A young anthropologist set out 30 years ago to examine the linguistic skills of children in two working-class communities in the Piedmont, Carolinas—one African-American; the other Caucasian. That researcher, Shirley Brice Heath, stunned the world with her conclusions: the African-American youth exhibited a far more sophisticated grasp of language than the Caucasian youth. In fact, their skills proved stronger than children with more resources available to them, black or white.

Heath found that, though the two communities were located only a few miles apart, segregation led to a far different at-home socialization process. The African-American children spent considerably more time with adults carrying out numerous tasks that resulted in their being able to play a range of roles in their language. Heath observed: "They were able to take on all sorts of questioning situations as long as those questions were relevant to the task at hand and not ones where the questioner already knew the answer, the way it often is at school."

A typical conversation Heath observed among the African-American working class families would involve a parent asking (without knowing the answer) of a child with cupped hands, "What's that in your hand?" And the child would respond, "a worm." Then the parent would say, "That's a grub worm and-if you squeeze that-you're going to get mess all over your hands."

The African-American children became accustomed to conversing in "planful" language; that is, if I want (or don't want) this to happen, what must I do? They were encouraged to explore. But when these adventuresome kids entered school, and the teacher asked them the color of their eyes, they had no experience with how to answer. Certainly the teacher could see that their eyes were brown! So these children reacted very strangely to school, according to Heath, and pretty much tuned out of educational institutions by the time they got to fourth or fifth grade.

Heath, a professor of English and linguistics at Stanford University and a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, notes that "many kids do not grow up in environments that allow them to use language in ways the world expects." Consequently, her work has always centered on the use of language and the context it provides for young people.

The Loss of Hypothetical Language
During the past three decades, Heath has continued to study the families in the Carolinas, finding that the children of the children she first studied did not have the same amount of valuable socialization with adults: "So I was aware of this broad trend in American life that children after the age of eight spend very little time with their parents in task activities. They may spend time at the dinner table or time in the car going to a baseball game, but they don't spend time doing a task. This means that kids today are not engaging in language that is hypothetical."

Children used to be more involved in planning a family vacation or building a sandbox, according to Heath. But now, particularly in middle class families, the parents will call a travel agent or hire someone for the backyard construction. And the kids, more often than not, would rather be practicing a hoop shot with their pals than sitting around the kitchen table in contemplative activity with adults.

Unfortunately, the child winning points with peers may be losing ground linguistically. "These kids don't spend a lot of time saying things like 'what do you think will happen if?,' or 'do we have the right piece for this, and if we don't, what do we do?,'" says Heath. They're not dealing in open questions and they're not engaging in the kind of planful language where they're talking about the possibility of what will happen with certain steps along the way. Finally, she says, they're not using mental-state verbs, such as wonder, speculate, or ponder.

Non-School Activities
In 1987 after noting the weakening parental influence on children's language, Heath decided to delve into the non-school hours and learn more about what
kids were doing on their own. Children only spend about 25 percent of their
time in school; she wanted to examine the other 75 percent because, "let's face
it, that time is not filled up with loving, giving, instructive parents who spend
a lot of time with their kids. Let's look at what things kids are doing out there
by themselves and see what difference that time makes in terms of providing
confident, considerate, pro-social, pro-civic folks."

Heath examined 120 community-based organizations in geographic locations
from Massachusetts to Hawaii. The chosen sites were identified as being
places where "good things are happening for young people outside of school."
The organizations, free of charge and primarily operating in impoverished
neighborhoods and high-crime zones, were clustered into three categories:
athletic-academic, community service, and arts-based.

Then, seven years into the ten-year study, she discovered that the children
engaged in arts activities were looking, in her words, "very different."

At that point, in 1995, Jane Polin of the General Electric Fund asked Heath to
take a closer look at the arts organizations. As Heath wrote in an article
summarizing the study, Youth Development and the Arts in Nonschool Hours,
the results were somewhat unexpected:

A positive conclusion is that the arts, by virtue of their very nature, carried a
particular power for learning achievement both in the arts themselves and in
closely related competencies upon which successful performance and
knowledge in the arts depends. For all participants in arts-based organizations,
hard work and high risk had a literal payoff in the continued survival of the
group and the continued availability of its personnel and space for creating
art.

Her work revealed that the kids in the arts-based organizations exhibited an
intensity of certain characteristics, including motivation, persistence, critical
analysis, and planning. When she compared the youth in arts programs with
the national sample derived from the National Educational Longitudinal
Survey, she found that the youth in the arts programs are: 25 percent more
likely to report feeling satisfied with themselves; twice as likely to win an
award for academic achievement; and 23 percent more likely to feel they can
make plans and successfully work from them.

"We're definitely not saying to forget the athletics and go for the arts. Every
group has its own special push," says Heath. She considers athletic activities
generally less verbal and less cognitive than the arts groups that she studied,
which spanned all aesthetic domains-drama, music, dance, visual, and media.
Kids involved in athletics will work to get better so that the team gets better,
she says, while the arts demand more personal determination and self
evaluation.

Many of the community service programs Heath observed, everything from a
really good girl scout troup to a group seeking to market new inventions, did
terrific things for the children from impoverished families. But, Heath says,
"you can't say to a kid in a community service group to go to a nursing home
and be imaginative. Do whatever comes into your head."

The Creative Process
The arts, she found, give youth free expression. "Primarily, the arts hold the
opportunity for kids to play around with ideas in their head and then carry it
out with degrees of success and failure, or something in between. The second
thing that's really important in the creative process is that kids can talk out
loud about what's going on in the piece, in their work," she says.

And for those truly committed, says Heath, "the arts make kids practice,
practice, practice."

Heath observed one arts-based organization where young people created a
theater group that worked up interactive programs related to key local
concerns. At another, inside a renovated warehouse, she saw young people
and young adults working together to create a multi-purpose project that
united drama, poetry, and hip-hop, with local mothers bringing food to sell at
intermission.

Heath listened to the kids talk about "the work." And talk about themselves as
artists, taking on that identity. She asked a number of the young adults to keep
journals and write down everything that crossed their minds pertaining to
their work as artists, and discovered that "they really do go around thinking
about their art. They couldn't be making this up."

The third crucial advantage that creative arts pose is much higher risk: "In
athletics you have to play within the rules of the game. If kids go outside of
that, it's bad. Yet you can go outside the frame of what some prior artist has
done. And if you do it well, that's great."
Importance of Critique

If the young artist fumbles while stretching his or her imagination, someone might say, "that's a terrible copy of a Picasso. Can you try something with less red tones?" This is known as critique, and though it may be difficult at times, the advice and comments of a peer group allow young people to recognize another person's expertise. Further, Heath wrote in her conclusions, "pursuing the distinctive wisdom of others led to recognizing that differences in a group are assets to be appreciated and used, not aberrations to be suppressed."

Elizabeth Michelle Soep, a doctoral student at Stanford University and a study collaborator with Heath, recalls her first experience with critique as a 15-year-old visual arts student in a summer program for youth: "You mean I have to let everyone see this sketch of a reclining woman and it's not even done? You mean, other kids are going to talk out loud about their images? I felt as exposed as the woman in my drawing. And I had no model for this kind of discussion—certainly not from school, where assessment was a private, teacher-driven process."

Twelve years later, Soep wrote eloquently for the fall 1996 issue of "New Designs for Youth Development" about how critique is an art in itself. Among her insights is that, "offering critique means, I have a valid point of view. Receiving it implies, my work is taken seriously.'"

Critique gets kids used to being criticized constructively, according to Heath. The critique is not geared toward telling someone what is wrong, but rather to get the young artist to think about what they are doing. "It's really a very good process for thinking about yourself as a thinker," she says.

Message to Schools, Foundations, and Policy Makers

Heath doesn't bemoan the lack of art in schools: "We can't expect schools to do everything in that little bit of time that they have the kids. Let's think instead about how the children can have learning environments outside of school that would push their creativity in ways that we can never afford to do in the schools. The school has to serve everybody."

"Let's look at what being voluntary means in the American system. That would be our message—to pay far more attention to the non-school hours and ways to provide a creative learning environment."

Heath is more adamant that foundations get the message that there has to be better evaluation of non-school programs because "right now so much money is going into organizations that are not effective learning environments. It's just a criminal waste."

She wants foundations to know that "we can now help you know how to go into a community-based organization that you may be supporting and know whether it is an effective learning environment for kids. We know how to evaluate a learning environment." After decades of meticulous study, Heath feels that she has the data to determine what works and what doesn't. "Even being on the conservative side with the numbers," she adds.

So far, policy makers have been the most inclined to listen to Heath and her colleagues discuss what programs can effectively enhance the chances for at-risk youth. She particularly applauds Attorney General Janet Reno for considering aspects of her research for inclusion in crime bills.

Additional Research Suggestions

What happens to the young women who go through these arts organizations? Heath says that she would like to know more about why women aren't getting the same long-term payoffs that the young men appear to be gaining from involvement in the community arts activities. One obvious deficit is that only about 5 percent of the organizations cater solely to females; 45 percent are geared for men only.

"Young women get programs for themselves primarily only if they get pregnant. They really have to get in big trouble before they get any help," she says, while "young men can look tough and they get programs."

In general, Heath would like to see more data on what happens after the youth finish their involvement in the organizations and move on. "My sense is that kids in arts-based organizations do better vocationally than kids in other organizations. But I need to look at that much more closely before I say that. We know what happens when they're in the organization. But I would like to know if they're getting more when entering a career."

The artists who staff these organizations really need to be commended, Heath says. They also require some professional bolstering: "There are so few adults at these organizations proportional to the kids, and these adults need all the support they can get. Like more professional opportunities to meet with other adults who are doing similar kinds of things."
There's no professional identity for these very talented and giving individuals at this point, Heath laments. She suggests a Master of Fine Arts or Masters program geared specifically toward training people to run community-based arts programs. The degree would guarantee some understanding of how to manage a non-profit, and how to eventually create a for-profit wing from the community group. Such a program would also give these professionals a much-warranted title.

**Art for Arts Sake**

Heath's research has unearthed some ramifications that she refers to as "the art creep." That is, the ability of the arts to slip into other aspects of life and seep into other forms of learning. "The opportunity to move through work cycles-from practice through performance and display-requires the young artists to explore many roles, with different levels of responsibility, and through a range of media," she wrote in her study conclusions.

Yet, she warns now, people shouldn't think about putting kids into the arts to make them better readers. "You cannot make the arts the handmaiden of good school performance. You cannot make the arts the handmaiden of good citizenship. Or the handmaiden of reforming a juvenile delinquent.

"It's true that when kids get into the arts there's a certain transformation of things that happen," she says, adding the caveat: Don't forget there also is "art for arts sake."

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