered from our focus group and interviews. This process led to 13 items on the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with particular arts educational impacts, 12 items on how participation in the initiative affected the organizations' programme offerings and delivery, and 12 items about organizations' assessments of initiative operations.

Administrators from all participating organizations were emailed a link to complete the survey. A reminder email was sent one week after the initial email, and a second reminder email and phone call was issued a week after the first reminder. Twenty-four of the 32 arts organizations (75%) completed the survey. We were not able to collect additional data to determine why eight organizations did not participate. On average, the arts organizations in our sample had been operating for 45 years. Organizations reported serving an average of 38,317 students with four full-time paid staff members who served in the organization's education branch. There was substantial variation on these variables. Organizations ranged from being relatively brand new, with just one year in existence, to having been in operation for 117 years, and ranged from serving 150 to 237,000 students per year. Our sample consisted of six music, six visual arts, five theatre, three multidiscipline, two creative writing, and two dance organizations.

Findings

Views on arts educational impacts

Our first questions investigated arts organizations' perceptions of arts educational impacts. School leaders have become increasingly concerned with outcomes tied to accountability measures (Government Accountability Office, 2009). A concern with these collaborative efforts is whether arts organizations' beliefs align with schools' accountability demands regarding impacts on measures assessed in school accountability systems (Hanley, 2003; Rowe et al., 2004). In addition to examining arts administrators' beliefs regarding their impacts on measures assessed in school accountability systems, we also investigate their perceptions regarding impacts on meaningful educational outcomes that have not been traditionally used for accountability purposes.

The proportion of arts organization administrators who strongly agreed with statements on arts impacts on educational outcomes are provided in Table 1. Organization leaders have positive views about arts impacts on all the outcomes we examined. The highest levels of agreement are with social and emotional learning, self-expression, creativity, and communication skills, all of which garnered more than 90% "strongly agree" responses. Based on a two-tailed t-test, the percentage of arts organization administrators strongly agreeing with these perceptions were significantly greater than for perceived effects on standardized test scores, attendance, and parent and community school involvement, which ranged from 42 to 54% strongly supporting these claims ($p < 0.05$).

Table 1. Arts impacts on students: arts organization leader perceptions.

% Strongly agreeing with the statement that participation in the arts positively affects …	
Social and emotional learning	95.83
	(4.17)
Self-expression	95.83
	(4.17)
Creativity	91.67
	(5.76)
Communication skills	91.67
	(5.76)
Confidence and self-esteem	87.50
	(6.90)
Student-school engagement with otherwise disengaged students	83.33
	(7.77)
Empathy	79.17
	(8.47)
Student-school engagement	70.83
	(9.48)
School climate	66.67
	(9.83)
Tolerance	66.67
	(9.83)
Student attendance	54.17
	(10.39)
Standardized test scores	54.17
	(10.39)
Parent and community school involvement	41.61
	(10.28)
Sample Size	24

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with "PK-12 students' participation in the arts positively affects … ".

Influences on arts organization practices and support for collaboration

The value of coordinated and facilitated efforts are unlikely to be equal across arts organizations. To dig deeper into this question, we asked administrators to respond to a series of survey items about the impacts of participating in the AAI. These results are provided in Table 2. Arts organizations were generally supportive of the Initiative, but we find substantial variation. Eighty-eight percent of the arts organizations agreed that the AAI "has been beneficial to my organization". The main factors contributing to support for this collective effort are the sense that participating in the AAI facilitated networking amongst the different arts organizations (88% in agreement), helped with identifying new school partners for organizations to collaborate (79%), and enhanced organizations' visibility in the community (75%).

These broad areas of support, however, mask significant variation by organization type. One theme that emerged from our focus group and interviews was that more-established arts organizations felt less dependent on the Initiative to fulfil their educational missions, while less-established organizations were more likely to express having benefitted from the AAI. We break our survey sample into two groups of "bigger, more-established" and "smaller/less-established" organizations, and find noteworthy differences between these groups. We operationally define "bigger, more established" as a mutually exclusive

Table 2. Assessments of AAI's impacts.

% Agreeing that AAI …	Smaller / Less Established	Bigger, More Established	Difference
Has been beneficial to the organization	100.00	62.50	37.50***
	(0.00)	(18.30)	(13.08)
Has effectively brought about the development and use of community-wide shared system of data and measurement	73.33	37.50	35.83
	(11.82)	(18.30)	(21.78)
Improved the organization's ability to obtain funding	46.67	12.50	34.17*
	(13.33)	(12.50)	(18.28)
Diversified student populations organization serves	53.33	25.00	28.33
	(13.33)	(16.37)	(21.11)
Has promoted greater community awareness of PK-12 arts education access issues	73.33	50.00	23.33
	(11.82)	(18.90)	(22.29)
Increased organization's number of students served	60.00	37.50	22.50
	(13.09)	(18.30)	(22.50)
Positively affected networking with other arts organizations	93.33	75.00	18.33
	(6.67)	(16.37)	(17.67)
Enhanced organization's visibility	80.00	62.50	17.50
	(10.69)	(18.30)	(21.19)
Expanded organization's offerings to PK-12 grade schools	66.67	50.00	16.67
	(12.60)	(18.90)	(22.71)
Helped with organization's recruiting of staff/volunteers	26.67	12.50	14.17
	(11.82)	(12.50)	(17.20)
Has provided Houston ISD's students with greater access to arts learning opportunities	100.00	87.50	12.50
	(0.00)	(12.50)	(12.50)
Supports organization's efforts with serving PK-12 schools	86.67	75.00	11.67
	(9.09)	(16.37)	(18.72)
Helped organization identify new school partners	80.00	75.00	5.00
	(10.69)	(16.37)	(19.55)
Sample Size	15	8	23

Note: ***statistically significant (two-tailed) at $p < 0.01$; *significant at $p < 0.10$; standard errors in parentheses. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with "Participating in the Arts Access Initiative … " Responses from the backbone organization were excluded from these analyses, which brings the sample size to 23.

category for those organizations serving over 10,000 students per year, for at least 15 years, and with three full-time, paid staff members working in its education department.

"Smaller" or "less-established" arts organizations, on average, were more likely to agree than "bigger, more established" organizations on every survey item that assessed perceived benefits from participating in the AAI. All smaller or less-established organizations agreed that the AAI was beneficial to their organization, but this figure drops to 63% for the bigger, more-established arts organizations, a difference of 38 percentage points. Compared to the bigger, more-established organizations, smaller or less-established organizations are more likely to feel as though the AAI expanded their offerings in schools, diversified their student populations, promoted greater community awareness of arts education, enhanced their visibility, and improved their ability to obtain funding; these differences fail to achieve traditional levels of statistical significance, which is potentially attributable to sample size. In fact, while nearly half of the smaller or less-established arts organizations agreed that the AAI improved their ability to obtain funding, only 13% of the bigger, more-established arts organizations agreed with this statement.

Finally, we are interested in exploring organizations' perceptions that could affect the longer-term sustainability of collective efforts to facilitate school-community partnerships. While there has been a notable rise in these partnerships, there have also been striking shortcomings. Holding together such coalitions when there are a myriad of needs and objectives has proven challenging. We find that all of the surveyed arts organizations were generally supportive of community-wide common agenda to ensure greater arts educational access. However, there was disagreement with organizational support for the continuation of the AAI. We developed 12 survey items based on concerns regarding continued support for the AAI that were voiced in the focus group and interviews. When investigating the relationship between organizations' responses to these items and indication for continued support for the AAI, a number of items emerge as significant predictors. Table 3 provides a series of bivariate regression estimates to determine what predicts support for the continuation of the AAI. Continued support for the AAI appears to be conditional on beliefs that the facilitators of the collective efforts communicate developments and proceedings, respond to questions in a timely manner, operate under a common agenda, resolve competing priorities, and operate with transparency regarding operational and financial decisions. The theme around these significant predictors is clear. Some organizations feel like they do not have a voice in the AAI and feel the organization lacks transparency. This is not surprising, as the success of any collaborative effort requires ensuring that members feel acknowledged and informed in decision-making processes.

Discussion

In this study, we identify and explore successes and challenges of a large-scale school-community arts partnership initiative. Through a collaborative process involving a major school district, community arts organizations, philanthropic efforts, and a backbone organization, members came together to address arts education deficits. After identifying schools most in need, the Initiative effectively increased arts funding and experiences for students in participating schools. A randomized evaluation of the Initiative found positive impacts on students, including improved student discipline, writing achievement,

Table 3. Predictors of support for continuing the AAI.

Item	Support for Continuing AAI
Belief that AAI operational decisions are transparent	0.55***
	(0.18)
Belief that AAI developments and proceedings are communicated to organization	0.54**
	(0.19)
Organization's questions and concerns about AAI are responded to in a timely manner	0.53***
	(0.18)
Belief that competing priorities are effectively resolved within the AAI	0.50**
	(0.18)
Belief that AAI website is kept up-to-date	0.46**
	(0.19)
Belief that AAI financial decisions are transparent	0.42**
	(0.19)
Belief that AAI effectively operates under a common agenda	0.41**
	(0.19)
Supports the development and use of community-wide arts organization-shared system of data and measurement	0.33
	(0.21)
Organization's voice is heard in deliberation and construction of AAI agenda	0.29
	(0.20)
Organization's AAI contributions are recognized	0.28
	(0.21)
AAI objectives viewed as being aligned with organization's	0.17
	(0.22)
Organization is actively involved in the AAI	−0.15
	(0.22)
Sample Size	23

Note: ***statistically significant (two-tailed) at $p < 0.01$; **significant at $p < 0.05$; standard errors in parentheses. All items have been standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Respondents asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each of these statements. Responses from the backbone organization were excluded from these analyses, bringing the sample size to 23.

compassion for others, school engagement, and arts-facilitated empathy (Bowen & Kisida, 2019).

With a rich set of survey data from participating arts organization leaders, we investigated how these critical stakeholders perceive their contributions to schools' educational outcomes in addition to their perceptions of school-community arts impacts. We find that arts administrators see greater promise in arts learning impacts on student self-expression, social and emotional learning, creativity, and communication skills – more so than outcomes tied to standardized assessments, attendance, and parent and community involvement. The conventional wisdom surrounding the discussion around U.S. education policy is that school leaders have been incentivized to chase programmes that improve test scores and attendance. While the majority of arts organization leaders strongly agree that their efforts positively impact these outcomes, they are more likely to believe that their contributions are having positive impacts on other educational outcomes. An implication of this finding is that, as policymakers expand outcomes used for accountability purposes, arts education advocates should lobby for those that perhaps better align with the impacts of these experiences.

To identify sources of cohesion and dissonance among the collection of arts organizations and the AAI backbone organization, we investigated feedback on their experiences. We find that arts organization administrators are generally positive about the impacts of this collective effort on improving students' arts access. Eighty-eight% of respondents agreed that participation was beneficial. However, support among more-established

organizations is notably lower. Smaller or less-established arts organizations appear to be benefitting more in terms of enhancing their visibility and gaining opportunities for obtaining funding. These divides suggest that making sure bigger, more-established organizations will remain involved despite being less reliant on the Initiative could prove challenging.

Finally, we identified key sources of support for the sustainability of school-community arts partnerships. Continued support for the Initiative significantly relies on the ability to operate under a common agenda, resolve competing priorities, and operate with transparency, both in terms of operational and financial decisions. We believe that these will be significant but not insurmountable challenges that organizations face when forming and furthering partnership initiatives that involve collective action approaches to expand arts educational access. While we believe these findings provide valuable contributions to this field, there are notable limitations. We assured study participants that their responses would remain confidential. However, responses were not anonymous, and we asked respondents to provide information that identified their organization for the purposes of our analyses. Providing this information may have influenced their responses. Moreover, school-community arts initiatives, while similar in many ways, vary significantly in terms of their operations and dynamics. Therefore, it is important to caution that these findings may be limited in terms of their generalizability.

Conclusion

The fragmented nature of the United States' federalist nature generates highly heterogeneous approaches to schooling, especially in subjects like the arts. At the same time, most arts and cultural organizations prioritize educational outreach and programming as part of their mission (Selwood, Adams, Bazalgette, Coles, & Tambling, 1998). This prioritization presents a valuable and cost-effective opportunity for schools to complement their efforts through partnerships with the arts and cultural sector. Despite some expected growing pains that confront the early pioneers of such initiatives, the lessons learned thus far suggest that this collaborative model has enormous promise for students' arts learning experiences, while also strengthening the role of arts organizations in the shared mission of education. However, it is critical that policymakers and administrators are mindful of variations in the perceived benefits and contributions of participating arts organizations and the importance of transparency and communication for ensuring the long-term sustainability and support for these collective efforts.

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Notes on contributors

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