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Enacting an Assets Pedagogy to Develop Youth Assets: Teaching K-12 Urban Youth in an After-School Visual Arts Program Using Participatory Action Research

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Chapter I: Introduction

"It's like art class without the school."

Lucas, Grade 6[1]

My earliest interest in education was embedded in fostering social change and democratic practice. Yet, any amount of study in the field makes it painfully obvious how far we have to go to achieve democratic principles and equitable access to education. Ladson-Billings (2007) points to the vast disparity in spending per pupil in public schools, which amounts to nearly 100 percent less in urban districts as compared to their suburban counterparts (p. 317). This figure counters the argument that our nation actually provides equal access to a quality education. Those without wealth and privilege are often denied the opportunities that quality education fosters. Through my studies and various teaching experiences I examined the problems surrounding democratic teaching practices as it related to urban schools and students.

My first teaching experience began fresh out of Buffalo State in 2007. I taught Middle School art at Public School #11, a K-8 building serving mostly urban students. While there was some economic and cultural diversity, the majority of students were African-American and working class while the vast majority of staff was Caucasian. I was aware of my shiny idealism and prepared myself to steer clear of the familiar traps in urban education that I had encountered through former readings and observation.

I remember my first day in a fog. I had my syllabi printed, my teaching scripts rehearsed, and my learning activities prepared as I waited anxiously for the first students. A boisterous fourth grade class entered. Within the opening minutes I knew I would not

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[1] All names of people and places are changed to pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of all research participants.

be sticking to my plan. Some students snickered, interrupted, and argued with one another and me. Some sat quietly amused at the chaos around them and played along with their "game" of school.

That first year I spent the majority of my energy determining how to manage the multitude of creative behaviors that students developed to prevent themselves from engaging with a challenge. I was engulfed in what Haberman (1991) identified more than twenty years ago as the pedagogy of poverty in which in which urban teachers are funneled into eliciting compliance rather than thinking with basic pedagogical practices (p. 292). In my classroom I felt the systemic effect of the pedagogy of poverty on my students who were angry and prone to mistrust and disrespect**.** I held on tightly to my curriculum, one that emphasized meaningful art making experiences. Yet students in *my* classroom were not ready for some of the things I felt most strongly about, such as negotiating curriculum, reflective critiques and dialogues, and collaboration. In my best classes I could barely hold a respectful classroom dialogue; in my worst I could not even state the lesson instructions.

I soon became dizzy from the game of school and deficit culture of blame found at P.S. # 11. I heard these sentiments at P.S. #11 in what teachers said directly to students and what teachers said to each other about students. For example, from within my classroom the shouts from nearby teachers could be heard. Teachers yelled and seemed to blame disruptive behavior and inadequate progress on the students' personality, intellect, family, or culture. These sentiments are not exclusive to P.S. #11. Nor does this narrative attempt to paint a more holistic picture of the environment for this particular

school. This description is merely one account of the discourse of deficit that saturates educational theory and practice as I point out in Chapter II.

A deficit paradigm is pervasive set of assumptions and practices in contemporary US society that emphasizes what is lacking and wrong rather than imagining and acting upon alternate possibilities (García & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006). A deficit model is the manifestation of a deficit paradigm within the educational realm in which the child is constructed as lacking and in need of help (García & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006).

The deficit model is particularly prevalent in understanding urban youth who are often constructed as criminal or delinquent (Miller, 2001; Rinehart, 2008). In the faculty lounge of P.S. #11, teachers would gossip about the recent exploits of current and former students. Proverbial bets would be placed on who would be pregnant first or thrown in jail. "These kids" and "monsters," as faculty called them, were characterized and labeled repeatedly as lesser "animals" lacking basic humanity and civility.

In my second year of teaching, I became involved at the Curcio Community Center. Curcio is an indoor and outdoor recreation center for urban youth living in the local neighborhood. Working with two art education professors and one other graduate student, we initiated an after-school visual art program. In many ways the population at Curcio was similar to the students I taught in the classroom. Like in P.S. # 11, the youth at Curcio were predominantly African-American and Latino who were living below the poverty level. At that time the region had the highest rate of unemployment for African American males in the nation: one in every two were unemployed (Warren, 2008).

I became increasingly interested in investigating something different from the game of school that I too played at P.S. # 11 as the system in place demanded. Developing an after-school program from the ground up carried the potential to circumvent many of the overwhelming structures of schooling that I encountered at P.S. # 11. I grew anxious to see how children from similar backgrounds would respond to an art program that they *chose* to attend rather than a required one. In addition, I wondered what effect the environment and power structure outside of the confines of a school setting would have on students' artistic thinking (Heath, 1999).

Motivation for creating and sustaining after-school programs is often related to improving students' character (Wright, 2007; Gasman, 2003; Nawrotzki, 2004; Miller, 2001). Yet, as Chappell (2006) alluded, envisioning the motivation of after-school programs as a magic cure-all to "fix" children not only constructs the child as deficient but also undermines the specific learning objectives of the after-school program at hand.

I began to wonder how to shift the paradigm from the pervasiveness of a deficit model to an assets model within an after-school visual arts setting. Envisioning an alternative to the deficit model at the Curcio Visual Arts Program (Curcio VAP) quickly became a main goal. Closely related to this ambition was the necessity for the Curcio VAP to prioritize learning through art education rather than merely preventing undesirable behaviors or academic achievement in other disciplines through engagement in art activities (Eisner, 1998).

How could curriculum, pedagogy, and methods used in an after-school art program counter a deficit model in order to educate youth? Rather than viewing youth through a lens of deficit, an "assets model" provided a framework in which students

afforded with agency could develop their ideas and capabilities (Blasi, 2002; Benson & Lerner, 2003; & Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007). An assets model disrupts a deficit model by understanding the child as *having* ideas and abilities to be developed. The construction of youth as individuals with strengths to be honed has specific implications for how art could be presented within the Curcio VAP. Instead of art saving children, Curcio VAP set up artistic experiences as a means to provide children with a "framework for understanding and contributing to the world" (Chappell, 2006, p. 13). Curcio VAP would offer the structure and tools to support children as they translated their ideas about their worlds into visual form.

To avoid undermining our specific arts-based goals the Curcio VAP focused on fostering artistic thinking rather than "improving" student behavior or character. Frequently arts programs (after-school or otherwise) are forced to qualify how art education impacts other types of learning. As Eisner alluded such an advocacy stance falsely implies that program participation causes academic or behavior improvement rather than investigating the variety of factors that are correlated to changes in student success. In an analysis of research that attempts to link learning in the visual arts to academic achievement in other disciplines, Eisner (1998) did not find significant evidence "that such transfer occurs" (p. 10). His findings reinforce the possibility of the impact of studies in the arts on other types of learning but allude to the difficulty in qualifying such claims. However, when art educators assert the impact of the arts on behavior or academic achievement without proper evidence they simultaneously undermine the importance of an art curriculum and diminish their personal credibility (Eisner, 1998). Taking from these findings, the mission of the Curcio VAP became to

educate youth through a visual arts curriculum rather than linking specific behavioral or academic results to youth participation.

The central problem for the Curcio VAP was investigating how a deficit model promotes a "dependence on viewing their school sites, youth, and families through a lens of lack, in which the arts curriculum becomes a bridge to normative cultural literacy" (Chappell, 2006). The impetus for the study was my personal experience in a public school system that seemed to be unaware of how to enact an assets model. The skeleton of the Curcio VAP was imagined as assets-based, which would necessitate a seamless infusion of theory into content and pedagogy.

The challenge of enacting an assets model reflects the propensity of after-school programs to be bound (conscious or unconsciously) by a deficit paradigm. Many educators increasingly believe that "after-school programs seem to be the latest silver bullet solution to social and educational challenges" (Miller, 2003, p. 12). Subsequently, motivation for creating and sustaining after-school programs is frequently founded upon improving and fixing students' lives. Literature concerning after-school programs often focuses on the outcomes for children; specifically that participation promotes positive behaviors and academic performance while reducing negative behaviors such as crime, drug use, and sexual activity (Miller, 2001; Rinehart, 2008). Such deficit thinking is also a common theme in research on after-school visual arts programs (Gasman & Tompkins, 2003). Programs that envision their driving force as "improving" students may compromise artistic learning and thinking (Chappell, 2006). If the motivation of an after-school art program is grounded in belief that art will save children ultimately from themselves and their cultures, the children and their communities may be alienated

(Chappell, 2006). Instead, utilizing an "assets model" framework allows children's perspectives and strengths to take precedence.

Several educational and psychological studies elaborate on an assets model (Ladson-Billings & Gomez, 2001; Blasi, 2002; Lerner & Benson, 2003; García & Guerra, Kegler et al., 2004; Weiner, 2006; Edwards Mumford, Shillingford & Serra-Roland, 2007; Baron, 2008) yet only one study provides analysis within an out-of-school-time setting (Halpern, 2003). Other authors describe an assets model within the context of broader arts learning (Heath & McLaughlin, 1995; Oreck, Baum, McCartney, 1999). One analysis critiques a deficit model within arts after-school programs (Chappell, 2006). However, I have found limited research that provides an exemplar of an assets based after-school *visual* arts environment. Curcio VAP sets out to illustrate the process of enacting an assets-based visual art program outside-of school.

The purpose of this participatory action research study is to find out what happens in an after-school setting when a deficit model is replaced by an assets model that connects artistic thinking to the lived experiences of urban youth. Current theoretical approaches that critique a deficit model are integrated into the goals and practices of the Curcio VAP. In addition, the cultural construction of public school systems that perpetuate an "educational debt" is examined (Ladson-Billing, 2009). This study will investigate the following questions:

- What happens when an assets model that strengthens learners' artistic thinking is infused into the goals of an after-school visual arts program?
- How does this shift in the paradigm impact the approaches and spaces for visual arts learning impact both teachers and youth?

- What theoretical, curricular, and pedagogical knowledge and skills do teachers need to actualize an assets model?

- What role does reflection play in the ability to embrace an assets model for art education?

According to Chappell (2007) a pervasive theme exists in much of the literature on after-school art programs that "art saves lives" in particular, art is purported to save children "at-risk" from social and educational problems (p. 13). However, literature dealing with educational psychology and critical pedagogy emphasizes the necessity to overcome a deficit model (Valencia, 1997; Lerner & Benson, 2003; García & Guerra, 2004; Weiner, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Yet, this critique of a deficit model has not been fully translated into the theory and practices guiding after-school programs. This study will narrate the development of an after-school program that has its goals embedded in an assets model utilizing "a framework grounded in scientific study" (Lerner, 2003, p. 9) and current educational and psychological literature that will be further delineated in Chapter II (Ladson-Billings & Gomez, 2001; Blasi, 2002; Halpern, 2003; Lerner & Benson, 2003; García & Guerra, Kegler et al., 2004; Weiner, 2006; Edwards Mumford, Shillingford & Serra-Roland, 2007; Baron, 2008). Synthesis of psychological and educational theories will provide insights and illuminate the strengths and challenges in utilizing an assets model in an after-school visual arts setting.

Definition Of Terms

The following terminology will be used throughout the study:

Assets Model – Drawn from developmental psychology, opposes the deficit model; viewing children as having ideas and abilities that are nurtured through the

education process (Blasi, 2002; Benson & Lerner, 2003; and Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007).

"At-Risk" – Terminology that implicitly constructs the child through a lens of deficit to describe students who are at risk of school failure due to cognitive, emotional, or environmental factors (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990 & Te Riele, 2006).

Deficit Model – The manifestation of a deficit paradigm within the educational realm in which the child is constructed as lacking and in need of fixing (García & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006).

Deficit Paradigm – A cultural paradigm that stretches across contemporary American society that views the world by what is lacking and wrong rather than imagining and acting upon alternate possibilities. (García & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006).

Developmental Assets – Introduced by Benson in 1990, a theoretical construct identifying the "developmental building blocks" or the social (external) and psychological (internal) strengths to enhance the well being of all children. Benson (2003) outlined external assets to include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets consist of: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Benson, 2003, pp. 26-27).

Ecological approach – Prioritizes the embeddedness of the child within multiple relationships, experiences, environments, and patterns of interactions (Lerner, 2003, p. 9). Understanding the child in a complex web of nature and nurture in

which students are analyzed in multiple environments that "may be physical, economic, biological, psychological, or social" (Edwards et al., 2007, p. 146).

Educators – Staff members of the Curcio VAP who collaboratively design curriculum, teach art education lessons, and participate as co-researchers in this study.

Resiliency – An ability to successfully adapt and rebound in spite of challenges or threatening circumstances (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008).

School Dependent - Those individuals as outlined by Ladson-Billings (2009) who have limited access to opportunity outside of the context of school.

School Independent - Those individuals as outlined by Ladson-Billings (2009) who can access opportunity outside of the context of school.

Thriving – A term defined by Benson (1990) as involving school success, leadership, valuing diversity, physical health, helping others, delaying gratification, and overcoming adversity.

Limitations and Ethics

The limitations of this study include a lack of longevity because of the nature of the funding available to Curcio VAP. Curcio VAP is not guaranteed additional grants or other funding options beyond this year. As such it would be imprudent to initiate a research plan that would extend beyond our current budget. In addition, transient populations and sporadic attendance at Curcio VAP youth participants prevents parental permission for youth participants who might be more closely involved in the research process.

As the researcher I may be biased by my vested interests with this project. Additional biases may be found in my theoretical foundation in critical pedagogy.

Moreover, my stance on the inherent problems of the deficit model in art education may blind my awareness to other variables. To circumvent such biases, I will seek to be reflective and analytical throughout my observations, interviews, and analysis.

Developing and sustaining an after-school art program presents a myriad of challenges. As I write, the dedicated leadership of the Curcio VAP has been successful in overcoming many obstacles such as securing funding, obtaining a professional and experienced staff, and developing strong curriculum and goals. Yet the key long-term challenge is to provide the youth of Curcio VAP with authentic artistic experiences to accentuate positive developmental assets, as I will describe in Chapter II. An assets model, drawn from current psychological and educational research, can guide the curriculum and pedagogy of the Curcio VAP. Assets-based visual arts experiences aim to provide youth at the Curcio VAP with an opportunity to excavate a "willingness to imagine possibilities…explore ambiguity…recognize and accept the multiple perspectives" from within themselves (Eisner, 1998). In this participatory action research study, I focus on how the educators at Curcio VAP intend to enact an assets model in the theory and practice for school dependent youth.

In Chapter II, I investigate current research that reflects a deficit paradigm to reveal its limitations. Additionally I review literature in education, psychology, after-school spaces, and alternative arts spaces and look for critiques of a deficit paradigm and assets-based alternatives. These analyses provide a framework from which to form grounding principles for the enactment of an assets-based after-school visual arts program at Curcio VAP that intends to strengthen the ideas and capabilities of local youth.

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Chapter II: Review of Literature

Literature examining after-school programs overwhelmingly agrees on the ability of alternative out-of-school-time learning spaces to benefit youth and create positive social change (Heath & Roach, 1995; Oreck, Baum, McCartney, 1999; Miller, 2001; Halpern, 2003; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Hirsch, 2005; Chappell, 2006; Rinehart, 2008). Yet, the specific benefits discussed, in addition to the motivations of the programs themselves, reveal vast differences in how after-school programs envision their child participants, in how to best serve youth, and in the manner in which programs should function to impact society. Despite many authors' sincere intentions (and sometimes as a result of such ambitions) much of the literature concerning after-school programs subtly or overtly reflects a deficit paradigm (Miller, 2001; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Hirsch, 2005; Rinehart, 2008).

This chapter assesses contemporary research that embodies as well as critiques a deficit model and presents assets-based alternatives. I explore research that perpetuates a deficit paradigm and present other authors who critique deficit language and practices in education. Additional, I evaluate assets-based alternatives to supplement the critiques of a deficit model. Deconstructing and analyzing the term "at-risk" is presented to exemplify language of deficit and its implications. Resiliency is presented as an alternative, psychologically grounded framework that focuses on developing children's ability to positively adapt in spite of obstacles. Finally, I examine the differences in deficit and assets thinking by reviewing research on after-school programs, art education, and after-school art education. These analyses lay the foundation for a syntheses of these research

genres into a cohesive example of how teachers facilitated student learning and managed an assets-based after-school visual arts program that I relate in Chapter IV.

Toward an Assets Model: Transcending the Blame Game of a Deficit Paradigm

"You've got to accentuate the positive

Eliminate the negative

Latch on to the affirmative."

- Johnny Mercer, Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive, 1944

A deficit paradigm is a conceptual framework from which to understand how reality in contemporary American society is shaped by a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that stress what is lacking and wrong. Across a variety of socio-economic institutions ranging from families, schools, hospitals, government, and media, "a narrow focus on individual weaknesses obscures the importance" of other structural societal factors (Weiner, 2006, p.42). Various authors expound the thinking, language, assumptions, and actions that are facets of a deficit paradigm.

According to García and Guerra, "Deficit thinking permeates society; schools and teachers mirror these beliefs" (2004, p. 154). Within the past ten years a critique of a deficit paradigm in education has become increasingly documented (Valencia, 1997; Lerner & Benson, 2003; García & Guerra, 2004; Weiner, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007). These critics of a deficit paradigm call attention to the systematic thinking and resulting language and actions, particularly in urban education, of the child as lacking and in need of help. Instead of focusing on the deficit of the child, these theorists urge educators to build upon student strengths to foster positive youth development. In doing so, the child's

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relationship with schooling becomes the site of investigation rather than the faults of the individual, family and community (Te Riele, 2006).

Weiner (2006) explores deficit thinking "that is so deeply embedded in urban schools" and reflects a deeper social phenomenon of blaming individual behavior and character for complex social problems (p. 42). Instead, Weiner (2006) argues that theory should address the *combination* of "the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom" that contributes to student achievement (Weiner, 2006, p. 42). She draws attention to the similarity in constructing the student and teacher to be in need of fixing. Attempting to "fix" students and teachers neglects these individuals' positive attributes and negates any sense of agency.

Deficit language as defined by Ladson-Billings in "Pushing Past the Achievement Gap: An Essay on the Language of Deficit**"** (2007) includes the attitudes and beliefs that implicitly blame poor student performance on the child. Ultimately, the family and culture of the child are understood, implicitly or otherwise, as culpable for underachievement (Ladson-Billings, 2007, p. 321). Ladson-Billings presents all too familiar echoes of urban educators who attempt to excuse poor performance through the language of deficit: "The parents just don't care….They are coming from a 'culture of poverty'…. Their families don't value education" (2007, p. 318). Ladson-Billings argues that the language of deficit "constructs students as deficit and lacking," and ultimately places "the onus of underachievement on the students, their families, and in some cases individual teachers" (2007, p. 321). If these individuals are admonished for student underachievement, then critical investigation and transformation of structural factors is suspended. Isolating the individual misconstrues the complex interaction of structures

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that systematically perpetuates student underachievement. Ladson-Billings (2007) further

identifies our nation's "educational debt" as disproportionately affecting children of color

and children living in poverty. She notes that when these children on the margins and

their cultures are blamed for educational failure or difficulties, teachers and

administrators use sympathetic excuses to lower expectations for student success (2007).

Ladson-Billings (2007) and Weiner (2006) disrupt the deficit paradigm in recognizing

"the untapped strengths of students and teachers" and enrich the definition of an assets

model (Weiner, 2006, p. 45). These authors seek to transcend the cycle of blame for

underachievement and prioritize high expectations and holistic perspectives to uncover

how to improve learning experiences for underserved urban youth.

Other studies provide an alternative, positive framework for an assets model and

enrich critiques of the deficit paradigm (Blasi, 2002; Kegler, Oman, Vesely, McLeroy,

Aspy, Rodine, & Marshall, 2003; García & Guerra, 2004, Benson & Lerner, 2006,

Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, and Serra-Roldan, 2007; Baron, 2008). Blasi (2002)

emphasizes the importance of students' strengths and capabilities within the context of

their families and communities in "An Assets Model: Preparing Preservice Teachers to

Work with Children and Families 'of Promise'." Blasi's assets model parallels other

critiques of the deficit model (Weiner, 2006; Ladson-Billings 2007) specifically in her

emphasis on building individual assets and examining the structures and institutions that

perpetuate underachievement in the manner of critical pedagogy.

While Blasi does not overtly define the term "assets model" within her article,

Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001) and Baron (2008), describe the characteristics of an

assets model. In a study conducted by Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001), the authors

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collaborated with seven elementary teachers who were trying to improve literacy abilities for their students. During monthly meetings, the authors encouraged teachers to focus on their students' capabilities by asking such questions as: "What strengths does this child have?" (Ladson-Billings & Gomez, 2001, p. 677). After a series of critical conversations facilitated by the authors, teachers began to change their classroom practices and the ways in which they viewed and talked about their students. Similarly, Ladson-Billings and Gomez's assets model emphasizes the strengths of children rather than their weaknesses.

Baron (2008) elaborates on an assets model in his article titled "Shifting Focus: From Deficits To Assets." He critiques deficit thinking as "it often obliterates the recognition of the assets" that children possess (p. 52). Baron (2008) passionately rallies for administrators to initiate the semantic, pedagogical, and philosophical transition "from the current deficit-based model to one that is centered on the assets that students, families, and teachers bring to school" (p. 52). Like Ladson-Billings, Baron sees the transition to an assets paradigm as essential to combat against the difference in achievement between "minority students and their White peers" (2008, p. 52). Despite Baron's didactic tone, his publishing in *Principal Leadership* illustrates the increasing relevance of an assets model even within the realm of educational administration. In addition, Baron (2008) further contributes to Ladson-Billings definition of an assets model.

Conversely, other studies that employ elements of an assets model simultaneously perpetuate a deficit paradigm (Kegler, 2003; Edwards et al., 2007; García and Guerra, 2004, p. 151). Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, and Serra-Roldan (2007), in their article

"Developmental Assets: A Prevention Framework for Students Considered at Risk,"
define developmental assets as internal and external factors that "guide positive choices
and foster a sense of confidence, passion, and purpose," that, "improve students'
opportunities to develop resilience" (2007, p. 148). Edwards et al. noted that children
who exhibit resiliency have a better ability to "respond adaptively to adversity, cope with
and manage major problems and negative life events, and succeed" (2007, p. 152).
Edwards et al. argue that improving developmental assets can "prevent" risk behaviors
and build resiliency for children considered "at-risk" (2007, p. 147). However, the
authors' connect prevention to resiliency and thereby exhibit an understanding of the
children from a deficit perspective in the assumption that the "risk" for children "at-risk"
is inevitable.

Edwards et al. (2007) link a deficit model to Congress's enactment of
Comprehensive School Reform in 1998 (p. 145). This bill provides funding for agencies
to "improve the educational outcomes" for students considered "at-risk" of school failure
(p. 145). In accordance with this legislation, schools have implemented intervention
programs that require a student to fail before they are able to receive support.
Subsequently, a "behavioral deficit" can only be treated after its manifestation (Edwards
et al., 2007, p. 145). According to Edwards et al., prevention programs based on such
deficit models are unsuccessful because they "do not delineate prosocial expectations, are
not linked to specific intervention methods, contain methodological errors that limit
treatment efficacy, and do not promote effective functioning for all children" (2007, p.
148). The authors critique the delayed response of deficit-based prevention programs

that are only directed at certain children who are judged to require intervention by the legal structures of the educational system.

Edwards et al. promote a more proactive framework of strengthening developmental assets in contrast to the dominant "wait to fail" deficit approaches. The authors argue that making positive experiences or "external assets available to all students" can enhance children's resilience and other developmental assets (Edwards et al., 2007, p. 148). The authors further suggest an ecological approach in which students are analyzed in multiple environments that "may be physical, economic, biological, psychological, or social" (Edwards et al. 2007, p. 146). This assets approach favors a more thorough understanding of a child's circumstance rather than isolating specific risk behaviors (Edwards et al., 2007). Edwards et al. move away from blaming the individual and alternatively investigate the greater contexts of the child to identify sites for change and action.

However, the authors limit their analysis of how the prevention programs they call for overcome a deficit understanding of youth. The approach of Edwards et al. (2007) is ultimately "to more effectively prevent problems experienced by students considered at risk" (p. 147). While Edwards et al. critique a "wait to fail" approach, expecting and preventing failure hardly sets the high expectations advocated by Ladson-Billing (2007) and Weiner (2006). Edwards et al. (2007) focus on limiting risk behaviors seems to counter their intention to be proactive in addressing the multiple circumstances unique to each student in an ecological approach. Throughout the article the authors espouse that "prevention of high-risk behaviors is at the core of building developmental assets" (2007, p. 149). The concept of prevention aligns with a deficit model in the subtle assumption

that children will fail without outside direction and resources. In conflating prevention and development of assets the authors limit the depth of an assets model they might present. Moreover, Edwards et al. (2007) focus their discussion on how "at-risk" students rather than how *all* children can benefit from strategies to improve developmental assets. Yet the framework provided by Edwards et al. (2007) may be useful when infused into learning environments that nurture positive developmental assets for every child.

Kegler, M. C., Oman, R. F., Vesely, S. K., McLeroy, K.R., Aspy, C. B., Rodine, S., and Marshall, L. (2003) highlight the impact of environmental resources in building developmental assets for youth. The authors interviewed youth and parents from the "inner-city" about the importance of neighborhood and community factors that reduce risk behaviors of children. The authors defined external developmental assets that are influenced by neighborhood contexts as "nonparental adult role models, peer role models, use of time (groups/sports), use of time (religion), and community involvement" (Kegler et al., 2003, p. 381). Not surprisingly, the study found that developmental assets "are more likely to exist among adolescents whose parents report higher levels of neighborhood and community resources" (Kegler et al., 2003, p. 394). Like Edwards et al., the authors promote a deficit model through their treatment of developmental assets as they purport that positive developmental assets are merely a means to prevent unwanted behaviors for youth who are constructed as errant, using "alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, had sexual intercourse, or participated in violence" (Kegler et al., 2003, p.381). However, the study does draw attention to the problem that children are bound by the resources (or lack thereof) available in their environment. Kegler et al. illuminate

the quandary of needing to strengthen developmental assets for children who do not live in bountiful neighborhoods without further marginalizing this population.

García and Guerra (2004) promote an "additive view" of students that relies on improving professional development for teachers (p. 151). The authors articulate that educators often believe their students do not come to school ready to learn, and thus fail to culturally contextualize student and teacher interaction (García and Guerra, 2004, pp.159-162). To address these issues, García and Guerra designed and implemented a professional development model that sought to resolve the conflicts between educators' personal assumptions and a culturally responsive pedagogy.

García and Guerra repeatedly refer to "deficit thinking among educators" and exclusively identify professional development as means to change deficit thinking (2004, p. 152). The question raised becomes whether the authors solely identify teacher perceptions and actions as a means to counteract the deficit model. If so, García and Guerra isolate teacher (mis)behaviors and minimize their "critical examination of systemic issues that perpetuate deficit thinking" that they espouse (2004, p. 154). García and Guerra replicate a deficit model by limiting their conversation to the fault of the educator without attempting to investigate other factors and, thereby, they fall short in their analysis.

In contrast, authors who promote an assets model look forward and identify sites for change without placing blame (Lerner & Benson, 2003). Lerner and Benson (2003) developed a multidisciplinary framework for developmental assets and present a more successful critique of a deficit paradigm and provide an assets-based alternative. Benson (2003) defines developmental assets as "developmental building blocks," or the

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environmental and psychological strengths that improve child health outcomes (pp. 25-28). Along with his colleagues at the Search Institute, an independent nonprofit organization that provides resources and research to promote healthy children, Benson (2003) categorized 40 specific assets that simultaneously prevent high risk behaviors, enhance healthy outcomes, and foster resiliency (p. 28). Benson lists external assets as support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets consisting of commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Benson, 2003, pp. 26-27).

Benson delineates these assets to provide a unifying vocabulary for community actors to "encourage the mobilization of assets building efforts within the many settings of a child's life and to increase these efforts for *all* children and adolescents within a community" (2003, p. 28). According to Benson, as these developmental assets increase, so do thriving behaviors and academic achievement; conversely, risk behaviors drop with an increase in developmental assets. However, Benson's studies indicate that children have overwhelmingly low rates of these assets: approximately two thirds of adolescents exhibited under twenty out of the forty developmental assets (2003, p. 30). Essentially, a substantial majority of adolescents possess less than half of the internal and external assets as classified by Benson.

Benson's model interlinks developmental psychology, human development, and community development to combat mounting evidence that indicates the weakness of "human developmental infrastructure" in American communities across lines of gender, age, parental education, and race/ethnicity (2003, p. 22). To address this weakness, Benson (2003) embraces the potential of a "framework of developmental assets, its utility

for triggering community transformation, and the challenge and opportunity of engaging communities as learning partners" (p. 20). Benson's proposition intends to strengthen the mutually beneficial relationships between enhancing community development and building developmental assets for youth.

Benson argues that a "deficit reduction paradigm" is reflected in federally and privately funded initiatives that focus on "naming, counting, and reducing the increase of health-compromising behaviors" (Benson, 2003, p. 24). He attributes this focus on prevention as a product of a medical model for understanding health on the absence of symptoms (Benson, 2003, p. 31). Like García and Guerra (2004), Weiner (2006), and Ladson Billings (2007), Benson (2003) contextualizes a deficit paradigm and its consequences within the greater cultural landscape of contemporary American society:

> What we have, then, is a culture dominated by deficit and risk thinking by pathology and by its symptoms. This shapes our research, our policy, our practice. It fuels the creation of elaborate and expensive service program delivery infrastructures, creates a dependence on professional experts, encourages an ethos of fear, and, by consequence, derogates, ignores, and interferes with the natural and inherent capacity of communities to be community. (2003, p. 25)

Benson identifies a top-down approach that imposes "professional" perspectives and goals on marginalized youth and their communities. Subsequently, children are simplistically polarized into the "problem free" and "the developmental 'have-nots' labeled as 'at-risk'", vulnerable, or marginalized" (Benson, 2003, p. 33). In both categories, youth are classified either positively or negatively in ways that do not support the child's education and positive development.

Furthermore, Benson (2003) asserts "problem free is not fully prepared" (p. 31).

In other words, the absence of problems does not necessarily translate to *positive*

development for children. Benson promotes a "bottom-up" approach to building

developmental assets through placing citizens at the locus of thought and action. In this

reframing, development is put on a continuum that runs from asset depleted to asset rich,

shifting a community's focus from supporting "some kids" to supporting "all kids"

(2003, p. 34). This asset development approach emphasizes "unleashing, supporting, and

celebrating the inherent power of communities" (Benson, 2003, p. 25).

Benson distinguishes between 1) preventative programs that seek to reduce

children's deficits and 2) programs that promote youth assets. Despite his criticism of

prevention as a manifestation of deficit thinking, Benson accepts the coexistence of

preventative and asset-development programs. Benson provides a language to instigate

community wide reflection and conversation, and thereby gives a framework that can

eclipse the dominant language and motivation of deficit.

Lerner (2003) supports Benson's conceptual foundations and emphasizes the

"complex and multileveled ecology" that contextualize child and adolescent development

(p.15). Like Edwards et al. (2007) this ecological approach considers the embeddedness

of the child within relationships, experiences, environments, and patterns of interactions

(Lerner, 2003, p. 9). Understanding the child in this complex web of nature and nurture

allows for an alternative to the historical construction of some children as intrinsically

delinquent:

Rather we can discard entirely an emphasis on problems, deficits and even

prevention. We can, instead, focus on the plasticity and strengths of individuals

and their family and community contexts and build an agenda for action that is

predicted on integrating these strengths of the developmental system – these

assets for positive development – in ways that capitalize on the potential for

healthy functioning present in all individuals and settings. (Lerner, 2003, p. 6)

Lerner moves beyond prevention for some and toward the provision of developmental

assets for all. Benson and Lerner (2003) redirect the dialogue concerning lack of access

and opportunity for certain children toward the potential impact of external and internal

asset development for children and communities across the many facets American

society.

An increasing number of authors in education critique a deficit paradigm that is

ubiquitous in contemporary US society. Analysis of contemporary educational and

psychological literature thus far in Chapter II indicates different manifestations and

interpretations of assets and deficit paradigms. Some authors who promote an assets

model simultaneously perpetuate a deficit paradigm in blaming teachers, students, and

communities through reliance upon a preventative framework (Kegler, 2003; Edwards et

al., 2007; García and Guerra, 2004, p. 151). Yet other studies present an assets model that

critiques the deficit paradigm and seek to recognize the strengths of children. What

follows is a critique of the deficit model in its linguistic manifestations that construct

reality and policy within education.

Perceptions of Youth on the Margins:
Shifting Focus From "At-Risk" to Resiliency in Urban America

"She ain't got nothing" - Marcus, age 10, Curcio VAP member

Deficit discursive practices infiltrate communication and consequent

understanding of issues in education (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Application of an assets

model to the terminology that frames a deficit paradigm can reframe foundational concepts. Despite its negative construction of youth, "at-risk" is a prevalent term within the educational field that perpetuates a negative construction of youth (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990; Te Riele, 2006). Children who are essentially born into this marginalized category are homogenized across socioeconomic, cultural, gender, and ethnic lines. Drawing from an assets perspective on youth development, the concept of resiliency emphasizes the strengths of youth to overcome or rebound from obstacles. The following segment investigates resilient youth and how fostering resiliency allows for a critical reframing of children "at-risk."

Deconstructing who is "at-risk."

Lubeck and Garrett (1990) unpack the theoretical and historical framework for the construction of children "at-risk." The authors purport that a child's "at-risk" classification may result from a psychological or emotional attribute, a socioeconomic circumstance, or health conditions (Lubeck & Garrett 1990, p. 328-329). In tracing the concept of "at-risk" throughout the history of American education "one sees across time, not a linear evolution, but rather symbolic amplification and recession, in the context of constantly contested meaning" (Lubeck & Garrett 1990, p. 333). Lubeck and Garrett (1990) evaluate the changing discourse, yet remarkably stable implications for the different children marginalized in American history. Throughout American history, the meaning of the term "at-risk" and who is implicated has changed. However, these different peoples were similarly oppressed and compartmentalized in society.

Lubeck and Garrett (1990) affirm that the term "at-risk" did not exist until the 1970s. Regardless, the authors contend that similar attitudes have been held in American

society toward distinct and varied marginalized populations (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 330). Lubeck and Garrett (1990) trace "at-risk" back to the 18th and 19th centuries when otherized immigrants were deemed genetically and intellectually inferior based on mental testing that reinforced the zeitgeist of American intellectual superiority (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 330). After *Brown versus the Board of Education* overturned school segregation in 1954, similar discrimination existed yet was directed toward people of color who were deemed as "culturally deprived." By the 1970s the term at "at risk" replaced the concept of "cultural deprivation" implicating people of color (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 331).

According to Lubeck and Garret (1990), a shift in what should be done for children in need of assistance is interrelated to the evolution of what the term "at risk" has been called and who is implicated. The change in meaning of the term "at-risk indicates that a name is significant in how it shapes action and policy. Two different systems separating the "haves" and "have-nots," date back to the nineteenth century and arguably still exist (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 332). As noted by Lazerson (1988) the introduction of kindergarten in nineteenth century "resulted in one type of program for the upper classes, featuring free play and fostering creativity, and quite another, fostering discipline and order, for the children of the poor" (1990, p. 332). Historically, educational institutions reinforced and perpetuated a dichotomy of inequity.

Lubeck and Garrett (1990) critique the false sense of equality created by redefining and mitigating meanings in a politically correct era. This artifice of equity may result in confining responsibility to the individual rather than initiating broader societal examination and transformation. Lubeck and Garrett argue that when blame is focused on

individuals, the notion that the "philanthropist/professional" must rescue the children that have been failed by their parents, family, and culture is perpetuated. Lubeck and Garrett (1990) note:

> Masked by what we assume to be a genuine concern to 'save the children', [*sic*] this stance reflects deep-seated biases against women, the poor, and people of color. The current language of children at risk orients the expression of outrage against individuals rather than against the conditions that constrain their lives and the life chances of their children. (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 338)

In contrast to "at-risk" and other deficit discursive practices, Lubeck and Garrett promote a "language of action" that encourages critically re-envisioning the cultural construction of schooling instead of actions that "serve both to obscure and to maintain unequal social relations" (1990, p. 338). Yet, despite their critique of the implications of "at risk," the term is prevalent and seemingly politically correct twenty years later.

Te Riele (2006) further deconstructs the label of "at-risk" for children "as a dominant and somehow self-evident concept in Australian education and youth policy" (p. 130). While her article analyzes the construction of youth "at risk" within an Australian context, much of Te Riele's analysis parallels problems within contemporary American society. Like Lubeck and Garrett (1990), Te Riele (2006) critiques "conceiving of risk factors in terms of dysfunction in the individuals or their families, rather than on a sociological framework" (p. 132). Consequently, blaming the child rather than examining more complex societal factors allows for more simplistic policy solutions targeted at "fixing" dysfunctional individuals.

Te Riele (2006) summarizes that these youth are supposedly at risk of not making a "smooth transition" throughout school, disconnections from families, community, education, work, and leaving school prematurely. Along with Benson and Learner (2003), Te Riele attributes this phenomenon to the diagnostic model borrowed from medical sciences "locating both the problem/illness and the place for action/intervention with the individual" (2006, p.137). She acknowledges, "some young people have individual problems. However, these problems often have a wider social dimension," an intricate knot of multidirectional, interconnected threads (2006, pp. 136-138). Subsequently, youth on the margins are "at-risk" of becoming what they already are - belonging to range of social and economic categories.

Te Rile (2006) asserts that the prevalence of constructing youth "at-risk" reflects government interests and compromises the welfare of youth (p. 136). She elaborates that 'at-risk' is understood as treatable thereby allowing "the government to take a behaviour modification approach rather than the more difficult expansive actions (2006, p. 139). Additionally, the term "at-risk" simplifies and consolidates the variety of issues concerning individuals who have been artificially lumped together in the "at-risk" category (2006, p. 132).

Te Riele (2006) asks, "How do we take risk factors seriously without demonizing those affected, but also how do we avoid demonizing them without belittling the difficulties they are trying to face?" (p. 136). She continues that more complex and advantageous policies can arise through problematizing and shifting the language of risk, as well as the simplistic and misleading conceptual framework that is implied (p. 142). Te Riele proposes the term marginalized youth, which implicates "the *interaction*

between schooling and different young people, without pathologizing individual students or their communities" and begs the question "marginalized by who [*sic*] or what" (p. 140). However, her use of marginalization appears to merely rename the problematic bifurcation of the haves and have nots, albeit a better name.

To transcend the issues that Te Riele (2006) identifies one might reconceptualize the issue of access to resources and opportunities. Ladson-Billings (2009) articulates a continuum ranging from school dependent to school independent to reframe the debate on children "at risk." In a lecture titled "The Language of Cultural Diversity in Education" she outlined how the ostensibly democratic language of cultural diversity actually perpetuates inequity, likening language to "the water in which we swim yet it never occurs to us that we are wet" (2009). She critiqued the use of the word at-risk and indicated its hidden meaning that signifies poor disenfranchised students of color who are poorly served by schools. Ladson-Billings encourages the examination of the structural factors that impact this population.

As noted by Lubeck and Garrett (1990), Te Riele (2006), and Ladson-Billings (2009) the term "at-risk" exemplifies a deficit paradigm. This language shapes pedagogy, curriculum, and policy that perpetuate deficit solutions which push those on the margins further away from success. In contrast, reframing the language and dialogue about the structural issues that impede student success is aligned with an assets model.

Fostering resiliency.

A more appropriate framework to address children who are bound by structural obstacles is to highlight the traits of children who persevere and overcome adversity.

Instead of bracketing children by what we fear might happen "researchers are beginning to look at the other side of risk – resilience" (Hanson & Kim, 2003, p. 9).

Clauss-Ehlers (2008) extends contemporary psychological research on resiliency to include positive cultural assets. She defines resiliency as an ability to successfully adapt, in spite of challenges or threatening circumstances. Clauss-Ehlers further articulates the importance in the development of resiliency for youth from culturally diverse backgrounds (2008, p. 197). Despite the significance of resilience for this population, the majority of studies to date focus on largely white, male, and adult samples and rarely consider cultural influences (p. 210). Clauss-Ehlers indicates that children, persons of color, and females are further marginalized by the lack of relevant research.

Clauss-Ehlers explores "resilience as describing the degree to which the strengths of one's culture promote the development of coping" (p. 198). Her study focused on young women from a variety of backgrounds. She analyzed the challenges and responses that these young women encountered from childhood to the present, and developed a conceptual framework that indicates how culture contributes to resilience and coping. While her language favors the preventative aspects of resiliency over its developmental potential, she shifts the dialogue to how resiliency can be enhanced by incorporating cultural assets. Clauss-Ehlres' conversation demonstrates an assets-based positioning that recognizes the strengths of different cultures rather than being an indicator of risk.

Hanson and Kim (2007) monitored and reported on the well-being of youth in their personal and educational environments in *Measuring Resilience and Youth Development: The Psychometric Properties of the Healthy Kids Survey.* The authors delineated the internal and environmental assets that contribute to children's improved

development and health, and subsequent social and academic well-being (p. 5). Hanson and Kim (2007) identify internal resiliency assets to include empathy, problem solving, self-efficacy, and self-awareness. External assets were investigated by asking students about their perception of their relationships with adults, their community, school, and home and included "high expectations from adults, caring relationships with adults, and opportunities for meaningful participation" (2007, p. 4).

The *Healthy Kids Survey* perspective on resiliency reinforces and contributes to an assets model. The skeleton of the survey is built upon the belief that when youth experience high levels of environmental assets they "will develop the resilience traits, the connection to school, and motivation to learn that lead to positive academic, social, and health outcomes" (Hanson & Kim, 2007, p. 4).

Current psychological research emphasizes the need for building resiliency for all children to promote healthy development. However, schools and other institutions generally have not utilized this framework as a basis from which to support students' best interests. Alternative learning sites provide a space for resiliency to become a part of a curriculum that can foster the development of youth.

Assets Models in Alternative Spaces: After-School and Beyond

"One boys' club is worth one thousand policemen's' clubs."

- Jacob Riis, President of Boys Clubs of America, 1918

As outlined in the beginning of Chapter II, in the past twenty years a substantive theme within multicultural education has included countering the deficit model (García & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006). However, only a handful of authors present an assets model that contrasts a deficit model within the

context of out-of-school-time learning (Heath & Roach, 1995; Oreck, Baum, McCartney, 1999; Halpern, 2003; Chappell, 2006). Many authors in the after-school field perpetuate a deficit model in their discourse of children and the motivation of their programs (Miller, 2001; Gasman & Thompkins, 2003; Hirsch, 2005; Rinehart, 2008). Such after-school programs that reflect a deficit model limit their ability to meet their educational potential and ambitions.

The increased responsibilities and presence of alternative learning spaces for children reflect the dramatic transition in "the rhythms and structures of daily American life" (Heath and Roach, 1995, p. 20). After-school programs are often distinct from a classroom setting which may change the power dynamic between educators and children. Unlike school, students often *choose* to attend alternative learning programs and have different expectations for themselves and adults. A plethora of literature has emerged that highlight the unique opportunities that alternative spaces provide for youth to interact with peers and adults to provide for valuable learning experiences. Despite this agreement, the literature varies greatly in its discussion of the responsibilities of programs that serve youth (Heath & Roach, 1995; Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 1999; Miller, 2001; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Halpern 2003, Hirsh, 2005; Chappell, 2006; Rinehart, 2008). In addition, there is significant variance in how children and their needs are constructed. In the following segments I relate the success of after-school programs' capacity to either disrupt or reproduce a deficit model as some of the literature suggests.

An after-school deficit paradigm.

In spite of sincere intentions, many advocates for after-school experiences do so within the confines of a deficit paradigm. Many authors successfully outline the opportunities and benefits that after-school experiences create for youth (Miller, 2001; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Hirsh, 2005; Rinehart, 2008). Yet simultaneously, implicit assumptions of the child's deficit appear to undermine many of the authors' objectives. In analyzing the research of Hirsh (2005), Miller (2001), Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins (2003), and Rinehart (2008) I seek to convey their illustration of successful after-school programs, yet indicate some questionable implications of their assumptions regarding the deficit of the child.

Hirsch (2005) examines how after-school programs for urban youth can build developmental gains in his research from a text titled, *A Place to Call Home*. Throughout a four year period, Hirsch studied six urban after-school sites affiliated with Boys and Girls Clubs. Concurrent to Benson and Learner (2003), Hirsch's research emphasized children's developmental need for supportive relationships with adults (2005, p. 4). Hirsch found that "successful programs drew on the unique interests of individual staff" who were caring, highly motivated, and responsive to youth interest and input (2005, p. 9). These findings are congruent with the environmental assets that Hanson and Kim (2007) outline, which include high expectations from adults, caring relationships, and meaningful participation.

Hirsch demonstrates the impact of *No Child Left Behind* in the after-school sector. The new emphasis on accountability has increased the pressure to implement "preventative" after-school programs to address "an array of problem behaviors" (2005,

p. 7). Many of these preventative programs are academically based and usurp the

structure of the school in which they occur. Yet Hirsch argues that if the structure of

school is not working for a specific population, it is illogical for after-school programs to

adopt that model (2005, p. 6). He notes that all too often school has been "a place where

low-income and minority youth were treated with condescension, where strengths were

neither understood or [*sic*] appreciated." (2005, p. 7). As a result, Hirsch continues, it

may benefit after-school programs to deliberately break from a typical school structure

that has had limited success. Hirsch critiques the majority of after-school programs that

are highly structured and focused on academics. However, the author's analysis fails to

recognize the potential of less formally structured academic after-school programs to

elicit supportive relationships with adults. If after-school programs limit actually

educating children in favor of mentoring them as Hirsh seems to suggest, then what are

they actually doing?

In a review of current research, Hirsch (2005) found a dominant theme in which

after-school programs advocated that their site produced positive change for youth (p. 8).

Another problem Hirsch encountered was the impact of an outside researcher on staff on

youth performance and behavior. Instead, Hirsch calls for more studies that focus on

process over outcomes and more data to align theory and practice (2005, p. 9-10). This

study that investigates how an assets model that nurtures artistic thinking can be infused

into the goals of a visual arts program supports Hirsch's appeal for documenting the

process of praxis.

While Hirsh (2005) outlines many useful criteria for studying and actualizing

after-school programs, he simultaneously engages in deficit language and practices that

require investigation. His title *A Place to Call Home* implies that this population is without a home and perhaps even a family. This lens of lack extends in his specific emphasis on mentoring relationships as the type of caring adult relationships from which youth will benefit. To Hirsch (2005) mentors "provide knowledge, encourage positive attitudes, and teach the skills and discipline needed for a successful life" (p. 12) Hirsh's concept of mentoring easily falls into the savior paradigm in which mentors hold the power and authority to bestow their wisdom, advice, and values onto the child who is implicitly constructed as in need of the "right direction" (2005, pp. 3-4). Hirsch (2005) claims through such top-down relationships with adults, children can "[broaden] cultural horizons" and "points youth in the right direction" and can ultimately help youth avoid gang violence, drug dealers, and gun shots (p. 2005, p. 3-4). Hirsh's assumption that adult guidance can save these children from their impending delinquency is indicative of a deficit paradigm. Without critical examination of such rhetorical slogans that promise to "save the children" Hirsch unknowingly accepts the deficit paradigm that is embedded so deeply in our culture.

Other authors articulate the merits of after-school programs on the basis of social and academic benefits. Miller (2001) implies that student engagement in after-school programs can prevent many "risky behaviors" (2001, p. 8). She argues that the "informal learning environments" of after-school programs "can support enhanced cognitive outcomes and social and emotional competence" (2001, p. 12). According to Miller, after-school programs can also provide a space for diverse student populations to connect with teachers through multicultural activities. Miller (2001) points out "that after-school programs can link the values, attitudes, and norms of students' cultural communities with

those of the school culture" (p. 12). However, Miller's statement seems to relegate children's culture only into the after-school arena. Moreover, she locates the site of action solely on the after-school program rather than the community, children, and program working together. Miller's argument parallels Hirsch's (2005) articulation of the benefits of after-school programs in using the language of deficit and prevention to describe their objectives of saving youth from inevitably bleak futures.

Rinehart (2008) indicates that deficit thinking continues in the most recent literature. She articulates the need to extend after-school funding particularly for middle school students. She notes that currently, only six percent of these adolescents attend after-school programs (2008, p. 60). Congruent to Hirsch (2005), Rinehart (2008) argues that after-school programs should capture students' attention and not "feel like an extension of the school day" (p. 60). With this statement Rinehart highlights the unique opportunity of after-school programs to engage students because such programs are free from the structures that alienate many students from learning in a school setting.

Rinehart (2008) encourages readers' alarm when "middle school students are released from school and left to their own devices" (p. 60). Rinehart shares Miller's belief that after-school programs have the ability to cure what ails today's youth. Rinehart (2008) contends that participation in after-school programs prevents children's engagement in crime, use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs as well as increases student achievement (p. 60). Ironically, Rinehart's attempts isolate her analysis to individual children's misbehavior and does not question the structures of schooling that prevent engagement.

Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins (2003) exhibit the deficit model in art

education in "A Renaissance on the Eastside: Motivating Inner-City Youth Through Art."

The authors warn that from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. "children are more susceptible to

temptations" and "one in five violent crimes committed by juveniles occur" (p. 429). Yet

though art, according to Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins (2003), these children can

"stimulate their creativity and thinking and thus reduce their propensity to participate in

disruptive activities" (p. 430). Effective arts programs, they argue, can foster the ability

to resist peer pressure as well as increase self esteem, experimentation, tolerance of

difference, coping strategies, conflict resolution, and cooperation (Gasman & Thompkins,

2003, p. 431). The refrain that art will save children from themselves and their

communities is often symptomatic of a deficit model in art education.

Gasman and Anderson-Thompkin's (2003) describe the goals of their art program

Artists in the Making (AIM) as to 1) "improve self esteem, provide an alternative to

juvenile delinquency, 2) to tap the talent that lay dormant in the children, and 3) to bolster

the artistic skills that the children possessed" and build community connection to the arts

(p. 435). In these three goals the authors elevate a deficit objective of preventing juvenile

delinquency, alongside of their educational ambitions. The deficit objective indicates the

authors' negative assumptions of seemingly all urban youth and their communities, when

left to their own devices. Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins (2003) represent a common

motivation for after-school programs as preventing the anticipated reprehensible

behaviors of urban children such as illicit substance abuse, sexual activity, and crime (pp.

429-30). Conversely, Gasman and Anserson-Thompkins (2003) articulate the ability of

after-school art programs to increase resiliency and positive self esteem through art

education (2003, p. 445). Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins both represent art as a discipline with inherent learning opportunities to benefit youth, and as tool to produce behavioral changes. The authors' contradiction is extended to their construction of urban youth as aberrant, yet full of "dormant" potential to be unlocked by art education.

Hirsh (2005), Miller (2001), Rinehart (2008), and Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins (2003) provide a sampling of the motivations to be found in many contemporary after-school programs. They are united by a common belief in the inherent strengths of informal after-school learning experiences to provide positive interactions with adults that support the cognitive and emotional development of youth. However, to varying degrees these perspectives are bound by deficit language and objectives. The authors' rhetoric of deficit envisions after-school programs as sites to improve the lives and communities of youth through reducing risk behaviors. Hence, the language and implicit intentions of these authors seem to reveal deficit thinking that contributes to the marginalization of youth for whom they are allegedly fighting.

Assets-based out-of-school-time.

Halpern (2003), Chappell (2006), Oreck, Baum, and McCartney (1999), and Heath and Roach (1995) provide contrasting examples of after-school programs guided by an assets model. These analyses often review several after-school programs, looking for their strengths, weaknesses, and structural challenges. Such examinations contextualize the opportunities of after-school programs beyond merely championing their strengths, and emphasize the ability of supportive adults to flexibly support children's learning.

Halpern (2003) investigates the contemporary and historical roles and responsibilities of after-school programs in *Making Play Work: The Promise of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children.* After-school programs arguably grew out of the decreased need for child labor and consequent growth in demand for schooling children that occurred in the late nineteenth century (2003, p. 9). Thus Halpern (2003) contextualizes the origins of the often hostile relationship between [Caucasian] working class children and the institution of schooling that sorted children and prepared them for their predetermined slot in American society (p. 11). Halpern (2003) examined how as Progressivism took hold within American education, out-of-school-time became increasingly understood as a site to improve children and encourage creativity, imagination, cognitive flexibility, and social proficiency (2003, p. 14). In this vein, boys and girls clubs emerged as separate institutions to rescue children from the ills of their communities, an attitude that has shifted rhetorically but still remains pervasive for after-school programs (Halpern, 2003, p.20).

Halpern (2003) explicates while these initial after-school programs varied in structure and curriculum, they generally shared a common goal of utilizing youth as a mechanism to Americanize and change "the children's own values and behavior and to use children to change the values and behavior of their parents" (p. 27). Moreover, Halpern (2003) noted that these early out-of-school-time spaces sought to protect children from inadequacies of working mothers and preventing delinquency and crime (p. 25).

Halpern (2003) outlined the evolution of after-school programs during the twentieth century. During this period, particular individual identities developed while the

field "grew, solidified and took the form it would maintain in coming decades" (Halpern, 2003, p. 65). Yet by the 1960s the growth of maternal employment along with the flight of Whites, wealth, and work into suburbia had a dramatic impact on urban centers. Halpern expands, "The inner-city neighborhoods in which after-school programs operated were becoming increasingly isolated from the social and economic mainstream of society" (2003, p. 67). Within the shifting context of the urban American landscape, after-school programs reconceptualized themselves to contribute to improving educational success for students of color and to accommodate families who were increasingly comprised of working parents (2003, p. 68). Thus, Halpern (2003) constructed the deficit foundation that permeates the identity of after-school programs that emerged and prevailed in the later half of the twentieth century. After-school programs came to envision their motivation as a remedy for youth ultimately suffering from racism and poverty.

According to Halpern (2003) contemporary after-school programs are increasingly called upon to provide a "fresh response to both social and educational problems" (Halpern, 2003, pp. 87-88). This demand has been met by heightened funding opportunities, some state sponsored, that require quantifying program outcomes and increased results relating to "preventing a range of problems and in strengthening social skills and improving academic achievement and attitudes toward school" (Halpern, 2003, p. 89).

Despite diversity in sponsorship and ambitions for contemporary after-school programs, challenges are widespread. Halpern (2003) outlines common constraints for after-school programs including inadequate funding, staff quality and quantity,

curriculum, and program structure (pp. 118-199). Moreover, he contends that the current emphasis on increasing student productivity during after-school time by ultimately increasing the academic day via the after-school program exhibits a simplistic understanding and solution to the problem of underperformance of low income and minority students.

After completing two studies that conducted detailed observations and interviews in twenty after-school programs in a variety of communities, Halpern (2003) outlined qualities of successful after-school programs and pointed to possible improvements (p. 118). Such programs are guided by "a distinct sense of purpose, of thoughtfulness about the program as a whole, about what the program was trying to do and to accomplish, accompanied by distinctive adult roles" (2003, p. 130). Successful programs sought to connect activities to children's lives and experiences and took children and their perspectives seriously. Staff members were well-equipped to balance structure with flexibility and seriousness with playfulness, providing children with "some unstructured time, to decompress 'to figure things out,' and to make mistakes and try to correct them" (Halpern, 2003, p. 159). Halpern's findings provide specific examples of what an assets model can look like in an after-school environment.

Halpern places the development of after-school programs within a political and historical context. He looks beyond simply advocating for their necessity and investigates the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of a sampling of after-school programs. In the following section, I show how Chappell (2006), Oreck, Baum, and McCartney (1999), and Heath and Roach (1995) support Halpern's findings and

underline the characteristics and obstacles of assets-based after-school programs in the arts.

Assets-based after-school arts programs.

Chappell (2006) analyzes the assumptions of childhood and children's needs as presented by the Federal Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC). She investigates a number of after-school programs that fall under the 21st CCLC umbrella. At these sites, Chappell (2006) found that children are initially constructed as deficient, as the program targets students from high-poverty and low performing schools. Chappell (2006) warns that because 21st CCLC understands the child through this "lens of lack," the program envisions itself as the source of salvation for a needy and lacking population that requires a watchful eye (p. 13). As such, the 21st CCLC and other like minded programs conceptualize "childhood as an empty space to filled by adult visions and state parameters for educational experience" (2006, p. 10-11).

Chappell (2006) further articulates a false polarization of children by the 21st CCLC that view participants either as "active and academically successful" or as "passive and unproductive" when "left to their own devices" (p. 10). This dichotomy "reflects a constructed crisis concerning youths in poverty that manages public understanding of their identities and experiences" (2006, p. 10). In doing so, the 21st CCLC simultaneously imposes the federal governments' middle class norms and goals for ideal child behavior that may be "in direct contradiction to the values, beliefs, and skills of their local communities" (Chappell, 2006, p. 12).

Chappell's (2006) critique parallels Lubeck and Garrett's (1990) analysis of how the expert "philanthropist/professionals" construct themselves as the saviors for those on

the margins. These authors articulate how public responsibility for children is understood as compensation for parental deficiencies. Consequently those in power control whose knowledge and cultural values are deemed important. Chappell (2006) elaborates that the path prescribed to "save" or "fix" children perpetuates their inequity because the knowledge and behaviors ultimately elicited promotes compliance instead of imagination.

Chappell proposes a theoretical framework for assets-based, after-school programs that contrast the pitfalls of 21st CCLC. She argues that after-school programs must embrace the communities that they serve and benefit from using the resources and input that the community offers. Chappell (2006) envisions, "Through the arts, young people may explore the cultural facets of interconnectedness and communion as well as tensions of nonparticipation and disidentification" (p. 13). Chappell views art within an after-school context as a site where youth can investigate and invert their rejection of the schooling process to develop individual empowerment. However, Chappell cautions against the paradigm that "art saves lives" and helps children "become what they are not" (2006, p. 13). To be successful, Chappell urges that after-school visual arts programs must help children understand and contribute to the world instead of "becoming a bridge to normative cultural literacy" (2006, p. 13).

Chappell provides a valuable framework to apply to after-school programs beyond 21st CCLC, particularly those serving children on the margins. This perspective aligns with a participatory action research framework where "families and communities are not only resources but central actors in the school" (p. 14). However, she demonstrates limited recognition that often the families of children on the margins are not able for a variety of reasons to be actively involved in community projects. At Curcio

VAP children often attend precisely because there is not someone at home due to work or other responsibilities. In addition, some children have family members who are not mentally available due to illness, including drug addiction. To build on Halpern (2003) for these children, *they* need to become equal actors in designing the curriculum and pedagogy to reflect their communities and values (p. 153). In such cases, holding the children's perspectives alongside of the program facilitators reflects an asset model.

Oreck, Baum, and McCartney (1999) investigate the development of artistic talent specifically for urban youth. The authors outline the impact of arts learning on "identity, work habits, attitudes toward school, future opportunities, and the choices they make" (Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 1999, p. 64). The authors specifically focused on the performing arts and linked artistic development to an increased ability to focus, self regulate, be resilient, and develop a sense of professionalism (1999, pp. 69-76). Oreck et al. found that successful students had a combination of desire, motivation, opportunities for quality instruction, and were supported by their families, communities, and schools (pp. 73-76). These factors enabled students to overcome adversity within and beyond their artistic pursuits (p. 77). Conversely, adversities that these student artists encountered include family circumstances, safety concerns, social stigmas, lack of affordable instruction and equipment (pp. 71-73). Oreck et al. (1999) view the development of artistic abilities as one avenue to foster positive learning experience for urban youth.

The authors identified "the existence of a school-based program that developed students' artistic talents and interests" as a crucial external factor for children's success (p. 77). Moreover the authors articulated the limited availability of challenging arts programs for urban students (p. 77). Urban students have less access to these highly

important external factors in contributing to the development of artistic success.

Heath and Roach (1995) investigate art in alternative learning sites "that young people choose for themselves in non-school hours" (p. 20). The authors described successful after-school programs as ones that "recognize young people as resources, not problems" and "urge creativity and invention" (1995, p. 21). Such programs are in a unique position to develop community involvement and "build strong pro-civic and pro-social values" that empower youth (1995, p. 33).

Heath and Roach also specify the linguistic, cognitive, and developmental learning that takes place in these alternative spaces. In arts programs, youth were able to envision multiple possibilities for imagining and communicating their ideas. Heath and Roach's anthropological analysis categorized the critical thinking skills fostered by after-school arts programs to include strategy building, planning, preparing, transforming, creating analogies, predicting, reflecting, and negotiating (pp. 27-28). They also noted increased "syntax complexity, hypothetical reasoning, and questioning approaches" that built students' communication and verbal abilities. Heath and Roach (1995) illuminate how after-school arts programs can provide opportunities to build upon the cognitive abilities that children possess.

Additionally, Heath and Roach found that participation in after-school art programs strengthened social skills including internal monitoring, persistence, and giving constructive advice (1995, pp. 27-29). The authors indicate that such multifaceted learning outcomes grew out of engagement with the artistic process and the opportunity to interact closely and informally with supportive adults. Their findings are substantiated by Vygotsky's (1978) theories that outline the zone of proximal development that

underlines the difference between a child's ability to learn independently as compared to the "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Heath and Roach (1995) similarly found that through such interaction with adults and peers children in alternative art spaces could access "rich environments of challenge, practice, trial and error, and extraordinary expectations and achievements" (1995, p. 22).

Halpern (2003), Chappell (2006), Oreck, Baum, & McCartney (1999), and Heath and Roach (1995) articulate the specific educational and developmental attributes for children that can be fostered by assets-based after-school programs. Heath and Roach (1995) recorded that such artistic learning experiences can, as one student put, change "your perception of the world" (p. 24). Arts-based after-school programs can provide a framework that supports a connection to students' lives, communities, and values.

Working towards assets-based after-school visual arts models.

While an increasing number of researchers advocate for after-school programs, attempts to correlate a specific program to positive outcomes often provided shallow analysis of the complexities of sustaining an after-school program that actually embraces youth attributes and learning. The definition of successful programs and students shifts depending upon the researcher's motivation. This problematic focus on outcomes prevents unbiased analysis and investigation of the strengths, weaknesses, and structural challenges that after-school programs experience.

The study seeks to investigate the process of educators enacting an assets model into the environment, philosophy, curriculum, and pedagogy of an after-school visual arts program. Characteristics of an assets model built upon existing research includes

recognizing and honing the assets of youth and elevating the perspectives of youth, curriculum connectivity to the lives and values of youth, the presence of a common sense of purpose throughout the program's leadership, and flexible structure that nurtures imagination and invention.

Learning through the arts purports to uncover "how the development of artistic talents can positively effect the personal qualities shown in the literature to be critical to becoming psychologically healthy and productive adults" (Oreck, Baum and McCartney, 1999, p. 69). A strong visual arts curriculum is a framework that supports the translation of these assets into action.

Finally, as I explain in the design of study in the following chapter, Curcio VAP is further analyzed in its ability to provide youth interaction with external assets that include high expectations from adults that foster constructive use of time, caring relationships with adults with clear boundaries, and opportunities for meaningful participation that support and encourage empowerment (Benson, 2003; Hanson and Kim, 2007). Heightening these positive external assets increases the potential for accessing resiliency and healthy outcomes for children.

In my extensive research I have found few references to studies that articulate a critical analysis of deficit model in after-school programs, which primarily focus on the visual arts. Furthermore, examples of what an assets model looks like in an after-school *visual* art environment are rare. To provide a critical examination of an assets model I posit what happens when and how does an art educator infuse an assets model that strengthens learners' artistic thinking into the goals of an after-school visual arts program. This study seeks to fill the gap in contemporary research and provide a cohesive

example of an assets-based after-school visual arts program that endeavor to find a means

to shifting a deficit paradigm toward an assets paradigm.

Chapter III: Methodology

Designing A Participatory Action Qualitative Research Project

This study seeks to examine what occurs when a paradigm shift from a deficit model to an assets model is infused into the goals of an after-school visual arts program. As a qualitative study it prioritizes "how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Grundy (1995) identifies the essence of action research as "groups of professional practitioners with a passion for improvement taking risks and assessing what happens when they initiate changes" (p. 10). In this study the educators at Curcio VAP will become active participants of the research process that seeks to document how the educators collaboratively develop an assets-based visual arts program. In particular, the teaching and reflection of Professor Ruth Caldonia, Ed. D. will be investigated to identify and analyze her assets-based approaches to teaching Curcio youth.

In order to uphold assets pedagogy, the Curcio VAP educators will utilize a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model to collaboratively improve the culture of learning and teaching. PAR is aligned with critical pedagogy in its commitment to action and reform. As ascribed by PAR, I worked alongside educators to identify research questions and collect and interpret data. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) the ongoing research, action, reflection cycle of PAR facilitates the improvement of teaching practices (p. 7). Moreover, a PAR framework is valuable as form of professional development for the Curcio educator-participants as "it blends the emancipatory elements inherent in participatory models with iterative cycles of action and research" (James, 2006, p. 525). For educators at Curcio VAP, a PAR framework also allows for the

elevating of their perspectives and their understanding of the research questions and findings as co-researchers.

McTaggart (1997) outlines that participatory action research "aims to build communities of people committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action, and consequence in their own situation, emancipating themselves from the institutional and personal constraints that limit their power to live their own legitimate educational and social values" (p. 35). The collaboration of Curcio VAP educator-participants to identify and address curricular and pedagogical concerns provided a means to resist the tendency of after-school programs to engage in deficit practices.

Context

The metropolitan area surrounding the Curcio Community Center is home to just over 1.2 million residents. However only one fourth of the population reside within the city limits. The city lost a substantial percentage of its population due to White flight in the 1950s. Many middle-income families were able to follow employment opportunities that fled to the suburbs and other more prosperous regions. What is left is a city plagued by segregation, economic depression, and poverty. Yet, the preceding description is written in the language of deficit. One might wonder what this city would look like from alternative perspectives that result from closer examination.

The Curcio Community Center is situated in an urban neighborhood, just south from a nearby college campus. On the short walk from campus to Curcio it is as if you enter a different world. The back of Curcio is on a heavily trafficked street where a beautiful mural covers the building's façade. During the school year, a desolate pool is

barricaded behind a tall chain-link fence. On a balmy summer day the cement ground is filled with children and teens cooling off. Ironically, the fence prevents community members from entering the building through the doors surrounded by the brightly colored exterior walls.

Walking around the block to access the main entrance reveals convenience stores, a dollar store, and a Chinese fast-food restaurant. The run-down block is a mixture of predominantly student housing and low-income families who rent the many neglected and deteriorating homes and properties. Across the street now from the front of Curcio, the towers H.H. Richardson's now decaying architectural marvel, loom above a college-operated group home. The entire block behind Curcio houses a psychiatric hospital.

Approaching Curcio from the rear reveals a different welcoming from the brightly painted walls in the front. A clean, unassuming brown brick structure quietly announces itself as "Curcio Community Center" serving the neighborhood's youth since the late 1980s.

On a crisp day youth can be found chatting at the Curcio entrance or playing basketball on the newly renovated outdoor courts. Between the hours of 2:00 and 10:00 p.m. Curcio hosts approximately 40 children daily ranging in age from 8-18 years. Inside, a main lobby with two rooms on either side houses an administrative office and game room with pool and foosball tables, and a television. Usually Nick and Maury, the two full-time staff members at the Curcio, can be found in one of these rooms surrounded by a group of kids or the occasional adult from a local affiliate. Straight ahead is an enclosed gym where community youth play basketball. The gym also houses a private floor hockey league in the winter. Looking left from the gym is a small computer lab with five

computers that are Internet ready, when they are not frozen signaling a need for additional funding to operate effectively.

Just beyond the computers is a large garage door. The turn of a key raises a loudly screeching door that rolls toward the ceiling and reveals the Curcio Art Room. Bright cornflower blue trims creamy yellow cinderblock walls that are covered with student artwork. Mismatched chairs and benches surround three long parallel tables on well-worn rugs. A television and couch are off to the side along with a wire milk-crate bookcase stocked with smattering of art supplies. To the left, a tall black cabinet stands between the boys' and girls' bathroom. Next to the cabinet, paint-stained drinking fountains double as the only sink in the room. Unlocking the cabinet doors one finds carefully organized art materials that fill every inch of the shelves which buckle under the weight of the precious supplies.

Yet no less than nine months ago the Curcio Art Room was just a recreational space. The new paint, tables, art materials and artwork are recent acquisitions. But the most important additions are the individual educators and local youth that fill the room on Thursday evenings.

Participants

Over a year ago, two art education professors secured the location and grant monies to house an after-school visual arts program to teach local youth and art education teachers and students. Professors Ruth Caldonia and Grace Aleel became the facilitators of the Curcio VAP. Both professors have extensive backgrounds as certified art teachers in urban settings. Additionally, both hold MFA's in painting and are exhibiting artists. Ruth and Grace envisioned a visual arts program that would be driven by art education

graduate students. For the first semester Bonnie and I were invited to join two of these professors to implement the Curcio VAP.

Our first responsibilities included compiling inventory, creating a budget, selecting and purchasing art materials, and wading through many layers of red tape that slowed the completion of many of these tasks. Halfway through the introductory semester, we began regular meetings of Curcio VAP. Still awaiting most of our materials, we focused on developing basic drawing skills, building a rapport with youth, and establishing a positive environment. Most of the children we met attended because they had nowhere else to be. Before long we had regulars. By the end of the first semester I identified our emerging visual arts program as a rich site for my masters research.

We completed our first semester with a dramatic shift in direction and reach. Without most of our materials we were not able to establish the program as we had envisioned. However, this change afforded us an unanticipated opportunity to sit back and get comfortable in our new surroundings. We spent hours talking and drawing casually with the VAP participants and tried to develop mutual trust and respect. We established expectations and rituals such as snack to provide consistency and comfort for the participants in the program. By the end of the semester we no longer reminded children when and how to clean up, not to laugh at others artwork, or to hang up work once it was completed; they told one another. The following summer we gained new perspective and proceeded with a more thorough understanding of our environment and our students. This period of reflection allowed us to better address the obstacles that often stifle blossoming after-school programs and to better serve the diverse youth at Curcio VAP.

By the Spring semester of 2010 Ruth, Grace, and I welcomed Theo, a new graduate student to our team. Theo was in the beginning of his graduate studies and worked fulltime as a coordinator and educator at a local after-school arts program. In addition, we were joined Sydney and Jane, our first undergraduate art education students.The size and extensive experience of our team greatly minimized one of the most pervasive challenges for after-school programs. All too often after-school programs are staffed by under qualified and even uncertified instructors (Heath & Roach, 1999; Chappell, 2007; Wright, 2007). At the Curcio VAP the professors and graduate student participants have extensive experience teaching visual art to children of diverse backgrounds. The undergraduates participate and observe closely to begin to develop their ability to work with urban youth.

During this study, the age range for children at the Curcio VAP was 7 to 17 years. As a result of the age differences educators taught two distinct versions of the same lesson with developmentally appropriate motivations, contextualization, and performance tasks. This system emerged as the participants self segregated by age at different tables. A lack of thorough material and concept exploration by the older students led educators to specifically address the developmental differences between the younger and older youth.

The younger group consisted of children 7-11 years old. These children are generally enthusiastic, helpful, and hardworking. Developmentally, the children's physical and cognitive growth as well as their increasing strength and agility allows for more complex interactions of the child within their environment (Cole & Cole, 2001, p. 472). Cognitively, youth in their middle childhood attain Piaget's concrete operations. In

this stage of cognitive development, children are able to think symbolically, logically, and metacognitively (Cole & Cole, 2001, p. 477, 495). According to Kohlberg these children are shifting from the pre-conventional to conventional stage of moral development as they increase their ability to perceive other's thoughts and feelings (Cole & Cole, 2001, p. 563). Artistically, these children explore creation of symbols to communicate their interpretations of human relationships and interactions and an increased ability to organize pictorial space (Burton, 1980).

The older group includes 13-17 year olds. This group is characterized by an increasing awareness of others perceptions and their artwork. These adolescents are biologically entering puberty at different stages. Their outward physical manifestations of puberty are met by internal hormonal and cognitive changes. According to Piaget, at around 12 years, children enter the formal operational stage of cognitive development and can start to think systematically and abstractly (Cole & Cole, 2001, pp. 646-649). The biological transformations impact the social development as these children transition from childhood to becoming young adults. Kohlberg outlines that young adolescents becoming increasingly equipped to understand other perspectives and comprehend the complex relationship between individuals within society (Cole & Cole, pp. 659-660). Increasing importance is given to the development of peer relationships and the defining and redefining individual and collective identities as articulated by Erickson as the major conflict for adolescents. (Cole, pp. 673-675). Adolescents' increasing ability to think abstractly along with their shifting social identities manifests artistically. Burton (1981) characterizes the aim of adolescent art-making as "to create and organize experience in a form which not only looks coherent but feels coherent" (p. 62). The adolescents and

children at Curcio VAP challenged educators to gear the same art lessons to the unique developmental needs of our youth participants.

The educators and the youth at the Curcio VAP have vital roles in this participatory action research concerning the development of assets-based teaching practices. Contextualizing the history and characteristics of the participants enables the creation of a design for collecting data and constructing meaning to which I now turn.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Marshall & Rossman (2006) outline that qualitative data collection can take place in the form of participation, observation, interviewing and analysis of documents (p. 97). In line with PAR the participation, observing, and interviewing intertwines for researcher and participants. The PAR framework as espoused by McTaggart (2009) also sees the advantage of "being explicit about collecting data" with participants and keeping an open mind to shifting multiple interpretations (p.34).

With these goals in mind I developed a five strategies for documenting the teaching practice of Ruth Caldonia in the Curcio VAP. Triangulation of data was achieved by using multiple methods of data collection and sources of data to confirm emergent findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 215). First, to capture direct instruction and thoughts, Ruth wore a portable microphone during instructional time. These findings were coded as "Instruction." Second, I kept a dated composition journal with descriptive field notes with reflective analyses to record my direct observation/participation during Curcio VAP instruction time. I reference information gathered in this manner as "Field notes." Third, I photographed artworks created by learners as well as Ruth working with learners. Exemplar photographs were chosen and included as figures embedded within

Chapter IV. Fourth, I recorded meetings of VAP educators to capture Ruth's working through process and the theoretical groundings of her teaching practice and are referred to as "Meetings". Finally, I recorded one-on-one interviews, referred to as "Interview," with Ruth to capture and contrast her planning and reflection on our performance. In these open-ended reflective interviews that I recorded and transcribed, I asked Ruth to contextualize her teaching practice that I had observed. Physical documents were locked in a safe space when not in use while electronic data was password protected.

As the reflective field-notes, open-ended interviews, audio-transcriptions of instruction and meetings, and analysis of completed student artwork are performed, methods for data analysis to "record, manage, analyze and interpret the data" can make sense of what has been collected (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 151). In this case, data collection and analysis happened simultaneously and informed one another (Merriam, 2009, p. 165). Data was coded and analyzed for patterns and emergent overarching themes (Stoudt, 2009, p. 10).

Limitations of Study

Limitations as well as strengths of this study include my closeness to the project as necessitated by the PAR design that encourages the full collaboration between researcher and participants. Merriam (2009) cautions about "the schizophrenic aspect of being at once participant and observer that is a byproduct of this method of data collection and is a problem not easily dealt with" (p. 137). Yet the collaborative and democratic advantages of PAR in this case outweigh such "schizophrenia" that is circumvented through my awareness of this obstacle and resulting detailed organization, data collection, and analysis methods to make clear sense of data.

Another barrier is the erratic attendance of youth. Curcio VAP has been designed to accommodate any student who wishes to participate. To include all students, no program fee, registration, or permission is needed beyond that of the general requirement of Curcio. Students were tracked through taking attendance to develop a cohort of students who have participated throughout the data gathering process.

Ethics

Throughout this study all individuals will be referred to with pseudonyms. In addition, all identifiers were changed to ensure the anonymity and safety of participants. The "walk-in" nature of the program prohibited guardian permission for children. As a result my fellow educators and I examined the completed artwork of students in addition to the field notes, observations, and interpretations in order to assess learning and youth perspectives.

The teaching practice of Ruth will be the focus of the study. I will look for her delivery of assets-based teaching methods that overcome the limitations of teaching from a deficit model as outlined in Chapter II. Non-obtrusive data collection methods along with pseudonyms will minimize any risk to all students and educator-participants. From the beginning of this study, open dialogue between all educator-participants fostered transparency about my research goals and questions. Written consent from the educator-participants formalized these agreements.

This participatory action research study intended to reinforce and support the teaching practices of the educators who grounded their teaching within an assets model. Through the professional development tool of PAR that emphasizes reflection and responsive action, Ruth investigated and identified her delivery of assets-based teaching

practices. A spiraling reciprocity emerged as Ruth translated her assets-based teaching

practices for Curcio youth to teaching undergraduate and graduate students. The

reciprocity further extends as Art Education graduate and undergraduate students develop

an assets pedagogy at multiple sites beyond the walls of Curcio VAP.

Chapter IV: Analysis

As a drop-in after-school art program, the Curcio VAP is a unique space that was tailored to fit the needs of its members. By our second year a start time was set at 4 P.M. every Thursday. Our team of educators was comprised of Professors Ruth Caldonia and Grace Aleel, two graduate students Maureen and Theo, and two undergraduate students Sydney and Jane. We slowly filtered in around 3:30 to set up for our two-hour art making session. As we came in through the main entrance, we would say our hellos to the youth who often congregated near the lobby to Nick, Director of the Curcio. We passed through the art room and proceeded into the boys' locker room that we had transformed into the Curcio art closet. As coats and bags were tucked away, we gathered materials for the evening's activity.

Our entrance into the Curcio in some ways was reminiscent of the beginning of my school day at P.S. # 11 as described in Chapter I. Yet this was not a school. The environment, in addition to the expectations of adults and youth alike, reminded us that here we were not traditional teachers and students. Still, our goal was to provide meaningful learning experiences through the visual arts in this alternative space.

Shaped by its educators, the Curcio VAP was a site for youth to access "support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time" (Benson, 2003, pp. 26-27) through closely interacting with adults within a strong visual arts program. Educators at the Curcio VAP envisioned our potential to provide external assets defined by Benson (2003) as support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (pp. 26-27) through arts learning that bolsters youth imagination.

The flexibility of the Curcio VAP permitted our program to emerge in support of the needs of learners. However, the situatedness of the Curcio VAP within a drop-in community center presented distinct challenges that our program encountered throughout the semester. These included 1) varied and unpredictable class size, ranging from none to ten children and 2) a wide range in ages of youth participating specifically from 8-19 years.

While such factors greatly contributed to our "art class without the school" atmosphere, educators continually strove to take into consideration the inconsistency of youth participation. For the spring semester 2010 we taught a total of nine sessions serving a total of eighteen youth participants. I relate how these distinctive features of the Curcio VAP played out in the different facets of Ruth's teaching.

Curriculum design was one facet that was specifically tailored to meet the needs of our drop-in visual arts program. A curriculum map (see Appendix B) drawn early in the semester, provided a framework for how to build on students' ideas and imagination. Contemporary constructivist visual arts curricula prioritized authentic artistic practices and held students' ideas, interests, and agency as a central shaping force. (Anderson & Milbrandt, 1998; Walker, 2001; Sullivan, 2003; Freedman, 2003; and Gude, 2007). Ruth articulated the goal of curriculum design at Curcio VAP, "We have to come up with imaginative things here to equal their [the learners] imaginations" (Ruth, 2.24, Meeting). We formulated our conceptual "big idea" (Walker, 2001) as *Views of the (Natural) World* using seminal works by local region watercolorist Charles Burchfield from current exhibitions at the Burchfield-Penney Art Center. In addition to Burchfield's paintings we

incorporated selected artworks by artists throughout world history to further enrich our learning activities and connect to the interests of the youth at the Curcio.

Prior planning established the "different key concepts that brought us into different areas" of the big idea (Ruth, 2.17, Meeting). Ruth defined key concepts as "what's significant about the big idea" or aspects of a big idea that can be developed in lessons (Ruth, 2.8, Meeting). In a classroom setting these different key concepts can be sequenced by increasing complexity. Yet at the Curcio VAP lesson sequencing was less linear as each lesson delved into a different area that provided a more in-depth understanding of the big idea. These lessons must stand on their own to convey an understanding of the big idea to a learner who may only attend one session, while providing a more in-depth experience for returning learners. In *Views of the (Natural) World* as indicated in Appendix B, lessons interconnected to deepen learners' understanding of how artists find a variety of wonders in their surrounding world and provide motivation for artistic inquiry. The semester was to culminate in a field trip to the Burchfield-Penney for students to see the works they had encountered throughout the semester.

Attendance was an extremely limiting factor. Despite having the curriculum, *Views of the (Natural) World* with eight lessons, six lessons were not taught, including our field trip, due to lack of youth participants. As a result, I include data from transcriptions and analysis of two lessons prior to the implementation of our curriculum to illustrate concepts for an assets-based pedagogy. These lessons include *Expressive Figure Sculptures* taught on February 18th and *Narrative Figure Drawing* taught on February 25th.

Views of the (Natural) World sought to build youth's ability to investigate interesting facets of their surroundings akin to the artistic process of Charles Burchfield. Strengthening youths' ideas and imagination reflects an assets model, as Ruth pointed out, "the ideas come from the students" (Ruth, 4.8, Meeting).

The emphasis of the Curcio VAP on building internal assets through artmaking has been an ongoing and evolving process. To define internal assets for the purposes of this study I use Benson's (2003) commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (pp. 26-27) as well as Hanson and Kim's (2007) empathy, problem solving, self-efficacy, and self-awareness (p. 4).

This study investigates the space and time needed to establish the goal of the Curcio VAP to develop learners' strengths and work towards the actualization of that goal. Hirsch (2003) calls for more studies that focus on process over outcomes and more data to align theory and practice. In this study I narrate how enacting an assets-stance as a unifying goal or "a distinct sense of purpose" (Halpern, 2003, p. 130) manifests itself in after-school visual arts program. I specifically examine how Ruth's assets-stance evident in different facets of her teaching, emphasized building on youth assets through visual arts learning. My facilitation of Ruth's refection during one-on-one interviews played a key role identifying and articulating assets-based teaching practices. Instructional exemplars of the emergent facets of Ruth's teaching are explored in depth.

Enacting an assets stance rubs against a typically status quo deficit model examined in Chapter II of this document, in which childhood and youth are constructed to be lacking and less valuable (Te Riele, 2006, p. 132). An assets-stance considers how the expectations of the institution of school impact the social construction of the child.

Within the school, the child, understood as a student, is expected to fit within the classroom environment. While that classroom can be shaped by constructivist theory and an assets model, the child still must fit within the classroom and ultimately the greater institution of school. Alternatively, the Curcio VAP sought to create an environment beyond the school that grew around the child to meet their needs.

Creating an environment that actively searches for learners' strengths is very different from the deficit paradigm that many of the youth at the Curcio experience inside and outside of school, as indicated by my own experiences of teaching in an urban setting in Chapter I. Thus the challenge and objective for the assets educator is to develop student strengths, which encourages youth to see *themselves* though an assets lens. In the following chapter, I descriptively analyze how the teaching approaches of Ruth emphasize the development of children's abilities and strengths.

"Its Like Art Class Without The School": A "Just Right" Space

Figure I. Week Four: Expressive Figure Sculptures, February 18th

Within this section I focus on the role of the environment in enacting an assets

stance in an alternative learning space. The flexibility of our alternative environment at

the Curcio VAP enabled educators to cultivate a space that encouraged youth participants

to learn through visual arts lessons. Since the goal of the Curcio VAP was to develop

youth assets, educators laid a foundation that was built to incorporate what youth

perceive and identify as their strengths and needs. As described by Lucas, one of the

youth participants, the Curcio VAP felt "like art class without the school" by its third

semester. In his statement, Lucas poignantly identified the need for youth to learn beyond

the parameters of school and reminded us of the resistance some of the Curcio youth hold

towards traditional schooling (Maureen, Field notes). Stemming from an assets stance,

educators responded to this perceived strength of the Curcio VAP by asking how we

could develop our own asset of providing learning experiences through the arts "without the school" that our population actively resisted.

In this section, I investigate what happened when an educational space was designed to cultivate youth assets and was uninhibited by what may be termed the institutionalization of learning within schooling. I utilize transcriptions from February 18th throughout the analysis to illustrate in depth how the environment of the Curcio VAP emerged to support youth strengths. The concept of the environment emerging is key if educators are responding to the strengths of students rather than imposing or constructing a preconceived environment ahead of time.

Like a traditional art classroom, the Curcio VAP has certified art educators and a standards-based curriculum. Yet, being situated within a drop-in community center where students choose to participate, our program grew out of an environment other than school. We made a conscious decision to honor the drop-in culture of this community center to accommodate students from all socio-economic backgrounds. Subsequently, youth were free to leave if they wished. Ruth told a surprised student who did not wish to participate "Go ahead. Its not school you can leave...I'd like you to stay but you can leave. Ok? It was nice having you here" (Ruth, 3.4, Instruction). Interestingly, this was the only student throughout the semester that chose to leave (Field notes).

Those who stay *choose* to be a member of the Curcio VAP. As Ruth asserted, Curcio VAP educators should focus on students' choice to participate instead of "worrying about creating school" (Ruth, 2.24, Meeting). The Curcio educators strove to "help students create a sense of community...to construct a place where they feel trusted, respected and empowered." (Kohn, 1996, p. 10). As Sydney, an undergraduate

participant noted, the youth members "enjoyed what they were doing...I knew that the kids who were going to be there wanted to be there" (Sydney, 2.17, Meeting). Likewise, the educators at Curcio VAP actively sought out this experience based on individual commitment to professional and community development. The *choice* of Curcio VAP members "to be there" promoted a shared sense of belonging and dedication to their collective space.

To contribute to a sense of belonging, Curcio VAP educators maintained a structure that grew around the learning strengths of Curcio youth for three semesters. Now, I identify the structures that organized the time and space within the Curcio VAP that have emerged and continue to evolve. The continual development of the Curcio VAP environment aligns with Halpern's findings (2003) indicating the importance of educators being "well-equipped to balance structure with flexibility and seriousness with playfulness" (p. 159). Within this section, I illustrate how Ruth balanced these evolving structures with a flexibility to be responsive and fresh to engage and re-engage learners.

Halpern (2003) identified the importance of balance within the after-school setting to support rich learning experiences for youth. However, the concept of balance implies a steady homeostasis. At the Curcio VAP, perhaps in part resulting from the ability to construct an environment rather than inherit it, educators engaged in the continual act *balancing.* As it relates to teaching, balancing involves a constant readjustment on the part of the educator to enable children to meet educational objectives. Balancing structure and flexibility along with seriousness and playfulness emerged as characteristics of our "art class without the school" (Halpern, 2003). Through the vigilance of this balancing act, a "just right" space emerged over time.

Flexible structure: A "just right" space.

In the following section I describe how sessions of the Curcio VAP were structured and demonstrate the flexibility that works within that constructed space. One of the assets of the Curcio VAP was the flexibility and autonomy of the educators to change as needed. As an alternative learning space the Curcio VAP educators strove to release themselves and learners from the habits and expectations of a traditional classroom setting. As Grace asserted, "I think we're in a really great situation over there [at the Curcio Community Center] because of the way it's set up, we don't have to do it that way. (Grace, 2.3, Meeting). The "way it's set up" involved certain structures including snacking, working, and closing. After my analysis of "the way" the Curcio VAP is "set up" I will relate the playfully serious atmosphere that has emerged outside of "that way" of school.

Snacking.

An integral part of the structure of the Curcio VAP since the beginning of our program involved sharing a snack usually consisting of juice, fruit, vegetables, or crackers. For many of our youth members who are living in poverty, hunger is a daily reality. In providing access to a healthy snack, Curcio VAP created a space that youth can count on to help meet fundamental nutritional needs. Previously, snacks were casually consumed throughout the artmaking session. However, this semester educators identified that "the snacks are going away" after the beginning of the Curcio VAP (Ruth, 1.28, Meeting).

Aside from simply making work time less messy, codifying a snacking time was a response to previous successes in working with Curcio youth. Educators witnessed that

sharing a snack helped to establish and maintain a reciprocal and congenial tone (Maureen 1.28, Field notes). Moreover, starting with snack also helped address the challenge of students' arrival: "Its very slow filtering in which is why snack first works really well." (Maureen, 1.28, Meeting).

February 18th was the fourth meeting of Curcio VAP of the Spring 2010 semester. Youth now asked what was for snack when they first came in, helped distribute food and paper towels, and sat alongside educators to eat (Maureen, 2.18, Field notes). As recorded below, Ruth shared some juice, cheddar rice cakes, and conversation with Cheyenne, a nine year old participant of the Curcio VAP.

Ruth: I love the fact that this humongous bag says sensible portions.

Cheyenne: What's sensitive?

Ruth: Sensible.

Cheyenne: What does that mean?

Ruth: That means it's not you know, normal, its not to crazy, not too much. Just right...Like Goldilocks...Not too big, not too little, just right.

Cheyenne: It was too hard, too soft, just right.

This exchange is typical in our program during snack time, which became an informal settling in period where educators and youth put aside those titles and expectations and had a conversation. Moreover, educators were able to identify and expand upon the teachable moments that occur in everyday life, in this case, understanding sensible portions. These informal interactions between educators and learners fostered rapport among Curcio VAP members that seeped into working and

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closing time. As this mode of interaction became ritualized, the more easily program time could shift the traditional expectations of educator and learner as defined within a deficit model. Such a blurred boundary between formal and informal learning can be common in an alternative learning space where the flexibility and time exist to listen. Additionally, learners and educators alike became accustomed to flipping those roles whereby all participants have something to learn and something to teach.

Snack became an established structure upheld by youth who initiated the ritual. One VAP youth participant explained to a boy who helped himself to a snack "No you have to be in art; you were in the gymnasium" (Jamal, 2.10, Instruction). Often youth performed these responsibilities on their own accord as Ruth recollects, "There was a single older kid who prepared the snacks. There was no way that a kid would have gone and taken something. Because he was the Snack Master and he would say 'What do you say?' Please and thank you" (Ruth, 1.28, Meeting). The participation of Curcio youth in creating and maintaining routines and rituals contributed to a sense of belonging and investment (Maureen, Field notes).

Unlike Goldilocks', the "just right" educational space is not found but collectively fostered by all members of the Curcio VAP. Yet the educators provided the framework that initiated the ability of youth to fully participate in establishing the routines and rituals that foster a safe space. Curcio members codified the natural occurrence in the beginning of the program where youth "come in...and say 'Hey what's going on" (Theo, 1.28, Meeting). In working with the desire of students to come back together, which in fact mirrors the arrival of educators, promoted a more successful segue into working time.

Working.

To begin *Expressive Figure Sculptures*, educators encouraged the eight youth participants to move to an elementary table and a secondary table (Maureen, 2.18, Field notes). This transition signaled the beginning of the working portion of the Curcio VAP.

On this day, Ruth sat at a long table along with five teenagers – three girls and two boys (see Figure I). Since she was not leading the motivation, Ruth took part in the art making activity. Her positioning alongside the teens was not formally decided ahead of time yet it grew out of how educators had come to work with youth at the Curcio VAP. With four certified art teachers, educators had the ability to establish an informal and intensive working style with youth.

As Ruth heard her graduate student, Theo, begin the lesson, she playfully redirected her tablemates' attention by exclaiming, "I wanna hear! I wanna hear!" Ruth's table followed her lead and listened to Theo who "had this idea of what we are going to do today based on the way your body can express how you're feeling or what you're thinking."

Ruth:	You ready! Ready? All right. Who gets the squishy chair? I've never done this either. Ooo this is kind of tough. Have you ever done this?
Mikala:	No.
Ruth:	Neither have I. I'm gonna find out. I think we're gonna build on this [she gestures to her tin foil armature].

Ruth took on the role of a learner, keenly modeling a developmentally appropriate response in her art making and her dialogue about her sculpture. As Ruth sat at one table

with the same group of learners throughout the entire lesson, she altered her normal approach to teaching. Ruth noted that in her typical classroom teaching practice: "I tend to walk around a lot. Because if I usually sit at one table then someone else is not there" (Ruth, 2.22, Interview). With more space and more educators, Ruth was able to literally change the way she taught and work intensively alongside five teenagers.

Ruth specifically chose what to say to help students with needs that she assessed in real time. Ruth deliberately tailored her wording, cadence, sense of humor, and body language throughout the working period of the Curcio to put her tablemates at ease. Ruth's playfully serious interactions with her tablemates will be revisited in the playfully serious subsection of this chapter with specific attention to how she shifted traditional expectations of herself as a teacher and her tablemates as learners.

Closing.

One by one as members finished working on their artwork they began a closing routine and came together with shared goals and responsibilities. Members began by placing their artwork on a table to dry and getting a piece of "special paper" to write down an artist's statement. Next, members took on cleaning jobs and worked together to clean up from the day's activities and set up for next week. Here Ruth probed a member to encourage his articulation of the meaning of their artwork and usher him into the closing ritual.

Manny: I'm done.

Ruth: Look at all this tin foil you left!

Manny: But that's his ah shining ability. He's 14 karate.

Ruth: Say that with more...believability.

Manny:	He's 14 karat tin foil
Ruth:	14 karat tin foil (laughing). Ok. What's the emotion you're expressing with this?
Manny:	He's falling back. He's like hugging his son or something. Like his niece...
Ruth:	Are...you done? Ok get a piece of paper. Put your name and whatever word or title that you want to go with this....What are you gonna call it?
Manny:	I'm gonna call it killing me softly.

Ruth asked questions that assessed Manny's understanding of the learning activity. She respected that he was finished even though she might have thought there was more that he could do. Yet she held him accountable for articulating how his artwork completed the task of expressing how a body reflects, "how you're feeling or what you're thinking." This informal assessment helped Ruth understand how to make necessary improvements for learning gaps but perhaps more importantly announced the learning of members to themselves and one another. As Manny wrote his artist's statement, Ruth circulated to see how other learners were progressing in the closing process. She reminded youth of their responsibilities whether it was completing their artist's statement, cleaning up or storing their completed artwork.

Ruth:	Come on, we gotta wash down the table. I'm gonna help. I did it too...Thank you!
Ruth:	Let me see. How's it coming.... Oh I see it's coming along...That looks amazing!

Ruth: Ok...Put your name on the paper and what that emotion is or whatever word you want to put in there. Its like the title of the piece.... What is your piece about? What's the title? This one's pregnant, this one's head hurts....This one's confused. What's yours...What's yours about? All right! Put that down.

Closing time engendered a collaborative yet informal environment in which members reflected upon the day's activities. Ruth's steady inquiry on the ideas and accomplishments of youth modeled a sharing of ideas that youth may begin to elicit from one another.

The snacking, working, and closing periods provided a structure and routine initiated by Curcio educators in response to the needs of Curcio youth. As Theo noted in describing one semester goal to establish a schedule that could provide Curcio learners with "time frames that they get used to" (Theo, 1.28, Meeting). The Curcio educators' ability to construct a learning space that was released from the expectations of a classroom is authentically assessed as Curcio youth decided which structures to enforce and uphold. Educators deliberately created a constructivist structure that inverts traditional roles: everyone is learning; everyone is educating. Yet the educators were the ones who were equipped with a theoretical grounding to realize this sustainable ideal.

Within this structure that emerged at the Curcio VAP, educators maintained a flexibility and responsiveness to sustain engagement for all Curcio members, especially youth. The structure itself is in many ways akin to a classroom. Yet, as Sydney observed, our "after-school program has more...flexibility...the kids have more room to...feel comfortable and want to be there" (Sydney, 2.17, Meeting). From an assets-stance,

flexibility is nestled within a routine structure to create a safe and engaging space where members "want to be" (Sydney, 2.17, Meeting). Yet the "just right" educational space extended beyond the physical structures of walls and routines. Expectations and interpersonal relationships among educators and learners founded on an assets-stance was the compliment to a flexibly structured space.

Playfully serious: Shifting expectations and relationships.

Shifting expectations and relationships toward an assets-stance involved a playful yet serious attitude on the part of Curcio VAP members, and was founded on building rapport, re-engaging through conversation, and elevating the learner throughout all of the structured periods of the program. Ruth reminded her co-educators, "Your perspective on kids and the way that you treat them in the classroom helps create the environment" (Ruth, 3.15, Interview). Halpern (2003) pointed out the link among educator respect for children and students' perception of a program as safe spaces, where their perspectives are respected (p. 118). In this section I investigate how the learning space extends beyond the physical structures of the environment at the Curcio VAP.

Building rapport.

To investigate the role of mutual expectations and relationships between educator and learners within an assets-based environment, I return to Ruth working with Curcio teens on their *Expressive Figure Sculptures*. As previously noted, a two-hour program time in addition to more educators, Ruth was able to change the way she teaches, and work intensively alongside five teenagers. This shift in her role as a teacher allowed the teens to interact with her in a different way than they might with a teacher. Ruth camouflaged her teaching with a sense of humor and informal conversation to build

rapport, personal connections, and trust with the teens. Ruth's playful approach to instructing these teens reflected how she prioritized infusing "humor and students' affective investment" into the learning process (Duncum, 2009, p. 240). The teens at Ruth's table were shy, this was in fact the first time some of them worked together in art class (Maureen, 2.18, Field notes). Ruth's playful personality coupled with her interest in eliciting and listening to ideas from teens contributed to the creation of a relaxed atmosphere. She worked at the pace of the teens as they began to manipulate the tin foil into armatures for their sculptures.

> Ruth: Does everybody have something? Do you have a pose? I finally thought of one that I think I would be very interested in.
>
> Mikala: Mine's bored.
>
> Ruth: Bored is important. I think bored is a very important emotion. Ok what's mine?
>
> George: Cleaning?
>
> Ruth: No, darn it.
>
> Mikala: Digging?
>
> Ruth: No (lighthearted disappointment) These aren't emotions...those are actions.
>
> All: Laughter
>
> Ruth: I was thinking about somebody who is very, very sad.... Digging!"

Ruth broadcasted her internal dialogue while making her figure. Her tone was upbeat and comical while her questions focused on the ideas behind the armatures. Ruth subtly reminded learners of the foundational importance of their idea for their artwork,

more specifically what emotion they were trying to convey. Because individual ideas
were developed upfront, Ruth was able to carefully work alongside the teens without her
work becoming an exemplar to be copied, which is contrary to best practices in
contemporary art education.

Ruth emphasized the importance of communicating ideas through the artmaking
process and the value of peer critique. She was playfully disappointed when the emotion
in her figure was not clearly conveyed to her table members. Yet she continued to work
with that awareness and modeled how to use constructive criticism. At one point Ruth
noticed her tablemates looking suspiciously at the papier-mâché "goop" and newspaper.

Ruth:	OK. The next thing. I gotta take my rings off, darn it. Cause this goop...
George:	What are we gonna do with that?
Ruth:	We're gonna drink it. And its lemon flavored.
All:	Laughter
Ruth:	This is the base and then we're gonna papier-mâché around it...We need to put this [goop] in some other container...Listen if I'm taking off my rings this is serious. I don't like taking my rings off.
All:	Laughter

Ruth's interaction with the teens is founded on the objective of having them
create figure sculptures that capture an emotion that they individually conceptualize and
find meaningful. Yet her witty delivery of this objective coupled with a slower pacing
afforded by her ability to stay in one spot shifted the relationship between herself and the
teenagers. Other learners or classroom responsibilities were less of a distraction. She had

time to intersperse casual conversation and real time observations about actually making a tin foil armature for the first time. The shifting role of Ruth within the learning space as a co-educator rather than a teacher allowed for a more in-depth interaction with learners. The relationships and expectations afforded in the Curcio VAP echo Benson's (2007) view of external assets that promote positive youth development including "high expectations from adults, caring relationships with adults, and opportunities for meaningful participation" (2007, p. 4). Expectations are reciprocal on the part of educators and learners such that mutually caring relationships were established.

Re-engaging through conversation.

The alternative space of the Curcio VAP provided Ruth with the ability to work in depth with the same group of learners for nearly a two-hour period. Despite general agreement that youth benefit from close working relationships with teachers and mentors, this space and time rarely fits within the structures of school (Halpern, 2003). One of the potentials of a close-working relationship between educator and learner is the ability to learn through conversation. As Ruth explained:

> "I'm constantly re-engaging...its a reinforcement of some sort...What are you
>
> doing over there?... What's your idea again? It's like they're verbalizing their idea
>
> ...I know what the idea is. But that's not it. I'm getting them to verbalize what
>
> they're doing. (Ruth, 2.22, Interview)

While this in some ways mirrors a dialogical teaching strategy at the whole class level, Ruth's conversation with her teenage table members was intensive and personable, perhaps more so than she would be able to sustain in a classroom (Field notes, 2.18). The

increased time and extremely low educator-learner ratio challenges these traditional structures found in the classroom.

Ruth's expectations and conversations with learners at the Curcio "isn't that different from how I would sound in my classroom" (Ruth, 3.25, Instruction). The conversation was sustained throughout program time with Ruth "pushing in" to re-engage and "pulling out" to let the teens take the lead. Here Ruth responded to the teen's hesitancy to begin to apply papier-mâché to their sculptures.

Ruth:	I'll give you guys some muck...Ok. I'll tell you what this is... Basically it used to be a powder... It was powdered plastic so it doesn't have any smell except if you can smell plastic... And so when you dip it into… I'll start with a small piece. You dip it into. Have you all done papier-mâché before?
José:	I've done papier-mâché before. We didn't use that; we used flour and water.
Ruth	Right. Do you know what happens with water and flour? Do you know why we don't use water and flour...
George:	Why?
Ruth:	At night what do you think comes into...?
George:	Rats?
Ruth:	(Nodding) They eat the paper. Particularly when it has flour on it, cause its food right?...So what do I do next?
José:	Put it [the papier-mâché] on [the armatures]?
Ruth:	With all that muck on it? What do you usually do with the paper?

José: If you have gloves you can take some of it [the papier-mâché] off.

Ruth: [Do] you use gloves to do papier-mâché? It is...kinda nasty.

Imagine that this poor little person...has, oh no, a broken arm, and

I'm making a cast. That's what it reminds me of.

All: Laughter.

Ruth taught through casual conversation probing to see what learners knew and let them share their knowledge while filling the gaps herself. She tried to put learners' uncertainties about the mysterious goop at ease by explaining exactly what the goop is. She utilized narrative to distract and motivate some uncertain teens who have rarely used three-dimensional art making material. She described this teaching conversation as "a way to banter imaginatively, but it was connected to what they said." Her ability to have a conversation is founded on her genuine interest in listening to youth perspectives as she explained, "I'm curious, I want to know what you think...I really do" (Ruth, 3.25, Interview). Ruth camouflaged herself as a teacher by seemingly taking on the role of a student. She masked her teaching objectives within a conversation that flowed on and off topic. With this student-like presence she was able to casually take stock of learner's frustrations and needs, and re-engage them by talking through the difficulties.

John Dewey (1902) reminds us "the child is the starting point, the center, and the end" (p. 187). The environment of Curcio VAP members emerged in response to educators seeking to balance the needs of learners and creating a structure that fits "just right." The educator's ongoing efforts to collaborate with learners initiated an alternative learning space with rich external assets that supported the positive development of youth (Benson, 2003).

The Curcio VAP's flexible structure and its playfully serious expectations and relationships among its members engender mutual respect and engagement. Through the ongoing responsiveness of the educators the Curcio VAP has the potential to sustain "extraordinary expectations and achievements" (Heath & Roach, 1995, p. 22). The foundational expectations of the educator established the environment and extended into the guiding philosophy and pedagogy of the Curcio VAP.

Accentuating the Positive Through Authentic Visual Arts Pedagogy

Figure I. Ruth and Cheyenne. Week Five: *Narrative Figure Drawings*, February 25th

The Curcio environment that emerged to support learners' needs is the manifestation of philosophy that actively searches for student strengths and abilities. The shared assets-philosophy of Curcio educators reflects what Halpern identified as a "distinct sense of purpose" that serves to unify successful after-school programs (2003, p.

130). An assets-philosophy directly counters the pervasiveness of often unconscious deficit philosophies that often drive after-school programs to "fix" deficient youth (Miller, 2001; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Hirsh, 2005; Rinehart, 2008).

The philosophical stance that all youth have strengths translates into teaching, which Curcio Educators have identified as an assets pedagogy (Maureen, 4.8, Field notes). An assets-pedagogy draws from authentic studio practices that focus on the development of meaningful ideas. Sullivan (1994) characterizes contemporary artmaking as imbued with "a sense of meaning, a sense of connection, a sense of doubt and a sense of perspective" (p. 11). Ruth mirrored these authentic artmaking principles in her teaching which is "much more holistic...It's an artistic way of thinking that I encourage...you don't have to think this one thing that I suggest" (Ruth, 2.10, Interview). A pedagogy for art education that is informed by respect of the idea facilitates the development of youth assets. As Ruth asserted, "we all have ideas" and if ideas are at the center of the artmaking everyone has something on which to build (Ruth, 2.22, Interview).

Within this section I examine the manifestation of the assets pedagogy that guides the Curcio VAP educators to celebrate and build on the ideas and accomplishments of youth. I specifically analyze the conversation between Ruth and nine year old Cheyenne as Ruth articulated an artists' internal monologue to guide Cheyenne to develop her ideas. Ruth's pedagogical approach to building on youth's strength is informed by and parallels her practice as visual artist. Her pedagogy is founded on authentic visual arts practices that encourage imagining multiple possibilities and celebrating discovery. Ruth aligned her pedagogy with an assets model by letting the ideas of the learner fuel this process.

Her guidance in translating the artistic process to learners centers on "getting their [youth's] ideas out" (Ruth, 1.28, Instruction).

Conversations to translate the artistic process.

A central feature of Curcio VAP pedagogy was modeling and talking through an artist's internal monologue. I described our teaching method to our two new undergraduates, Sydney and Jane, in that, "It's about getting a conversation going....One of the problems is that our kids have never been taught this way...So they can be a little hesitant at first." (Maureen, 2.17, Meeting).

This week's art lesson, *Narrative Figure Drawings,* expanded upon last week's lesson *Expressive Figure Sculptures.* Youth choose a figure sculpture from the last week and imagined the story behind the emotion depicted. Their imagined story was depicted in a drawing that used a variety of pencils and oil pastels. Cheyenne followed the motivation and began to draw one of last week's figure sculptures that expressed a feeling. Along with her two older brothers Marcel and Marcus, Cheyenne has attended more art club meetings than any of the other youth.

Ruth reminded everyone as they began to draw the figure sculptures, "You're focusing on the pose first and then you get to the details...And hey wait a minute have you forgotten the environment?" What follows is Ruth's extended conversation with Cheyenne that illustrated how Ruth searched for strengths on which to build.

Ruth: Cheyenne! Cheyenne let me see!

Marcus: She ain't got nothing.

Ruth: Well, it looks like she has something.

Ruth encouraged Cheyenne to see what she *has* in the face of a world that tells her "She ain't got nothing." In this statement her brother Marcus succinctly reminded Cheyenne of what he and his sister have been told throughout their lives. Ruth quickly shifted her attention toward Cheyenne who was discouraged with her drawing and crumpled it up. Before she could throw it away Ruth interjected.

Ruth: Oh no you don't missy! Let me see first. Let me see first. Let's see.

Cheyenne: But I don't like it.

Ruth: Hey whoosha. Whoosh, whoosh.

Ruth "magically" smoothed out the paper and took a look at what Cheyenne drew on her page.

Ruth: Wait what's she doing? Decide that first.

Cheyenne: Hmmm? Where's that eraser?

Ruth: Wait, what's she doing first?

Cheyenne: I'm doing my picture over.

Ruth: Wait. What are you trying to make?

Cheyenne: I don't even know.

From Cheyenne's deficit stance it is not surprising that her initial answer was to crumple up her paper and throw it away. Her next idea was to erase what she had and start over (Maureen, 2.25, Field notes). Instead, Ruth told Cheyenne that "she has something," namely ideas, that are worthy of investigation. Next I relate how Ruth translates an artistic practice of imagining possibilities to Cheyenne's ideas for her narrative drawing.

Imagining possibilities.

Educators at the Curcio VAP engender the types of critical and divergent thinking that characterize contemporary artistic processes. Heath and Roach (1995) noted that "problem posing and hypothetical reasons lead these youth in arts organizations to consider multiple ways of doing and being in their artistic work and beyond" (p. 28). Ruth described her approach as "an artist's practice that I'm bringing from experience" (Ruth 2.10, Interview). This assets-pedagogy opens up possibilities through questioning strategies and moves the learner towards synthesizing their best ideas into a tangible concept.

Ruth asked probing questions to deepen learners' budding idea to give it complexity. The goal is for the learner to synthesize their different ideas through the art making process while eliminating those ideas that are not needed. Ruth facilitated youth engagement with the divergent thinking strategies used by contemporary artists. Her open-ended questions mimic those that she might ask herself while making artwork. Ruth prioritized an active role for learners by asking these questions rather than providing the answers and instructing "how to." As Ruth thought aloud she modeled brainstorming strategies and encouraged learners to arrive at limitless possibilities.

Below, Ruth encouraged the development of the story that Cheyenne is trying to communicate by staggering divergent and convergent questions to fuel some possibilities.

Ruth: And where is she?

Cheyenne: I don't know.

Ruth: Well that's something you can decide for yourself – where she

     is...Is she inside or is she outside?

Cheyenne:	Outside.
Ruth:	Ok. All right. What are some ways that you can show us that she's outside? Is it summer or is it winter?
Cheyenne:	Spring!
Ruth:	Oh so what kinds of things show us that its spring? Ah, there we go. Is she by herself or is she with other people?

Ruth's questions began broadly without inserting her own narrative or interpretation of Cheyenne's idea. Her successive questioning was responsive to Cheyenne's answers and focuses her artistic concept. An assets-pedagogy that elevates the ideas and perspectives of the learner allows "the kids to see that oh you're just asking the questions. I'm coming up with the answers...I'm not just listening (Maureen, 2.17, Meeting). Cheyenne's ideas guide this conversation while Ruth crafts questions to translate processes for artmaking.

Similarly, Ruth asked another learner just beginning his narrative figure drawing "Which way you gonna put him... Cause there's lots of different ways. How many different ways can you put this guy? That one's kind of nifty… I didn't know it could go that way" (Ruth, 2.25, Instruction). Thus Ruth asks learners to consider their own answer when considering how their figure drawing might look. In doing so, she removed herself as an artist in each learner's artwork and translated her artistic process.

After learning that Cheyenne's drawing is taking place during the spring, Ruth directs Cheyenne's attention to a poster of Charles Burchfield's *Mid-June* (1917-44) hanging on the door. Aligned with the practices of contemporary artists, youth in the Curcio VAP are encouraged appropriate ideas and techniques from an increasingly

multifaceted world. Ruth elucidated, "I know one thing that artists do is that they don't take a single idea and just do that...They take stuff from here and there and there and there." Ruth modeled how Cheyenne can find inspiration for her imagination from the surrounding world.

> Ruth: Come over; let's look at it. You want to hang your drawing up? You can draw over here if you want.... I think you need to get up higher. Let's get you up higher.

Cheyenne stepped up on the chair (see Figure II.) to see the Burchfield work at eye level and began to look carefully for herself. Cheyenne and Ruth's exchange is a poignant metaphor for an assets-stance in art education. Aligned with constructivist theory the position of the learner is elevated, with regards to the curriculum and pedagogy to be an active participant in the learning process (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 4). Ruth recognized Cheyenne's ability to observe carefully and imagine, and built off of those strengths. Ruth reflects that she continually needs "to look for these things to build upon" (Ruth, 3.4, Instruction). Ruth carefully extracted Cheyenne's ideas through a series of divergent and convergent questions that opened up and focused her concept.

Celebrating discovery.

When Ruth and Cheyenne reached eye level with *Mid-June* they began to look carefully together. With a lifetime of experience analyzing, creating, and teaching art, Ruth was able to ask some questions that kept Cheyenne at eye level with the artwork that was before them. Simultaneously, Ruth celebrated Cheyenne's careful observations that recognized and authentically rewarded Cheyenne's insights and thinking. Careful

observation brought information into Cheyenne's mind to continue the brainstorming

process.

Ruth: How many butterflies do you see?

Cheyenne: One two three four five six seven eight nine ten eleven twelve.

Ruth: Oh my goodness!

Cheyenne: Thirteen fourteen fifteen.

Ruth: Oh there was one right there you're right! Hey what else do we

see? We see fifteen butterflies. What's that?!

Cheyenne: It's a butterfly. And this looks like an upside down tree.

Ruth: Oh …that's so funny you're right!

Ruth rarely gave praise for pretty pictures. Instead she celebrated excellent ideas,

careful observing, and working tenaciously. Ruth's genuine enthusiasm and curiosity was

expressed at developmentally appropriate levels. In a later lesson she celebrated the

observations of another learner "Oh wow you're looking carefully. You are! You are

looking carefully...Oh I see what you're doing. Very carefully, excellent" (Ruth, 3.4,

Instruction).

Ruth identified and announced Cheyenne's capabilities and reinforced the

foundation of an assets-philosophy articulated by Ladson-Billings that every learner has

"something on which to build" (2001, p. 677). In recognizing the achievements of

learners, Ruth laid a pathway for the Curcio youth to take pride in their accomplishments.

Ruth: Look at this one! Doesn't that look like it too? It looks like an

upside down tree. That's really wild. What's that? Do you know

what it is?

Cheyenne: I think it's a flower.

Ruth: Oh look... yeah! So we've got fifteen butterflies. This guy [Charles

              Burchfield] is kinda wild.

Ruth's celebration allowed Cheyenne to recognize that her own ideas and

perspectives actively shape her learning. Ruth not only announced her careful

observations but also modeled a marveling at this sense of discovery. The result of such

engaged observation that Ruth modeled seeks to produce authentic artworks unique to the

child's ability and thinking.

Youth-driven analysis.

As Ruth and Cheyenne continue to examine *Mid-June,* a natural conversation

emerged between the educator and learner. The objective was not only for Cheyenne to

understand the painting before her eyes; it was also to begin to provide her with strategies

so that the next time she is in front of an artwork she can independently ask some

questions for herself (Hamblen, 1984).

In the following conversation, Cheyenne's interest and curiosity about *Mid-June*

peaked while Ruth pulled away and created the space for Cheyenne to guide the

conversation. Ruth elicited divergent and critical thinking by letting Cheyenne and other

learners at Curcio VAP "raise and answer their own questions" (Duckworth, 1996, p. 8).

As Ruth pulled back, Cheyenne strengthened her ability to analyze Burchfield's artwork

and exhibited clear focus and self-regulation (Oreck et al.,1999, pp. 69-76).

Here, Ruth relies on learners' body language, ranging from furrowed brows to

shrugged shoulders, in order to gauge how much learners need from her to keep going.

Perhaps more importantly Ruth relied on learners' cues summarized below to know when

she can pull back allowing learners to work independently. She utilized inflection and cadence to communicate just enough to get learners to work out problems for themselves. In an interview she reflected:

> I'm looking at the kid's face to see whether I should stop....I try to give more than someone needs because then there's definitely a choice...I want them to see that there's definitely something that you can throw out. You don't need to take my idea. But there's so many you can't do 'em all. And I kinda stop when I see a flicker or something. (Ruth, 2.10, Interview)

Ruth sees "that flicker" when a learner has chosen a path from the many possibilities and sees this flicker as an indicator of learner readiness to move forward with their own ideas. Ruth continued in her conversation with Cheyenne reflecting the youth's flickering discoveries, perhaps one of the brightest being Cheyenne's ability to ask questions the way Ruth has modeled.

> Cheyenne: I'm gonna ask you one question. What does this look like?
>
> Ruth: It looks like three diamond shapes.
>
> Cheyenne: Yeah.
>
> Ruth: I don't know but I love the fact that there's blue in this tree.
>
> Cheyenne: There is no blue in trees.
>
> Ruth: Well it kinda makes it look neat...I don't see that many pine trees [in Western New York].
>
> Cheyenne: What about the ocean?
>
> Ruth: It looks like the ocean to you?
>
> Cheyenne: No, you could put a little lake in the picture.

At this point, Cheyenne had a specific idea for her artwork. She continued to investigate and is intrigued by small specks that fill the air in the Burchfield painting. She pointed and continued to question Ruth (See Figure 2).

Cheyenne: What are these things?

Ruth: I think that's...the sky.

Cheyenne: Yeah.

Ruth: Because you know when its spring there [are] lots of butterflies

                   and...different bugs. And there's pollen and stuff in the air. So

                   maybe that's a tree from behind. You can't see it very well... Oh!

                   Look at this...Look at it carefully.

Ruth interjected with an observation that can steer the conversation back to its original course: "so what kinds of things show us that its spring?" Yet Ruth only brought Cheyenne's attention back after she dabbled in her self-directed discovery of the *Mid-June*. Moreover, Ruth did not impart this shift onto Cheyenne, she asked a question that allowed both participants in the conversation to naturally segue back to the original question. Ruth demonstrated the enthusiasm for the shared discoveries that she hopes Cheyenne will take on herself.

Ruth: See, it's two words.

Cheyenne: Mid-January?

Ruth: Can you see that word?

Cheyenne: June!...Mid-June!

Ruth: Yeah...Its very summery. Cause butterflies come in the

               summer...Ok what can we use from here?...We're looking to get

               ideas. What do you wanna take from this to put in your own work?

Cheyenne: Butterflies!

Ruth: All right, what else?...You can come back and look at it again...Get

               to work girlie you have a lots of ideas now. You know what? This

               is why I want you to sit here. You can turn and look at the

               painting. And then turn back to your picture!

Cheyenne returned to her seat and sat down with a fresh piece of paper and placed

it next to her first sketch. While drawing Cheyenne intermittently studies her own

drawings and the Burchfield poster. Her preliminary sketch transformed into a useful

draft instead of being a loathed "nothing." Cheyenne's reinvestment in her artwork

occurred after a thoughtful and improvised conversation with Ruth. After years of

working with learning artists, Ruth can extemporaneously craft questions and

observations that are grounded in theory and responsive to the needs of the learner

(Prawat, 1992).

In Ruth and Cheyenne's exchange, the educator and learner seamlessly oscillated

between voicing and listening, questioning and responding, and being formally on and

informally off-topic. Cheyenne exhibited "questioning approaches" as well as "planning,

preparing, transforming, creating analogies" (Heath &Roach, 1995, pp. 27-28) in her

analysis of *Mid-June.* However, Ruth and Cheyenne's engagement in the conversation is

steady because both parties were responding to one another. Yet, this is not a fortunate

accident. Ruth specifically chose to structure this learning encounter as a conversation in

alignment with constructivist theory. Ruth facilitated the development of Cheyenne's ideas that were deemed as meaningful and worth being heard.

Ruth's pedagogical approach translated her working through process as an artist to Cheyenne. Ruth modeled her own internal monologue about *Mid-June* that Cheyenne can begin to take on herself. Ruth infused "positive comments" which are "about thinking out loud...That's a modeling process" (Ruth, 2.22, Interview). An assets-pedagogy encourages learners to think and be like an artist engaged in a studio where educators translate the artist's processes. Ruth celebrated and cultivated Cheyenne's assets of curiosity, careful observation, and confidence with regards to analyzing a painting that helped her create pathways for those same behaviors in making her own work of art.
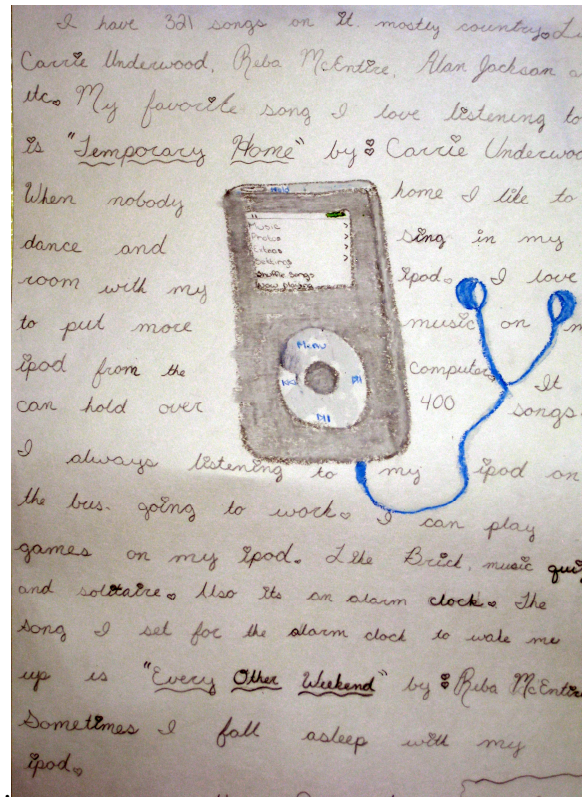
Translating Visual Art to Children's Lives

Figure III. Week Nine: Narrative Objects, March 25th

     Analogous to a pedagogy that honors authentic studio practices, contemporary constructivist visual arts curricula prioritize youth ideas, interests, and agency as a central shaping force. (Anderson & Milbrandt, 1998, Walker, 2001, Sullivan, 2003, Freedman, 2003, and Gude, 2007). Ruth explores the interactive relationship between curriculum and pedagogy that are "even in their weight" (Ruth, 2.10, Interview). She elaborated "You bring the content to your students through your pedagogy. But they're not the same thing" (Ruth 2.10, Interview). To align a constructivist curriculum and pedagogy, the educator's role is to "pull out" the content and learning objectives "with your students" (Ruth, 2.10, Interview). From an assets stance, the alignment of a constructivist curriculum and pedagogy seeks to provide youth with opportunities that support the

development of their ideas. Ruth viewed the responsibility of Curcio educators to help learners get their ideas out and facilitate the translation of their ideas into form.

Often, many after-school programs operate without a well-developed curriculum that outlines the essential questions and key concepts that guide the progression of learning activities (Walker, 2001; Halpern, 2005). However, the goal of the Curcio VAP was to design a visual art curriculum out of the interests of our population (Maureen, 2.3 Field notes). As Prof. Grace noted, from the beginning the Curcio VAP tried to separate our program from more traditional arts and crafts programs "because we were concerned about becoming a make and take...We wanted there to be something more behind it" (Grace, 2.3, Meeting). Grace distinguished the Curcio VAP from making and taking specific products that are created rather than teaching individuals how to think and work like an artist.

The Spring 2010 semester was the Curcio VAP's initial attempt to incorporate our goal of providing Curcio youth with a "concept-based curriculum" that reflected youth interests (Maureen, 2.8, Field notes). A challenge we encountered was aligning an academic calendar and a public school calendar. Specifically, we had difficulty balancing our desire to begin teaching early and developing our curriculum. The result was teaching a smattering of semi-connected art activities (including *Expressive Figure Sculptures* and *Narrative Figure Drawings)* until we were ready to begin teaching our concept-based curriculum, *Views on the (Natural) World,* on March 4th.

As previously noted, the lack of youth participation resulted in extremely limited implementation of the curriculum *Views of the (Natural) World.* Hence, the previous

sections of this chapter do not contribute to the understanding of how this curriculum could have been expanded throughout a semester.

We formulated our conceptual "big idea," *Views on the (Natural) World,* from themes found in Charles Burchfield's watercolors that were on display at the Burchfield-Penney Art Center (Walker, 2001). Throughout the curriculum efforts were made to use a broad definition of "natural" to provide alternative pathways for our urban population to connect to Burchfield's landscapes. In addition to Burchfield's paintings we incorporated artworks and artists throughout world history to further enrich our learning activities.

Within this section I explore the role of a meaningful curriculum at the Curcio VAP. I analyze how Ruth worked with learners to "pull out" curricular objectives from the lesson *Narrative Objects* that resonate with learners' lives and interests. *Narrative Objects* was designed as this third lesson in our curriculum *Views on the (Natural) World* and served to segue learners from observing and noticing objects in their surroundings to telling a story about their own worlds. We asked learners to chose an important personal object that they wanted to tell a story about through combining painted image and text. Through conversation, learners were pushed to articulate the importance of their object that was then articulated through the artmaking process. This lesson exemplifies the goal of the Curcio VAP educators "to connect activities to children's lives" (Halpern, 2003, p. 159). Yet to connect to Curcio Youth, the lives and experiences of our program's population and the visual art curriculum must be understood in context.

Contextualizing curriculum.

Making the ideas of artworks accessible is a core responsibility of an art educator. In addition, the choice of a big idea that is relevant and resonates with the lived

experiences of the learners can facilitate this task (Walker, 2001). Ruth reflects, "Big ideas are connected to human beings. Somehow. And the world. If you just think...usually you connect something about them [the learners] and something about the world" (Ruth, 2.3, Meeting). In the following segment, I illustrate how Ruth developed the big idea *Views of the (Natural) World* with youth participants and recalled previous learning activities and life experiences to provide learners with a framework for understanding for the day's lesson.

Connecting to curricular sequence.

Ruth recognizes the previous artistic successes and understandings of today's three learners Valerie, Chris, and Jamal. The following excerpts from Ruth's instruction and conversations with individual learners demonstrate how Ruth facilitates Curcio youth in discovery of how the curriculum connects to their experience.

Ruth:	Is it just us? Ok. All right. So. Valerie, when you think about what we've been doing, (cause you're the experienced one here right?)... Is there some object that you think from the very beginning that reminds you of what we've been trying to do here even from last semester. Anything here? Anything?
Valerie:	The sculptures.
Ruth:	Which ones?
Valerie:	From last week.
Ruth:	Ah right, ok. Did you make one? (Raising her voice)
Valerie:	Yeah.
Ruth:	Where is yours?

Valerie:	Over there...It's the one where they're proposing.
Ruth:	Ok let's get it.... So is that the proposing one? Yes. Ok. So if you were to draw that, what kind of a story would you tell about that object?
Valerie:	Nervous?
Ruth:	Ah, so you're telling it from the experience from that person right there...So you could probably tell a pretty good story about that. One that we don't even know.

Ruth invites Valerie to review previous weeks' activities through a series of questions. She makes a deliberate choice to have Valerie's voice as prior participant at Curcio VAP contribute to the context of the lesson. Incorporating learners' voices into instruction models the structure Ruth will use in looking at works of art that these learners have not seen before. In a drop-in program, Valerie's translation simultaneously enriches her understanding of last week's lesson and shares that background with learners who did not share in that experience. The process also strengthens Valerie's voice and demonstrates to others that this environment and curriculum are a space for learner's voices to resonate.

Art in context.

Ruth segues from reviewing and calls attention to the artworks that guide today's activity. Introducing artworks requires the educator's understanding of how the selected artworks deliberately connect to the big idea and key concepts of the day. As Prawat argues, the strength of the experienced teacher "lies in their ability to access or lay hold of what they know – presumably because their knowledge is organized in a more

connected or coherent fashion." (1992, p. 375). For educators to translate an understanding of a big idea and key concepts through visual art, a fluency in art history and aesthetics is necessary. The more Ruth knows about the cultural and historic contexts of narrative artworks chosen, the more readily she is able to improvise and respond to the observations and analysis of youth.

Ruth: What you've got in front of you are some artists who have painted or drawn...objects. Some of them are probably ones that you know or can recognize and some of them you might not....What do you see there? (Ruth takes a reproduction from Chris)

Ruth: Ah (she reads from the text incorporated into the background of painting) "The Japanese pagoda tree, oblivious to all the fuss, vaguely remembers that it is also known as the Chinese scholar tree." This person is imagining themselves as the darn tree. What color is that tree? What color do you see?

Chris: Purple.

Ruth: That's pretty wild, huh? So she actually experiences that tree as purple. And it looks like its several shades of purple which is kind of fascinating.

Ruth beckons to last week's natural object lesson and uses Maria Kalman's *The Pagoda Tree* to demonstrate how an artist can tell a story about a natural object. Yet she began by asking the learners which artwork they saw on a table with numerous examples of artists incorporating text and painting to tell a story. Thus the art dialogue itself is built from one learner's choice and interest that Ruth developed.

Building upon learners' knowledge.

After perceiving that youth are hesitant to participate Ruth begins with comfortable questions to ease them into her conversational teaching style. She reads Kalman's writing on *The Pagoda Tree.*

Ruth:	"The pagoda tree which flowers profusely in the late summer offering to the lucky person standing under it a fragrant dappled refuge from the noon day sun." That sounds rather lovely considering, what is it like outside today?
Valerie:	It's rainy.
Ruth:	I can't wait to go on break right now.
Chris:	I'm already on break.
Ruth:	You're on break? Oh you're lucky. But it's kind of yucky weather.
Chris:	Two whole weeks.

Ruth contrasts late summer setting of *The Pagoda Tree* with the dreary March weather that the members of Curcio VAP are experiencing. Her comparison further provides the tentative learners with an opportunity to talk about something they know and provides an example of how artwork can be understood through personal connections. In a classroom, the conversation between Ruth, Valerie, and Chris might be described as on and off-topic. However, from an assets lens the oscillation from artistic analysis to personal narratives is valued as Chris and Valerie actively build upon their knowledge. Ruth responds to Chris's excitement about his upcoming spring break and values his contribution.

Ruth: Oh. Wow! Well we can imagine this even if we can't experience it

               right now. That's kind of the nice thing about art. Let's have one

               more. Let's pick another. Hey there!

Ruth welcomed Jamal as he entered the art room. As he sat down she picked up

an artwork to which Valerie and Chris had pointed.

Ruth: You wanna do Gumby? Do you know who this is?...And can you

               tell us something about Gumby?

Valerie: He's made out of clay.

Ruth: Its kind of a rubbery clay stuff. Right? Ok let's see [she reads the

               text] "There's a touch of poetry in the figure of Gumby but I think

               there is a weak spot in his history." What do you think about

               Gumby? What would Gumby be like if you knew him?

Valerie: Small.

Ruth: What if he was the same size as you?

Valerie: Scary.

Ruth: (Laughing) Ok...But for this person Gumby's very important.

               Cause you can buy a Gumby. You can have your own. I had one

               when I was little. He kind of bends and you could bend him and

               play with him. So for this person he's a toy. He's made a whole

               painting about a toy.

Ruth continued the dialogue, slowly increasing the complexity of her questions.

Again, she is guided by the learner's choice in what reproduction to discuss and

connected *Gumby* to the key concepts of the day's lesson on the spot. In comparison to

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The Pagoda Tree she motivated the learners to consider the range of objects they might choose to tell *their* important story ranging specifically from toys to trees and more broadly demonstrating the openness of the lesson to accommodate learners imagination.

Through questioning strategies Ruth elicited the perspectives of learners and contextualized the narrative artworks for the day's lesson. Her questions emerged to meet the goal of making the ideas within the artworks accessible to learners. These questions provided a model for learners to ask similar questions themselves when they look at an artwork or visual culture phenomenon. The context of *The Pagoda Tree* and *Gumby* revealed different facets of the big idea *Views of the Natural World* that was collaboratively uncovered through Ruth's questions that probed for learners' perspectives and choices. Yet this occurrence resulted from the educator's creating and understanding the Curcio VAP curriculum and selecting rich artworks that can translate to the worlds of the Curcio youth.

Meaningful participation

Ruth's dialogue was structured around learner participation. I related the advantage of getting "the kids to see that oh you're just asking the questions. I'm coming up with the answers. I'm doing that; I'm not just listening" to our undergraduate participants (Maureen, 2.17, Meeting). Learners recognized that they have answers based on their own experiences. Hanson and Kim (2007) defined meaningful participation as "involvement in relevant, engaging, and interesting activities with opportunities for responsibility and contribution in school, in the community, and at home" (p. 11). For meaningful participation to continue during art making Curcio educators carefully constructed a challenging question that addressed ideas rather than subject matter by

other artists. Guided by previous analysis of *Gumby* and *The Pagoda Tree*, learners began

to consider how they wanted to portray their ideas using an object.

It's their work.

The Curcio VAP educators specifically designed the *Narrative Objects* lesson to

deepen learners' understanding of how to investigate an object and see that object as a

symbol of a meaningful story. It follows that the educators must respect and help nurture

youth's own ideas in their artwork.

> Ruth: Can you think of an object that...is important enough that you
>
> would...do a painting...and write a story around it? What might be
>
> one of them? Do you have an idea of something? Do you have
>
> something at home that's really valuable? What about you?
>
> Valerie: My phone, my iPod, and my camera.
>
> Ruth: Oh the trilogy. Ok all right. Why? Why are they important?
>
> Valerie: I can't go without my music, my telephone, and texting.
>
> Ruth: And what does texting allow you to do?
>
> Valerie: Ah...talk to my friends.
>
> Ruth: Ah, Ok.
>
> Valerie: And my camera.
>
> Ruth: What's your camera for?
>
> Valerie: I love taking pictures.
>
> Ruth: What do you take pictures of?
>
> Valerie: Anything.
>
> Ruth: Do you ever take pictures of him?

Valerie: Not yet.

Valerie's decisiveness in answering what objects are important to her contrasts her earlier hesitancy during the dialogue. Ruth respected Valerie's choice to focus on her iPod, and helped her consider how to represent her story. After materials were distributed, twelve year old Jamal entered the art room.

Ruth: Where have you been! Come on in. We're doing something very unusual. Instead of looking at objects from nature, we're looking at artists who paint things that are kind of personal and important...So what I'm asking you to do is to think about an object that's really important to you. That's yours.

Jamal: Ah, hmm.

Ruth: It can be at home, it doesn't have to be here.

Jamal: My TV?

Ruth: Ok. And why is that important to you?

Jamal: Because I can watch stuff on it.

Ruth: Who do you watch TV with?

Jamal: My mom.

Ruth: Ah so you get to watch TV with people too. What kind of shows do you like to watch?

Jamal: Cartoon shows.

Ruth: Oh yeah!...So the one thing is there two parts to this. You can draw or you can paint your object. And then you tell us something about it. Just like these guys have done. And I'm gonna tell you about the

materials we have. We have cray-pas...We have colored pencils...
If this is a good size piece of paper, you can use this. If you want
larger we can get you a bigger piece.

Jamal: Nope, just like this.

Ruth eagerly welcomed Jamal to art, and discussed the day's activity with him individually. In comparison to Valerie, Jamal appeared uncertain about his ideas and answers. She tailored their dialogue to validate Jamal's idea. Her questioning encouraged Jamal to be confident in his ideas and provides specific options for him to consider in developing his idea.

Both the design and teaching of *Narrative Objects* created opportunities for meaningful participation during both the dialogue and art making portions of Curcio VAP. Lessons that are designed and taught to elicit meaningful participation about topics that learners find "relevant, engaging, and interesting" (Hanson and Kim 2007, p. 11) beget responses that responsive educators can mold into additional meaningful activities.

Curcio VAP educators assessed how learners' artworks met the day's learning objective and elicited an understanding of the big idea. The lesson, *Narrative Objects,* asked learners to consider an important object, opened a range of possibilities drawn from experiences, real or imagined.

Valerie's *iPod* (see Figure 3) illustrated a personally meaningful work that she created. Valerie positioned her iPod in the center of the page perhaps indicative of the centrality of the object in her life. She took painstaking detail to record each button and screen feature on the object, which she knows intimately. Valerie's placement of her ear buds give the impression that the viewer is looking down on the iPod resting on a flat

surface that Valerie covered in text. Valerie's writing, much like her drawing, points out the details of the iPod. She indicates that this is not an iPod but *her* iPod with "321 songs" and lists her favorite artists. Valerie describes her relationship with the object that she listens to "when no one is home," "to dance with," "on the bus," as "an alarm clock" and even to "fall asleep with." Valerie's artwork is indicative of her life circumstances in which she has learned to rely upon herself with the help of her iPod. In *Narrative Objects,* educators created a lesson that provided the space for Valerie to reflect on and record how her personal object is meaningful.

Valerie's *iPod* and Jamal's *Television* indicated a trend toward an interest in entertainment technology. The narrative of consumption as a central component of adolescents lives reflects a dominant trend for contemporary youth who increasingly act as consumers " for their own self realization" (Buckingham, 2001, p. 166). From this, educators have a learner interest on which to build lessons that critically develop the significance of technology and consumption for the youth at the Curio Community Center in later lessons.

Youth in context.

A curriculum that prioritized meaningful participation that connects to personal experience is founded upon educator's collective consideration for the youth community at Curcio VAP. Focusing on the strengths of youth also contributed to overcoming the social construction of youth as "incomplete and less valuable than adults" (Te Riele, 2006 p. 132). In addition, the social and developmental contexts of the individual must be respected. For the Curcio VAP this is a particularly salient undertaking considering the broad K-12 range of our learner population.

In considering prior interactions with Jamal, educators were surprised by his sheepish behavior. On most days Jamal was very energetic and socially interested to the extent that he could be disruptive (Maureen, Field notes). The disparity was a concern for Ruth who privately approached Jamal to gain further information.

Ruth: Are you ok Dear? You're awfully quiet. You're not? What's wrong you wanna talk about it? OK. Are you hungry? Ok cause we have some animal crackers. Do you want some? All right.

Jamal's nod confirmed Ruth's suspicions yet he shook his head no to indicate that he did not wish to discuss the specifics. She respected his answer while maintaining a casual eye on Jamal while she paints across from him. After several minutes pass, Ruth excused herself and found Nick in his office.

Ruth: There's something wrong...He's upset. You might talk to him. I mean...

Nick: Let me just go back.

As director, Nick has a personal relationship with most of the youth who regularly attend the Curcio. He is familiar with Jamal's personal history, his family, and his living situation. This closeness between administration and youth is another facet to the community center setting. In this setting, Ruth is able to walk away mid-lesson to address a problem immediately. Ruth re-enters the art room and returns to her painting.

Ruth: All right just had to make a little phone call. I know what's wrong, I need some green. Watercolor maybe. Yeah?

Nick: How's everybody doin'? What's up with you Jamal where've you been? At home? Let me see what you're making...Where's your

mom living? Huh? She wasn't home when you got home? Was Joe

there? Nobody was there?

It became clear that Jamal was understandably distraught by his family's absence at home. Jamal's perseverance on a trying day is recognized by the educators, yet is not given undue attention. The educators encouraged Jamal's effort and investment in his artwork. The adults were able to work together to support Jamal in a way that was responsive to his needs.

Nick: Hi, what are you making? What's important to you? Come on

             Jamal I wanna see your hard work, man. When I come back here in

             five minutes I wanna see your TV.

Nick: I think what's important to me is Bow's 40.36 [exercise machine].

             What brand is it gonna be Jamal? RCA? A little Toshiba action?

Jamal: Ahuh.

Nick: I'll come back and check.

Nick reinforced his support and care for Jamal through extending the conversation beyond what is wrong. Along with Nick, the Curcio educators reaffirm the art room as a safe place where the behaviors and experiences of youth are heard and contextualized. If the curriculum seeks to connect to children's lives the behaviors of youth must be understood within the contexts of their lives and lived realities.

The visual art curriculum, *Views of the Natural World,* connected to the lives and strengths of youth. As Dewey (1902) addressed educators' responsibility to transform the curriculum "to take it and to develop it within the range and scope of a child's life."

(p. 207). Educators at the Curcio VAP identified a big idea in the work of local artist Charles Burchfield and wrapped that concept around the interests of the youth at the Curcio. In order to translate *Views of the (Natural) World* educators delivered their curriculum through conversational teaching and questioning strategies designed to elicit meaningful participation from youth participants. The efforts of the educators at the Curcio VAP to prioritize youth perspectives enabled the connection between the visual arts and youth within the context of their lived experience.

In this chapter, I have explored the manifestations of incorporating an assets model that strengthens artistic thinking as the unifying goal of the Curcio Visual Arts Program during the Spring 2010 semester. A shift towards an assets paradigm played out in regards to the environment and teaching approaches found at the Curcio VAP.

The environment that emerged at Curcio VAP, as students noted, felt like "art class without the school" as educators sought to deinstitutionalize the process of learning. Instead of fitting the child into the school, the Curcio VAP grew out of youth strengths. Our environment was comprised of the space itself, the physical structures that organized that space, as well as interpersonal expectations and relationships that filled that space. The environment that emerged balanced a structure that provided safety, routine and ritual with a responsive and playful flexibility.

The goal of the Curcio VAP to strengthen artistic thinking through developing learner strengths similarly impacted the approaches to teaching. My analysis of Ruth's strategies for building on children's strengths, specifically the having of ideas, is reflective of contemporary artistic practices and stems from an assets model in art education that is founded upon a concept-based curriculum. Her pedagogy of lively

conversation illustrates how youth can take on the artistic process for themselves, imagine multiple possibilities and celebrate their discoveries of their world through the artmaking process. Ruth's pedagogical approach is infused with wit, personal narratives, genuine interest, and enthusiasm to build trust and translate to youth the content of a concept-based visual arts curriculum. The curriculum, *Views on the (Natural) World,* was designed to meaningfully connect to the lives of youth. Yet Ruth's delivery of the curriculum through her conversational pedagogical approach elevates the role and investment of the learner in creating personal connections and discoveries. Ruth's teaching approaches illustrate how an assets model can align with contemporary artistic practices and fosters the strengthening of the ideas and imagination that all youth possess.

Chapter V: Implications and Conclusion

I embarked upon this quest to investigate a tangible alternative to the deficit model over a year ago. In my first years of teaching, despite my training and theoretical understanding of contemporary approaches in art education, I had difficulty enacting an assets model within my own classroom. Regardless of my belief in the capabilities of my students, I felt the pervasive deficit culture within P.S. #11 seep into my classroom. Being able to challenge the broader school culture from within my classroom seemed impossible. I felt these students were capable of so much more than creatively rejecting the learning that P.S. #11 institutionalized. And while I felt I understood theoretically how to tap into their capabilities with meaningful visual arts learning experiences, I had difficulty realizing my goal.

As I began teaching in the Curcio VAP alongside Professors Ruth Caldonia and Grace Aleel I became reinvigorated. Here I was able to witness and contribute to assets-based teaching approaches in which educators actively looked for and built upon the strengths of youth. In this setting I casually observed my professors instantly responding to the types of problems that I encountered with trepidation while at P.S. #11. I saw my professors modeling and enacting the theory that I had heard about and discussed in class.

In many ways, what I experienced at the Curcio VAP is perhaps what some pre-service teachers experience in student teaching. While I had experiences in numerous urban schools, I had limited exposure to teachers actually modeling contemporary approaches in art education taught in an urban setting. At the Curcio VAP I was able to witness the process of creating a learning environment that challenged the status quo deficit culture through shifting the experience of learning towards an assets paradigm.

I was struck by the similarities of the Curcio youth and my students at P.S. #11. Yet I was amazed by how differently I was able to interact with these learners in this setting. Looking back, I now recognize that the way I learned how to teach art in the Curcio VAP paralleled the way Curcio youth were learning how to make art in our alternative learning environment. What follows are the shared characteristics of assets-based learning in which Curcio youth and I were engaged at the Curcio VAP:

- Working *alongside* professionals to accomplish a shared goal

- Feeling relaxed in an atmosphere that promotes *trust* and personal relationships

- Fluidity of expected roles: everyone has something to teach; everyone has something to learn

- Laughing with learners and educators who engage in *playful* conversations that connect learning to personal narratives

- Being invested in *meaningful* learning that is guided by ideas relevant to life

- Listening and being heard

- Asking and answering content *questions* that are infused into general *conversations*

- Pushing past frustration and towards *possibility* with the support of educators who have overcome similar challenges

As educators and learners developed our program over our three semesters, these characteristics of learning specific to our site surfaced. An underlying current within these characteristics is the centrality and agency of the learner which contrasts the heightened "dependency and institutionalization" within the educational system (Buckingham, 2000, p. 70). Learning environments such as that of the Curcio VAP, with

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the autonomy to challenge the construction of the child through a deficit lens, support access to these characteristics of learning. One hope is that schools and teachers will take risks to challenge their deficit practices.

Considerable overlap occurs among the characteristics of assets-based learning and what may be considered good teaching. Certain facets, in particular working alongside, playful conversations, and elevation of trust and personal relationships, may be prohibitive to enacting an assets stance within a school setting for some teachers. What art teachers, and perhaps K-12 teachers in general, particularly those within a school that is limited by a deficit paradigm, can gain from this study is a recognition of the potential of actively seeking out and building upon the strengths of their particular students in their particular classroom (Valencia, 1997; Lerner & Benson, 2003; García & Guerra, 2004; Weiner, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007). This study has provided an introduction to how the educator can identify and build on students' strengths, as they create a different culture of learning.

Changing Paradigms

In this study I investigated how an assets model that develops learners' artistic thinking was infused into the goals of the Curcio VAP. Through analyzing Ruth's assets-based teaching approaches, I have identified her conversational pedagogy, which reflects contemporary artistic practices that emerged around Curcio learners' strengths. As illustrated in Chapter IV, this conversational pedagogy may be uniquely fitting in an after-school environment in which the roles and responsibilities of educators and learners are less institutionalized and imposed by inheriting the deficit culture of school. To understand how to avoid a deficit paradigm one must realize its characteristics and

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impact on students. Then one must actually seek to understand the characteristics and strategies to enact an assets stance with students.

A conversational pedagogy may be particularly helpful in meeting the needs of learners who, as Marquez-Kenov (2007) noted, rejected the institution of school. Our population of learners needed their institutionalized expectations of learning to be disrupted. The Curcio VAP usurped learner expectations by shifting the context of learning so that youth experienced "art class without the school."

In this pedagogical approach, the teaching dialogue became infused into conversations. Off-topic discussions were valid and in fact desirable to build rapport and bolster personal relationships among youth and adults that Learner (2007) notes youth often lack in contemporary American society. On-topic discussions, namely addressing artistic learning concepts and objectives, were often casually addressed or camouflaged within the off-topic discussion. Educators embedded dialogical questions that promoted opening up and synthesizing ideas within extended conversations. Within the conversations, the educator actively searched for youth's ideas, strengths, and interests upon which to build.

The playfully serious approach to fostering relationships combined with a conversational pedagogy is related to theories in Duncum's (2009) playful pedagogy. Duncum (2009) articulates the potential of a "pedagogy that acknowledges fun and pleasure" and particularly underlines the ability of art education to tap into "popular culture as irrational fun and pleasure seeking" (p. 234). Ruth was able to accentuate and model a type of playful pedagogy that integrated not only visual culture, for instance with Valerie's *iPod*, but also professional artists' works. Therefore, expanding our playful

approaches to teaching and making art can deepen our ability to foster learner's engagement with more in depth and authentic learning experiences.

Within this conversational pedagogy I have identified the following themes for assets-based teaching as they emerged from this in depth examination of Ruth's approaches to art education. These themes are indicative of the role of the educator within an assets-based visual arts alternative classroom.

Translating.

Within an assets-based learning environment the art educator translates artistic concepts and processes to youth who learn how to develop their ideas within this assets framework. Art educators model strategies that they have developed and learned through their research, reading, creating and analyzing artworks for learners. As translated by Ruth, helping youth to build skills that included divergent thinking, brainstorming, and imagining characterized the contemporary artistic process. Thus, the educator translated how to make sense of the limitless possibilities for addressing artistic questions that youth work through to connect these ideas and themes about their world and life to make it their own.

Translated by the educator, artmaking itself is guided by the central artistic question raised by examining the work of a professional artist. In building on the essential question Ruth asked, "How can a personal object tell a story about you?" In this question Ruth revealed a layer of meaning implied by the artist to an essential question for youth to address from their personal experience. Educators infuse additional questions into conversations to guide learners to work through that essential artistic question. Within these questions, educators model the type of thinking that learners can use to

guide them through the formation and elaboration of their ideas. Thus the educator thinks aloud to model and verbalize an artists' internal monologue, which learners then increasingly take on for themselves.

When educators translate artistic concepts and processes, learners actively come to know the artistic process by pulling their own ideas through it. Guided by this process, learners begin to work through that process for themselves and translate how these concepts resonate in their own lives. The goal for the educator is to facilitate the learner's ability to ask themselves questions that can guide their own answers to any essential question they choose to explore. Ultimately, learners through this type of modeling begin to ask their own questions and form their own internal monologue to fuel personal artworks.

Playing and connecting.

If the educator is translating artistic concepts and processes to connect to the lived experiences of youth, the educator must foster personal connections with youth. A conversational pedagogy that oscillates from artistic learning to personal narrative provides multiple possibilities for such connections to emerge. Educators can build on these meaningful connections with youth to establish mutual caring relationships, all the while maintaining professional boundaries. Hanson and Kim (2007) identify the importance of youth perception of caring relationships with adults that promote positive outcomes for youth. If educators seek to tap into learner's "affective investment" (Duncum, 2009, p. 240), effort must be taken to establish an environment in which learners feel secure in their investment.

Verbally playing with youth, or "bantering" in Ruth's approach, facilitated the creation of a relaxed and safe environment founded upon caring relationships. Ruth's own affective investment noted in her sense of humor, enthusiasm, sincerity, and curiosity in relation to the artistic experiences she facilitated set the tone for youth to become similarly invested. Laughing and having fun can be infused into a conversational pedagogy as we saw in Chapter IV in regards to artistic discoveries involving "goopy" papier-mâché as well as personal commentary about upcoming vacations. Playful approaches facilitate the ability of educators to foster a caring and safe environment for youth to connect with adults and artistic learning experiences.

Discovering alongside.

The relationship between educator and learner shifts when both parties are collaboratively and responsively engaged in conversation and artmaking. When the responsibility and ability of the educator is altered such that they have the time to stay alongside youth throughout an art making and session, the educator increases their ability to foster connections between art concepts and youth contexts. Ruth relinquished the typical teacher responsibilities and because of her physical ability to stay in one place she was able to develop these connections in depth with youth. The change in the physical presence of the educator to work alongside youth is permitted by the presence of several educators to yield a lower student-teacher ratio. From Ruth's success in building artistic and life concepts alongside students, knowledgeable teachers can emulate these strategies as they assist learners in personal discoveries.

The physical ability of Ruth to work alongside youth inverted the expected, institutionalized role of her as teacher. Within this dynamic the learners discovered how

to connect to artistic concepts and processes while the educator discovered how learners come to grasp these artistic learning objectives. Both parties share in mutual discoveries of themselves and others in this environment, which elevates the role of personal narratives and perspectives. Both educators and learners are active participants in their own discoveries.

Honing pride and resiliency.

Youth can deepen their understanding of their own assets within a space that fosters the development of youth strengths. The artmaking process can "urge creativity and invention" and is imbued with challenging risks that youth enjoy (Heath & Roach, 1995, p. 21). This alternative education setting provided opportunities for youth to work through and accomplish artistic goals within a safe learning environment. Within this setting Ruth repeatedly marveled at those artistic and personal accomplishments, large and small. Challenging artistic opportunities provided youth a framework in which they built pride for their accomplishments.

The proximity of Ruth to individual learners afforded her the ability to perceive learners' difficulties in accomplishing their goals. Much like Cheyenne, Curcio youth often lack exposure to working through challenges and literally or metaphorically crumple up their paper. Like Ruth, educators with strong theoretical grounding can redirect, re-engage, and support learners in overcoming such obstacles. Ruth bridged theory to practice by modeling and teaching theory aloud, and used reflection as a means to articulate the theories she enacted during encounters with students. Practice in overcoming and working through artistic challenges provided youth with opportunities to strengthen the internal resiliency assets including empathy, problem solving, self-

efficacy, and self-awareness (Hanson & Kim, 2007) as they are handled in a way that strengthens rather than depletes those assets as seen in Valerie's *iPod*. Educators and youth alike can celebrate and take pride in artistic successes that tap into broader personal attributes.

These themes of translating, playing and connecting, discovering alongside, and honing pride and resiliency emerged within Ruth's assets-based teaching approaches at the Curcio VAP. These findings are indicative of the role of the assets-educator seeking to develop the strengths of youth within a safe and caring learning environment. Educators and learners became mutually engaged through playful conversations that promoted personal investment in one another through artistic learning experiences.

While these themes emerged within an alternative visual arts environment, they are not exclusive to a traditional classroom setting. Yet, art teachers' abilities to build on student strengths within an art classroom setting may result in different manifestations of how translating, playing and connecting, discovering alongside, and honing pride and resiliency may play out within the context of school. However, the potential of assets-educator within and beyond the school setting lies in the capacity of the visual arts to provide environmental assets to support youth as they develop and celebrate their strengths.

Future research recommendations.

This research raised other possibilities for future research. These questions may provide insight into complexities surrounding the types of learning engendered at Curcio VAP and the Curcio Community Center as a whole:

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- How can the successes of the Curcio VAP inform and aid in the incorporation of additional sustainable partnerships with the emerging Curcio Arts Center and University faculty and students in the Arts?

- How would the strengths of a similarly conceptualized assets-based after-school visual arts program emerge in an environment with consistent attendance and larger class size?

- What learning opportunities manifest from a playful pedagogy that features the educator working alongside learners?

- What are the relationships among the learning tiers (Professors, Graduate students, Undergraduate students, and Curcio youth) at the Curcio Visual Arts Program? How can an assets model be simultaneously infused into the teaching approaches to enable pre-service teachers to take on an assets-stance for themselves?

- What types of programming that reflect a playful and flexible structure would attract girls and young adolescents who are currently underrepresented at the Curcio Community Center?

Other recommendations stem from the unique ability of the Curcio VAP to have four certified art teachers is unusual. Yet, the findings of this study are particularly significant for art teacher education. The ability to participate in the enactment of theory has provided me with an improved ability to translate theoretical premises for application to teaching practices. Since all students may not have the opportunity for first hand observation of model teaching as I did, I would like to suggest opportunity be afforded to pre-service teachers to experience an assets-stance through technologies if not in person.

Technologies including audio and video recordings provide additional opportunities for students in art education to listen, watch and respond to professors modeling assets-based approaches to teaching. Audio and video recordings can be brought into the university setting and analyzed to assist in art education students to understand how to enact theory. Additionally, the written transcripts from this study may provide another avenue for art education students to witness sound assets-based approaches to teaching.

The narrative that I presented within this thesis illuminates just one version of how an assets model was enacted at the Curcio VAP during the 2010 Spring semester. Other approaches might have revealed very different stories. By pulling from different approaches to analyzing data I might have investigated a critique of an assets model and narrated how the systematized hierarchical power relationships manifest between educators and learners in terms of how educators define which youth assets are important and worthy of strengthening. Another narrative might have unfolded by critically examining more of the gray areas throughout the semester that did not illustrate an assets model. While these alternative narratives simultaneously existed amidst the narrative that I have relayed, my choice to the highlight themes and manifestations of an assets model at the Curcio VAP fills a void in current literature. In future studies, I recommended researcher's telling of such alternative narratives and examining indicators of youth resistance to an assets model.

Conclusion

Studying the learning experiences that youth choose for themselves is a particularly salient lens through which to analyze problems within our current approaches to art education. My investigation of the teaching approaches of Ruth Caldonia within the

Curcio VAP revealed specific characteristics of what assets-based teaching and learning might look like within an alternative artistic learning environment "without the school." My findings indicate the importance of art educators being engaged in a conversational pedagogy which focuses upon translating learning concepts and processes, playing and personally connecting, discovering alongside, and honing learner's pride and resiliency. These themes of employing an assets-based stance in teaching illustrate what developing youth assets might look like within a visual arts context and emerged in a responsive setting that evolved around youth strengths. The findings illustrated the importance of a conversational approach to working with youth within an informal learning environment that actively accentuated the importance of personal narratives alongside artistic learning.

Ruth articulates her understanding of contemporary artmaking as: "Artists use their world to make artwork" and make "their artwork to affect the world." (Ruth, 2.10, Interview). As such, contemporary approaches to artmaking reinforce that art grows out of the lived experience of the artist within the world. Engagement in visual arts learning encourages youth to look "at their world" as "a human being" (Ruth, Interview, 3.20). Within a learning environment that mirrors these contemporary approaches to artmaking the lived experiences of youth become infused into the artmaking process. The themes that emerged reflect the lives of youth who seek out opportunities to build relationships and to feel valued while having fun along the way.

For Ruth, "building on art ideas," means to understand developing student strengths within the realm of visual arts learning (Ruth, 3.20, Interview). If art is about the human capacity to look at and make sense of the world, then we all have ideas about the worlds in which we live. Our role as art educators is to translate to learners how to

"use your imagination" and "the world around you to make art" (Ruth, 2.10, Interview). Embedded within the strengthening of the artistic ideas of youth is the development of internal assets including commitment to learning, problem solving, self-efficacy, and self-awareness (Benson, 2003; Hansen & Kim, 2007). Assets-based learning is indicative of the symbiotic relationship between building artistic thinking and building on the strengths of children. It is my hope that these assets-based approaches to teaching the visual arts at the Curcio can be extended into other assets-based learning opportunities within other disciplines as well. In addition, I hope that burgeoning local after-school programs may come together to translate how to build on the strengths of youth within their own learning environments. Employing an assets-based stance by educators at the Curcio VAP provided the environmental asset of a flexible structure that permitted this learning through the visual arts and development of youth assets.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Curcio Community Center
78 Euclid Street
Western, NY 14999

Please note that Ms. Maureen McCarthy, State College, Graduate Student in Art

Education, has the permission of the Curcio Community Center to conduct research at

our center for her study, "Developing Assets-Based Approaches to Teaching for K-12

Urban Youth in an After School Visual ArtS Program."

Ms. McCarthy will participate, observe and record the staff at the Curcio Community

Center's After School Visual Art Program. Her plan is to tape record the staff member's

instruction, motivation, and interaction within the art class. She will use portable

microphones during teaching and in interviews with staff. These interview/discussions

will take place after instructional time between two or more staff members. Finally,

completed student artwork and artist statements will be documented and further analyzed.

Physical documents are locked in a safe space when not in use, while electronic data is

password protected.

Ms. McCarthy's on-site research activities will be finished by May 2010. If there are any

questions, please contact my office.

Sincerely,

Nick Novak, 716-999-9999

Appendix B

Curriculum Map: Enduring Idea: Views of the (Natural) World

1/28 & 2.4 **Masks**: Compete painting, and write artists statements	**2/11**	**2/11**: Day in Color
2/18: Expressive Figure Sculptures	**2.25**: Narrative Figure Drawings	**3/4**: Objects from Nature(Fruit) Observation Drawing
3/11 ` **Large scale natural objects: No show Chalk drawings**	**3/18 Blown Out of Proportion** **Observation Drawing** Objects from Nature -What if you were only 3 inches tall? What would your object be like? What do you notice about your object?	**3/25 Daily Life Objects** **Visual/Textual Storytelling** -find an object you encounter in your daily life -How can this tell a story about you? Images: **Materials**: (transfer printing?)
4/1 BSC Spring Break _____	**4/8 NO** **Buff.Publ. Schools' Spring Break**	**4/15** (NAEA) To be Designed *Something using contemporary themes & materials*
4/22 Stepping Outside Our immediate neighborhood: -What does it tell you about you? -How is it home? Burchfield quote: "The healthy glamour of everyday life" "Wake Up! Be Bold!" **Images:**	**4/29 Blowing in the Wind** **-**How can we represent the wind in a visual image (painting)? -Burchfield quote on wind -tape of sounds? -Burchfield images (& others: Hokusai, Curry, _____) **Media:**	**5/6 Visit to the BPAC** -Visit Burchfield Exhibit -Run by Museum Ed/Studies Class **Essential Questions:** -How does Burchfield represent his world? - -
5/13 Wrap Up Reflection on the Burchfield Sho -What did you notice at the BPAC?	**Class #14** • **Hanging work of Studio** • **Finishing Artist Statements**	**Class #15** • **Gallery Walk of ALL classes** • **Self Assessment Sheets** • **Gallery Walk Critique**

-**consider more than modern images & the usual suspects**
-consider different media/contemporary media (consider media that practicing artists usually use)