The Arts as a Context for Youth Purpose

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Abstract

The arts offer many young people a promising context for developing purpose. This article presents a secondary analysis of 270 Youth Purpose interviews, with a focus on 53 arts-involved adolescents. For this analysis, purpose was theorized as an “intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and contributes to the world beyond the self” (Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003). Qualitative methods determined whether and how participants demonstrated purpose. Few demonstrated purpose because they did not meet criteria for beyond-the-self motivation and future intention. Relational intention emerged as an important motivation for arts-involved adolescents, but raised questions about what it means for young people to contribute beyond the self. A two-year follow-up interview was conducted with 146 participants, and a longitudinal analysis found that artistic purpose is unstable. Adolescents lost meaning in their artistic activity as they transitioned from school to work, suggesting that purpose development is complicated by the challenge of pursuing an artistic career.
“All music is understanding somebody else”

—Mark¹, 21-year-old musician

Purpose is what we believe we are here for; it is what we need to accomplish in order to realize meaning in life and leave an impactful and positive mark on the world. It involves acting to contribute to the world in personally meaningful ways, and as such, is considered a developmental asset in adolescence (Benson, 1997), and important to positive youth development (Damon, 2008). The arts, as personally meaningful pursuits that also have the potential to make an important contribution to society, are a promising domain for adolescents to develop purpose. Despite this potential, arts participation has received limited attention in the literature on adolescent development, and there is very little research that examines the arts as a context for purpose development in adolescence. This qualitative study explores the neglected area of adolescent arts participation as a developmental context, with a particular focus on the relationship between the arts and purpose as it develops in young people.

**Youth Purpose**

Adolescence is a time when individuals begin to seek meaning in life (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1983), and set life goals (Nurmi, 1991; Massey, Gebhardt & Garnefski, 2008), and these tasks are necessary for establishing a positive life course in the identity formation process (Erikson, 1968). As such, adolescence has recently been investigated as the phase of life when purpose can emerge. Purpose has been defined as a central life aim (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), that is, a goal, but more significant and extending further into the future than more every day goals. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) sought to distinguish purpose from other similar

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¹ Names of all participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.
constructs such as meaning in life. In doing so, they defined purpose as “a stable and
generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of
consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003, p. 121).

This definition provided three dimensions of purpose that could be operationalized for
empirical investigation: (a) stable and future-oriented intention, (b) beyond-the-self orientation,
and (c) meaningful engagement. Initial investigation of these dimensions of purpose found that
adolescents can have fully realized purpose (exhibit all of the dimensions), or might have a
precursor form of purpose (exhibit one or two of the dimensions of purpose), in a variety of life
domains, including the arts (Moran, 2009). Purpose does not develop in a linear path in
adolescence, but comes and goes as the dimensions of purpose are influenced by factors such as
social supports, life transitions, and identity formation processes (Malin, Reilly, Quinn & Moran,
2012). The preliminary findings about the dimensions and forms of purpose provide a
foundation for examining how purpose emerges and develops in the different contexts that
adolescents inhabit. The following study builds on these findings to explore whether and how
the arts function as a context for developing purpose during adolescence.

Arts and Adolescent Development

There is evidence of a decline in artistic skill, creativity, and interest as children grow
into early adolescence, suggesting a “U-shaped curve” in artistic development in which the
bottom of the “U” aligns with the middle school years (Davis, 1997). This dip in artistic
development is believed to cause many young adolescents to end their artistic pursuits. Those
who persist in the arts beyond early adolescence are thought to be the talented few, who will go
on to be adult artists, and consequently there is little research that explores arts participation as it
relates to adolescent development. The arts have been included in some studies that examined
the learning and developmental outcomes of participation in extracurricular activities. In these studies, arts programs were found to offer youth opportunities to explore, reflect upon, and express identity (Eccles & Barber, 1999), and were an important arena for some youth to develop skill and mastery (Fredricks et al., 2002). Arts participation in adolescence has been associated with positive school outcomes, including attainment of important learning dispositions (Heath & Roach, 1999) and better performance on academic measures compared with youth who do not participate in the arts (Catterall, Chapleau & Iwanaga, 1999). The arts have also been found to provide adolescents with a context for abstract thinking about ideas of personal significance, and are important ways for young people to make meaning and communicate their ideas (Burton, 2001; Graham, 2003; Wolf, 1997).

The scant research that has specifically examined positive youth development in the arts provides inconsistent information about the psychological implications of arts participation. The arts provide flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), which have been associated with psychological well-being. On the other hand, research on the relationship between extracurricular activities and positive youth development suggests that participation in the arts does not predict positive developmental outcomes (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Bundick, 2011). Creative youth expressed ambivalence about purpose in their lives (Moran, 2010), and creative college students reported low scores on life purpose in middle adulthood (Hill et al., 2010). Additionally, the arts have been characterized in much of the relevant literature as self-involved (Moran, 2010), expressive (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1980), and individualistic (Reker, 1991) pursuits, and some have argued that creative contribution requires a level of cultural expertise unavailable to adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi, 1994; Feldman, 1994). If purpose is how
individuals see themselves contributing to the world, these characterizations have negative implications for the arts as a context for developing purpose.

These inconsistent conclusions indicate the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role that arts play in adolescent development, and in particular the development of purpose. A better understanding of arts participation would benefit both the science of adolescent development, as well as youth development practitioners. The arts appear to hold potential as a source of purpose for young people, but the research to date does not adequately describe youth perceptions of and experiences in the arts, and therefore cannot fully explain what makes arts participation meaningful to the youth themselves. Furthermore, there is insufficient understanding of why and how young people engage with the arts activities that are provided for them, and the inverse relationship between adolescent arts participation and adult purpose suggests that arts programs are not always structured in ways that align with the developmental needs of the young people who seek them out. Practitioners who provide arts opportunities have limited and inconsistent information about how adolescents experience the arts, what they bring to their arts activities, and what they take away. Theorists and educators alike need research that describes arts participation from the youth perspective, what young artists find meaningful about their arts activity, and how they view the role that the arts play in their lives.

Positive Youth Development and Developmental Systems Theory

Positive youth development (PYD) theory is grounded in developmental systems theory, which argues that developmental outcomes result from the interaction between individuals and their developmental context. Positive outcomes, such as purpose, emerge when there is a good fit between the characteristics of individual youths and their developmental ecology (Lerner, 1996). Therefore, in order to provide arts opportunities that can foster purpose, practitioners
need to understand what individual youth bring in terms of goals, motivations, prior experiences, and existing beliefs about the arts. They also need to understand how factors in society, community, and the youth’s family integrate with and influence those individual characteristics. In particular, understanding is needed of the supports, opportunities, and constraints that are part of the developmental ecology, and how they interact with the artistic motivations, goals, and beliefs of individual youth. This study applies positive youth development theory to explore youth arts participation, the artistic aspirations and motivations of adolescent artists, and how they engage in artistic activity within the context of social supports and constraints, to better understand whether and how young people find purpose in the arts.

The Present Study

The following is a secondary analysis of data from the Youth Purpose study that examines purpose in arts-involved youth. In the first phase of the Youth Purpose study, 24% of all adolescents were found to have purpose in at least one life domain, such as family, school, career goals, and hobbies (Moran, 2009). Based on prior research, we expected that the arts would present challenges as a domain for adolescents to develop purpose, and indeed the preliminary findings from a longitudinal analysis of the youth purpose data found that although many youth participate in the arts and describe them as meaningful and important, few appeared to be engaged in the arts with purpose (Malin, Reilly, Quinn & Moran, 2012). Furthermore, those who were purposeful in the arts did not sustain artistic purpose over time. These preliminary findings present a complex picture of adolescent arts participation, suggesting that the arts are meaningful activities in the lives of many young people, but are a limited and unstable domain for purpose development in adolescence.
The present study looked more deeply at interviews from arts-involved youth to examine whether and how the arts function as a context for purpose development. The objective of this analysis was to generate theory about the interaction between arts participation and purpose development in adolescence. Such theory would have a number of applications in youth development research and practice. It would offer more refined ways of thinking about youth, contribute to theory about adolescent arts participation, and inform educators about the role that the arts play in adolescent development. The questions investigated in this analysis were: Do arts-involved youth find purpose in their artistic activity? How do they describe their artistic motives and goals? And, what is the relationship between arts participation and purpose development in adolescence?

**Methods**

**Sample**

For the Youth Purpose study, school sites were selected in regions around the United States that provided a diverse demographic sample. From these sites, over 1,200 participants aged 11-21 completed a survey on youth purpose, and of those, 270 were interviewed following the survey. We conducted interviews in suburban and agricultural California, rural Tennessee, and urban Trenton/Philadelphia. Students from four grade levels participated in interviews: sixth grade, ninth grade, 12th-grade, and college sophomores or juniors. Table 1 describes the demographic features of the sample. Two years later, 146 of the original 270 participants were interviewed again using the same protocol. Retention was higher among Caucasian participants (64%) than nonwhite racial groups (42%), lower among 12th-graders (24%) than other ages (58%), and lower among urban participants (21%) than other locations (52%). The rate of retention among males and females was balanced.
Data Collection

Participants completed interviews in two waves over two years (T1=2006, T2=2008). Middle and high school students were interviewed at their schools, and college students were interviewed at various locations after being recruited at their schools. We obtained parental consent for students under 18 years old, and all participants signed a consent form prior to being interviewed. The interview was conducted face-to-face whenever possible, and took 45 minutes on average to complete. Interviewers were research scholars, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students, and all were trained on the Youth Purpose interview protocol. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

In the interview, respondents were asked to describe what was most important and meaningful to them and why, how these important things affected their life, their goals for the future, actions they took to attain those goals, and the obstacles they experienced in pursuing goals (see Appendix A for the full interview protocol). A semi-structured format enabled interviewers to probe responses in order to fully explore interviewees’ meaning in their statements, and capture their perceptions and experiences related to important goals and activities.

Data Coding

Following the first phase of data collection, we coded interviews using a qualitative content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). An initial set of codes was derived from the dimensions of purpose outlined in the definition provided by Damon et al. (2003): the most important goal, actions being taken to accomplish the goal, meaningfulness to the self of
that goal, and the motivations driving the goal. Using these codes, it was possible to assign each interview one of five possible forms of purpose:

- **Purpose**—Actively pursuing a goal that was both meaningful to the self and motivated by a desire to contribute beyond the self.
- **Self-goal**—Actively pursuing a goal that does not meet the criteria of being beyond-the-self oriented.
- **Dreaming**—Has a vision for a beyond-the-self goal but is not actively pursuing it.
- **Dabbling**—Engages in beyond-the-self activity but does not have a future-oriented goal related to that activity.
- **Non-purpose**—Does not meet any of the criteria for purpose.

Coders also identified the goal content of each interview and labeled this content with one of 17 broad categories of intention that had previously been identified through focus groups with adolescents. Some of these categories were: help others, support my friends and family, create something new, make the world a better place, make things more beautiful, change the way others think, and have a good career. (See Appendix B for the complete list of intention categories). Because the content of each interview was unique to individual respondents, organizing that content into broad categories enabled coders to reach greater reliability in determining forms of purpose.

Three coders were trained on, and came to agreement on, a subset of 30 interviews (10% of the interview sample) at T1, and attained reliability with a kappa score of .70 (Fleiss, 1981). For the remaining 90%, two coders coded each interview and came to agreement at each step prior to moving on to the next step. While coding the T1 interviews, the researchers developed a codebook to ensure that identical procedures would be used for coding at T2.
**Longitudinal Data Coding**

After determining the form of purpose for all interviews at both T1 and T2, a new coding system was created to analyze the changes in purpose over time. This coding phase was conducted with only those participants who were found to be purposeful at either T1 or T2, or both. We sorted these participants into three categories according to the transition that they made into or out of purpose between T1 and T2: purpose to non-purpose, non-purpose to purpose, and purpose to purpose. Each of these categories was assigned to a different coder. A coding grid was developed based on the questions guiding the analysis: What happens to purpose developmentally during adolescence? What changes when a young person loses purpose? What changes when a young person gains purpose? And what can be noticed when a young person who is purposeful remains purposeful over time? The coding grid was designed to identify changes from T1 to T2 by looking for indicators in the following areas:

- **Driver content**—Indicators of change in the individual’s primary goal between T1 and T2.
- **Driver priority level**—Indicators of change in the priority level of the T1 primary goal.
- **Reasons for goals (beyond the self vs. self-oriented)**—Indicators of change in the individual’s reason for pursuing the primary goals from self-oriented to beyond the self, or vice versa.
- **Supports**—Indicators of change in the types of support that the individual received for pursuing his or her goal.
- **Comprehensive change**—The content of the T2 interview is completely unrelated to the content of the T1 interview.
The research team met periodically during this phase to discuss the changes found in each of the three purpose transitions, identify developmental themes that cut across these transitions, and reach conclusions about the developmental trajectory of purpose.

Secondary Analysis of Arts-Involved Youth

Following the preliminary analysis to determine forms of purpose, the interviews were revisited to identify arts-involved youth and analyze them using a grounded theory approach. Subjects selected for this analysis were those who described arts participation as an important, meaningful, or frequent activity in their lives. Next, open coding was used to better understand arts participation from the youths’ perspectives, in order to explore the complex relationship between youth arts participation and purpose development (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through this process, new categories emerged to describe adolescents’ artistic motivations and goals, their perspectives on the role of arts in society, and their experiences encountered as they pursued creative careers. Analysis with this coding scheme was then conducted to generate theory about the arts and purpose development in adolescence.

Results

The first stage of analysis looked at the overall status of purpose among the adolescents in this study. Of the 270 adolescents interviewed at T1, 25% (n=67) were found to be purposeful. At T2, 21% (n=31) of 146 interviewed were found to be purposeful. Those who were purposeful at T2 were not necessarily the same as those who were purposeful at T1, indicating that purpose is not a directly linear or stable developmental trajectory, but is marked by transitions in and out of purpose as a young person develops (see Malin, Reilly, Quinn & Moran, 2012, for a more detailed description of the results of the Youth Purpose study).
The next stage of analysis determined the status of arts participation among the adolescents in this study. Of the 270 participants interviewed at T1, 53 (20%) described some current participation in the arts. They participated in a diverse range of arts disciplines, including theater, painting, photography, filmmaking, dance, music, graffiti art, graphic design, game design, fashion design, and creative writing. Of these, 17 were found to be purposeful, that is, they exhibited all of the dimensions of purpose. However, they did not necessarily find purpose in their artistic activity. For many of the purposeful young artists, something other than the arts was the source of their purpose. At T2, 29 (20%) of the 146 people interviewed talked about the arts as an important activity in their lives. Of those 29, only one was identified as having artistic purpose, and one other was identified as having purpose not related to his artistic activity. Table 2 shows the number of arts-involved participants who exhibited each form of purpose at T1 and T2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Few arts-involved youth were assigned to one of the two intention categories that were most relevant to the arts: make things more beautiful and create something new. Only seven (16%) arts-involved youth at T1, and three (10%) arts-involved youth at T2, were assigned to one of these two categories. Some were assigned to non-arts categories because something other than artistic activity was more important in their life at the time of the interview, such as family or career pursuit. However, most were difficult to assign to any of the pre-existing intention categories because their primary motivations for arts participation did not align well with them. Open coding was used to explore how youth described their artistic motivations. Participants described many different motivations for their artistic activity, but one category of intention
emerged that was frequently discussed in the interviews and pertinent to the theory of purpose that frames this study: a relational category. The relational category captured statements describing intention to relate to, connect with, share self with, provide experiences for, and build community with others through engagement in the arts.

The following analysis addresses the research questions by examining two key findings from these results. First, I analyze the finding that young people are driven by relational, rather than creative or aesthetic motives in their artistic activity, to understand whether and how young people find purpose in the arts. Second, I examine the finding that most arts-involved youth lost purpose over the two-year interval, to understand the interaction of arts participation and changes in purpose over time during adolescence.

**Relating, Connecting, and Building Understanding through the Arts**

The notion of having an intention to contribute to the world beyond the self is central to the purpose construct. Broadly conceived, intention to contribute to the world can be seen in the recognition of self as inextricably linked with others, and the desire to have meaningful and positive influence within one’s community, culture, and society. Beyond-the-self contribution has been described in prosocial terms (Eisenberg, Fabes & Spinrad, 2006), and as a moral or civic commitment (Colby & Damon, 1992; Sherrod, 2007). However, purpose can also be realized through contribution to cultural domains, including the arts. In analyzing interviews with adolescents, we anticipated that arts-involved youth, like adult artists, would be motivated by a desire to make creative or aesthetic contributions to their culture. Although a small number of participants talked about wanting to create something new, more spoke of the arts as a way to make better relationships, by connecting with others, creating community, sharing their perspective with others, and bringing joy to others.
Some adolescents spoke of their artistic activity as a way of connecting with others, and derived fulfillment from the positive impact that this connection had on themselves and others. As one young actress said of acting, “It connects you to the piece of work, and then you’re trying to connect your audience to that as well. . . . It’s just the connection you feel with an audience is something you don’t feel in many other things.” Another spoke of the importance of the community that theater provides: “It’s important to me to have a community of people that can really connect and be honest with each other. . . . I do musical theater because in the cast of a musical you practice everyday together and you just really learn to trust people and be able to talk to people. . . . Bringing people together to do something creative is really fulfilling.” A young musician felt music was an important way to connect with others about personal topics:

It’s cool because people will hear one of our songs, and they’ll ask what it means, and I get to tell them, . . . hey, that song is about my dad, or that’s about my home life. And when people relate to it, . . . and they’re interested in you for something that you put your heart into and they can relate to it, that just feeds you. . . . All music is understanding somebody else.

Other participants saw the arts as a way to build relationships with others by sharing their own way of understanding the world, or by providing a valuable experience to others. A young photographer said, “Photography is important to me because I like taking pictures of things that people don’t notice.” She did a photo project about how women see themselves, which “showed how even the most beautiful women wear make up. We all have something to hide.” She noticed something about how the social world works, and wanted to share what she noticed with others through her art making. In a sense, this is self-expression, often framed as a self-involved act. But here self-expression is an act of sharing vision and awareness, of helping others to
notice, and an effort to produce shared perspective. A young professional musician similarly talked about how he enjoyed making music as a way to impact how others feel and think:

You feel like you’re changing people’s minds. That’s what good art is, when it changes somebody’s views somehow. . . Part of the reason why I wanted to be an artist to begin with is you can leave your mark on the world that way. Because other people are being affected by your art. It makes them feel certain things. . . It makes [them] feel good. It helps [them] relax; it helps [them] get excited. . . I remember my teacher. . . said when I play ballads I should aim to make people cry. . . So I played this song for my friend for her birthday and she was bawling at the end and it was really cool, because it reached her. . . I like music because music can do that.

He recognized the aesthetic value of his music, but more relevant to his sense of purpose was the effect he could have on other people through his music.

A high school dancer explained her commitment to her art form as a way to break free from the norms of social conformity to share self with others: “If you see someone dancing you can tell by the styles they do. . . what kind of person they are, what kind of personality they have. It just shows who I am when I dance, shows who I am to everyone.” She also felt that dance was a vital aspect of life that she was compelled to share with others: “By working hard at dance, then it shows other people they can do the same. My purpose is to keep dancing and I think I’m supposed to show people that they can do the same.” She did not just dance for her personal fulfillment; she had a purpose of enabling others to experience fulfillment through dance.

Similarly, a college-aged musician found purpose in music because it was a way for him to bring joy to others lives: “Do I have a purpose? Make people smile. Not everybody is endowed with
those gifts of music and the ability to make others laugh. I play music because I can. I’d like to use my gift in a positive way and not let it go to waste.”

**Decline of Artistic Purpose from Adolescence into Adulthood**

Although participants in this study found meaning in the arts by relating, connecting with others, and building community, they also recognized that society did not highly value their artistic contributions. This contradictory perception of the arts as an activity that builds connections and community, but is not valued by society, led to a complicated interaction between arts participation and purpose development. Many participants believed that the arts, while personally meaningful and important for relating to others, were not a realistic long-term pursuit or career path. The definition of purpose used to frame this study includes two important criteria that were problematic in the longitudinal analysis: long-term goal setting and stability. The arts-involved youth in this study did not demonstrate the stability of purpose that was seen in other domains of purpose, and their long-term artistic goals were weak and not well defined. This section describes the changes that occurred over time for arts-involved youth, and examines how they talked about their long-term artistic goals.

**Challenges on the path to a creative career.**

Participants in all age groups discussed the unlikelihood of pursuing the arts as a career. Some thought it was unrealistic that they would find a creative job that could support them financially. A college student said, “Music is a big part of my life but it’s not something I want to pursue as a career. It’s too risky.” This risk was a message that some got from their parents: “I really wanna be a dancer. Well, my mom tells me you can’t get money with it.” Others learned from society about the financial risk and unlikely reward of pursuing a career in the arts: “Writing isn’t really a good job to make money unless you write a fantasy story and suddenly
Neither this writer nor the dancer had serious long-term aspirations related to their art. While they both found fulfillment in their art form, both saw it as something to do on the side, at most, once the demands of a real career filled their time.

Another limitation that young artists in this study experienced was a poorly defined path from school arts to a creative career. An ill-defined path allowed some to feel that their chosen field is open, but vague: “I don’t really know what it is yet, I just know I’m kinda into drawing and 3D modeling. . . . So I don’t really have anything I want to do yet, but I’m open to options.”

To a point, an open path enabled young artists to pursue their art unfettered. However, challenges arose when career decisions had to be made. Will young artists who are “open to options” understand which options lead to a sustainable career? Will they know how to take the steps needed to develop creative interests into a career? Some participants in this study were unable to answer these questions. A young filmmaker was pursuing a film degree in college, but had no concept of how to take the steps needed to turn that education into a job. Her lack of knowledge about the options and how to develop them left her paralyzed at a critical point in her career development: “I really like film, but I don’t know what kind of career you can take.”

Despite her investment in film school and the accompanying sacrifices, she was also laying groundwork for non-arts career options because she was at a loss for how to advance into a film-related career.

Those who did press forward and pursue a career in the arts faced the manifestations of the devaluation of art in society. They experienced the transition from school to creative jobs as poorly developed and poorly defined. Like the young filmmaker just described, even young artists who knew exactly what they wanted to do could not see the path from training to a creative career. There was a perceived lack of support for that transition, and none of the early-
career artists talked about having a mentor to guide them. Some started work and found that the creative vision and relational aspects of their college art making were stifled by marketplace demands. Further, the arts-related jobs available to them just out of school shared little in common with the meaningful artistic activity that drove them to pursue a creative career. Just out of college, the need for a job—any job—caused young artists to diverge from their path to artistic purpose and instead seek purpose in other domains, such as family, or to lose purpose altogether.

Ashley, a young visual artist, demonstrated these challenges in her transition from art student to a career in graphic design. Ashley was found to be purposeful at T1, when she was in her early college years, taking art classes and producing work for college exhibitions. At that point, she was very thoughtful about her personal style of art making, and what made art meaningful to her: “A lot of my art is...whimsical things...I guess I have an imagination and I think it’s important to have that in the crazy world.” After transitioning to a vocational program in graphic design, however, she did not speak about what her particular artistic contribution was, and instead focused on how she could pursue her own happiness in a career in graphic design, which at that moment related to money: “I just started working, and I think I'm happy actually because I am busy, and I'm making my own money and that feels really good. So in that case, money did buy me happiness.” She also spoke about the transition from school to work in an art career: “You have to follow the guidelines. Your client is right. You’re not creating art; you’re creating something for them. You’re pretty much communicating their art and not your own.” Ashley found happiness in her work as a designer, but the artistic purpose she had before starting her career was lost.
Like Ashley, several of the young people in this study found meaning in their artistic activity in college, where they were able to be ideological in their art making, develop a personal artistic style, and focus on how they impacted others through their art. However, their artistic purpose was stifled by workplace demands as they transitioned from school to work. Young artists had to choose either career stability or meaningful work, resulting in very unstable and uncertain purpose development in the arts.

**Identity formation and purpose in the arts.**

Among young artists in this study, the artist identity emerged early in high school, when they started to use terms like “artsy” to describe themselves, and talked about wanting to be a musician, dancer, actor, or artist. However, just as early, they had already internalized the idea that the arts are not a realistic career, are not acceptable as an adult pursuit, and would never lead to financial stability. As a result, artistic identity formation became problematic and was stunted, and so too was the development of artistic purpose. As they entered adulthood, participants faced tremendous challenges in maintaining artistic identity and purpose, both from the ideas they internalized from society, as well as from the lack of external support for the transition into a creative career. Although they claimed an artist identity, if they internalized negative ideas from society too much, and encountered an uncertain path, the meaning in their art making dissipated in the transition to work and the artist identity faded along with the potential for artistic purpose.

Pascal, a young jazz musician, demonstrated how the relationship between artistic identity and the social context could develop along a different path to result in artistic purpose. Unlike the many other young artists who allowed the negative messages from society to disrupt their artistic identity, Pascal pushed past the social obstacles and used his emerging musician
identity to gather resources, which in turn enabled him to more fully integrate music into his identity and build an increasingly supportive environment for his music development. Music became a viable career pursuit for him when he recognized it as his identity and used that identity to shape his ecology:

Music is my life. . . .[Without it], I don’t think I’d have as good a relationship with my brother. . . .I don’t think I’d have a strong identity. . . .I don’t think I’d be living in New York. . . .It’s hard for me to think about what my life would be like without music. . . .It’s been more and more important over the years. . . .Right now it’s even harder for me to think of that because right now all my friends are musicians, all my studies are music. Everything is music.

Like the other young artists in this study, he acknowledged that he might face challenges in making a living as a musician, but those challenges did not hinder him on his path because music was so thoroughly integrated with everything in his life. His musical identity enabled him to develop social supports and an ecology that could help him through the obstacles to a music career. Because music was so integral to his identity, he was better able than others to commit to the discipline, practice, and sacrifices that being a musician requires, and through that commitment he was able to maintain the aspects of music that gave him a sense of purpose.

**Discussion**

What does it mean for young people to find purpose in the arts? And how does their artistic purpose develop as they grow into adulthood? These are vital questions for understanding what artistic activity means to adolescents, and for understanding how best to support young people in pursuing meaningful involvement in the arts. This study explored these questions by using a qualitative approach to examine how young people talk about their artistic
activity, the place it has in their present and future lives, and their artistic motivations. Using a PYD theoretical framework, this analysis focused on the interaction between individuals and their context and how that interaction influenced their arts participation and purpose development. By doing so, this study revealed important insights about why young people participate in the arts, how artistic activity interacts with their developing personal and social identity, and what happens to artistic purpose as they become adults. It also revealed gaps in the construct of purpose and in our understanding of how it develops in adolescence.

**Art as a Relational Activity**

An important finding of this study is that the arts are meaningful to young people as an activity for building relationships, for understanding others and being understood, and for young people to connect with and build a community. In the adult art world, a contemporary movement called *Relational Aesthetic* (Bourriaud, 1998) comprises artists who are similarly motivated to create meaningful human relationships through the artistic process. Artists participating in the relational aesthetic movement see themselves as contributing to culture and society by promoting connections and shared perspective among individuals. Relational activity in adolescence is viewed as an identity formation process (Erikson, 1968; Flum & Lavi-Yudelevitch, 2002), and has not been considered as a way for young people to contribute to the world beyond themselves. Some studies have examined theater participation as a way to develop social capacities, such as role-taking (Wright, 2006) and theory of mind (Goldstein, Wu & Winner, 2009), suggesting that the arts provide young people the opportunity to increase their capacity to understand, respect, and value perspectives different from their own. This study adds to those findings and introduces the argument that engagement in relational artistic activity is a meaningful effort by young people to improve society within their developmental capacities.
Intention to contribute to the world beyond the self is a critical dimension of purpose and thriving as they are conceptualized in positive youth development. In the PYD literature, contribution has been examined in prosocial, spiritual, and civic domains (Lerner, 2004; Flanagan, Syvertsen & Wray-Lake, 2007; Sherrod, 2007; Mariano & Damon, 2008; Tirri & Quinn, 2010), however, little research has focused on youth contribution in cultural domains, such as the arts, and how cultural contribution might differ from other domains. Most of the young people quoted in this analysis were found to be self-oriented in their artistic pursuits, largely because our criteria for “beyond the self” were based on a theoretical foundation built from what was known about prosocial purpose. However, as described above, young artists in this study demonstrated their desire to strengthen and transform their culture by seeking not just to connect, but to create new connections for and with their audience; not only to relate, but to produce deeper and mutually meaningful relationships through shared understanding; not simply to express themselves, but to change the minds and lives of others through their self-expression.

Artistic Decline During Adolescence and Early Adulthood

Scholars have recognized for a while that young people lose interest in the arts during adolescence as their creativity dips (Davis, 1997; Graham, 2003). A more recent study of purpose orientations found that creative purpose was stable from adolescence into adulthood (Hill et al., 2010), however that study measured creative purpose only by asking how important creative activities were to the individual. Beyond those studies, little is understood about artistic development in adolescence and early adulthood. The present study offers some explanations for these conflicting results along with new ways to understand the decline of artistic development during adolescence. First, youth in this study internalized the perceived low status of the arts in society and lack of career prospects in the arts. These limitations were internalized early in
participants’ artistic lives and presented challenges to their long-term goal setting in the arts. Although many of our artistic participants expressed artistic identity as early as ninth grade, that artistic identity formation was stunted in those who internalized the idea that the arts are not a realistic career, or are not acceptable as an adult pursuit.

As young artists entered into emerging adulthood, they faced further challenges to maintaining artistic identity and purpose. In the transition from school to the world of work, they focused on finding a job, supporting family, and career stability, or turned away from meaningful and connective artistic activities to pursue balance in life, and marginalized the arts as a source of hedonic pleasure. By examining the arts as a domain for developing purpose, this study found that most adolescent artists lost one or more dimensions of purpose as they transitioned into creative careers: meaningful engagement declined, self-oriented motivations overtook self-transcendent motivations, and future artistic intentions faltered. The loss of meaning and purpose during the transition from school to creative work may explain why a previous study found no correlation between creative purpose in college and adulthood purpose and well-being (Hill et al., 2009).

Prior research found that adolescent arts participation does not correlate to purpose development (Bundick, 2011), and does correlate with negative psychological outcomes (Barber et al, 2001). This study illuminated some of the contextual factors and developmental processes that might underlie those findings. Participation in the arts enabled some young people to develop an artistic identity, but simultaneous to that, the emerging artistic identity prompted a negative response from the adolescent’s support structure, such as parents denouncing the arts as a poor career option. Among our participants, this pessimistic social response appeared to inhibit future goal setting in the arts, and therefore diminished artistic purpose development. One
preliminary theory that emerges from these findings is the possibility that negative response to the arts from the adolescent’s support system successfully inhibits artistic development and purpose development, which in turn correlates with reduced purpose and negative psychological outcomes later in life.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Research

Few young people in this study found purpose in the arts, despite it being a source of meaning in their lives, and those who did find purpose could not sustain it over time. These unexpected findings suggest a number of theoretical and practical implications that warrant further research. First, it may be that artistic purpose is difficult to attain in adolescence, and that another construct is better suited to explain the role that arts play in adolescent lives. Some similar but distinct constructs offer other ways to describe artistic engagement in adolescence: The arts are personal projects, or activities directed at making meaningful cultural connections (Little, 1993); and they are meaning making activities, in that they are used to represent ideas about, make sense of, and connect with the external world (Bruner, 1990; Steger, 2009). Artistic activity might for some youth be a manifestation of the process of exploration and commitment that forms identity (Erikson, 1968; Burrow, O’Dell & Hill, 2010; Burrow & Hill, 2011).

Research examining adolescent arts participation through these different theoretical lenses would enable theorists and practitioners to better understand what the arts mean to young people and the role that arts play in adolescent development.

Another possible explanation for the low incidence and instability of artistic purpose among our sample is that the operational definition of purpose is inadequate for analyzing cultural domains, such as the arts. Beyond-the-self contribution is typically understood as occurring in prosocial domains, and cultural contribution is thought to be out of reach for young
people. One theoretical implication of this study is that the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose needs further development in light of how people describe their intentions and activities in different domains. Another implication is that contribution to culture and society needs to be considered in developmentally appropriate terms. A young person might experience purpose differently from adults, in the sense that they have different capacities for contributing to culture and society. The findings about artistic purpose suggest a need to better understand the many ways that adolescents see themselves as contributing through their artistic activity in developmentally appropriate ways, for example, through striving for connectedness, strong relationships, mutual understanding, and community-building.

A number of implications for education and youth development practice emerge from this study. Many of the young artists were motivated by a desire to connect with others, build relationships, share the self, and change how others think and feel. These findings are contrary to prior assumptions in the literature and recommend a shift in how schools and youth organizations engage adolescents in the arts. For example, Barber et al. (2001) argued that adolescent arts participation might be associated with negative outcomes (suicide attempts, psychiatric visits) because the arts promote individuality. The experiences reported by our participants suggest that if youth arts programs are promoting individuality, they are doing so against the preferences of young participants, and perhaps more relational approaches to arts activities would be better suited to adolescent interests. Furthermore, the relational intentions reported by participants indicate that youth program leaders can capitalize on the arts to promote connection, one of the important “5 C’s” of positive youth development, and civic engagement (Benson, 2003; Lerner, 2004). The arts offer a unique opportunity to promote connection in activity that is deeply meaningful to individuals and enmeshed with the identity formation
process. Arts programs, if designed to encourage adolescent inclinations to develop deeper connections with others and build community, could play an important role in fostering civic identity and engaging youth in democratic society.

Participants in this study indicated that they are not receiving adequate support for setting artistic goals or in pursuing careers in the arts. Their responses suggest that they need arts opportunities and training that promote the value of the arts as a humanizing activity and as a way of building important relational capacities. They also need to receive better information about the arts as a viable career path and the many artistic careers that can provide financial as well as personal reward, job stability, and life balance. It is clear from the results of this study that in late high school and college, young people need support in transitioning from school into creative professions. Currently this path is poorly defined in many creative fields and requires a survival mentality. Worn down by the struggle and confusion of starting out in a creative career, young artists abandon what it was that drove them to an arts career in the first place. While they may regain footing on the path to artistic purpose later in life, this study suggests that the uncertainty of the school-to-work transition, combined with artistic commitments that are already shaky due to social pressures to pursue other careers, make it tremendously challenging to find that path without adequate external support. Organizations that employ creative people in entry-level positions need to consider how to enable their young employees to sustain meaning and purpose in their artistic activity. Such an approach would better support the artistic development of their employees, which can in turn benefit the organization.

For the above theoretical and practical reasons, it is imperative that scholars produce more knowledge about adolescents’ artistic activity and development. The goal of this qualitative study was to generate preliminary theory about youth arts participation, and
additional research is needed to further explore, test, and build upon the ideas that emerged from this analysis. Ideally, models of adolescent arts participation should be produced that describe the intentions, motivations, and meaning-making processes that young people bring to their artistic activity, and the social and cognitive processes they engage in their art making. In this study, relational intention emerged as an important motivation for youth arts participation, however a more systematic study of adolescent arts participation would likely reveal an array of intentions and a unique profile of multiple intentions for each individual (Malin, in press). Mixed-methods studies that reveal, elaborate, and test models of artistic intention in adolescence would enable youth development practitioners to better understand what young people are doing and thinking as they engage in artistic activity, and how they might be supported to find purpose in that activity. By focusing on youths’ artistic intentions and purpose, rather than on their talent, practitioners may be able to raise the dip in the “U-shaped curve” of artistic decline.

The relational intention described by young artists in this study indicates a connection between arts participation and social development (in the societal or civic sense), in that they were developing the capacity to understand and influence how others think, and to connect with and build community through their arts activity. PYD theorists and practitioners are concerned with how young people develop civic identity, social responsibility, and commitment to social justice, and the impact that this development has on civil society and democracy (Benson, 2003; Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003). If the arts do enhance social development in the ways that have been described in this article, further research should be conducted to examine the interaction between arts participation and adolescents’ developing understanding of their role in community and society.
Finally, research is needed on the context of adolescent arts participation: the opportunities, supports, and constraints that shape the arts experiences that are made available to youth. The unfortunate devaluation of the arts in public schools in the United States has meant decreased opportunities for young people to participate in the arts, resulting in reduced capacity for adolescents to pursue their artistic interests into adulthood, and a subsequent devaluation of the arts in society. This cycle of artistic decline has shifted the context of supports and constraints for young people who are interested in the arts in ways that are not fully understood. Some of the consequences of that shift were demonstrated in this study, including the loss of artistic meaning from adolescence to adulthood, and low incidence of long-term artistic goals among adolescents. Additional research is needed to understand the interaction between these outcomes and the context in which they emerge, including research on the transition from adolescent arts involvement to a creative career. In particular, longitudinal research is needed that examines the induction path to creative careers and how external factors along this path impact artistic motivations and meaningful engagement.

Conclusion

By examining adolescent arts participation through the lens of youth purpose, this study revealed some of the intentions that youth bring to their artistic activity, and showed ways that the developmental trajectory of young artists can be impacted by the social context. The intentions, meanings, and motivations that adolescents bring to their artistic process are important factors in determining how they will engage with artistic activities, such as those assigned in school or offered in youth programs. The arts were found in this study to be a way for adolescents to develop the capacity to connect through self-expression, to relate to others through the sharing of ideas, emotions, and observations of the world, and to build community
through personally meaningful interaction. Furthermore, the arts, despite their low status in public schools today, are important to the continuation of innovative thinking, beauty, and humanism in our culture, so it is vitally important that young people are given every opportunity to pursue purpose in an art form that they love. It is vital that those of us who are concerned about youth development of these capacities find ways to clear the path for them to do so.
References


162-177.


### Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Sample at Time 1 (n=270)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>6th grade</th>
<th>9th grade</th>
<th>12th grade</th>
<th>College</th>
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<td>Nonwhite</td>
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<td>49 (72%)</td>
<td>43 (68%)</td>
<td>45 (64%)</td>
<td>34 (49%)</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>14 (21%)</td>
<td>17 (27%)</td>
<td>19 (27%)</td>
<td>17 (25%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>37 (54%)</td>
<td>33 (52%)</td>
<td>36 (51%)</td>
<td>29 (42%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>26 (38%)</td>
<td>27 (43%)</td>
<td>28 (40%)</td>
<td>22 (32%)</td>
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<td>Region</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
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<td>46 (68%)</td>
<td>45 (71%)</td>
<td>48 (69%)</td>
<td>50 (72%)</td>
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<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
<td>6 (10%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
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<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>18 (26%)</td>
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</table>

*Note.* Some information was unreported because the participants did not complete a survey.
**Table 2**

*Arts Participation and Purpose at Times 1 and 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Arts Involved</td>
<td>53 (20%)</td>
<td>29 (20%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of Arts Involved that are:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purposeful</td>
<td>17 (32%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-goal Oriented</td>
<td>13 (25%)</td>
<td>15 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreaming</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dabbling</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-purposeful</td>
<td>17 (32%)</td>
<td>11 (38%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Self
Tell me a little about yourself: What matters to you? What are some of the things that you care about? What is really important to you? What kind of person are you?
How do you spend your time? What do you do well?

Beyond the Self
If you could change anything about the world, what would you want to be different in the world?
Describe your perfect place/world? Are you doing anything in progressing towards this? How could you work towards making some of these changes?

Most Important
You’ve mentioned several things that matter to you, which are most important? Rank 1-3 Why is X more important than Y or Z? Is there anything else more important?

Centrality
How does X influence your life? You have also mentioned Y and Z, how do they relate to X?

Rationale
How does your participation in X affect others? How does X relate to the “ideal world” you described earlier? How do you feel when you are engaging in X?

Stability
How long have you cared about X? What do you do that shows X is important to you? Do you see your participation in X ending at some point?

Obstacles
Why are you excited about this? How do you keep yourself excited?
What were the obstacles? How did you overcome them?

What will you need to do to maintain your involvement in this?

**Origin**

How did X become important to you? When did it become important to you?

Why do you think you got involved in this particular cause rather than a different one?

**Future**

Picture yourself at say, 40 years of age. What will you be doing? Who’ll be in your life? What will be important to you? What are your plans in the immediate future, say the next few years?

**Sense of Purpose**

Do you have a purpose? What does purpose (the concept) mean to you?

Do you think you’ll have it for the rest of your life? Do you think you will have one?
Appendix B: Intention Categories

1. Help Others
2. Serve God/a Higher Power
3. Make the world a better place
4. Change the way people think
5. Create something new
6. Make things more beautiful
7. Fulfill my obligations
8. Do the right thing
9. Live life to the fullest
10. Make Money
11. Discover new things about the world
12. Earn the respect of others
13. Support my family and friends
14. Serve my country
15. Have fun
16. Be successful
17. Have a good career