

MEMO

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Subject: *Teen Research in Providence and Boston—
Overview and Topline Findings*

Overview

In late February Fluent Research, in collaboration with Next Level SMG, Y-USA and BGCA, conducted focus groups with arts-engaged teenagers affiliated with either a local YMCA or a Boys & Girls Club in Providence and Boston.

We spoke with 64 teenagers of varied ethnicities, and a range of passion and engagement in artistic pursuits. Overall, the total composition skewed slightly female. As expected, we had a good mix of groups with varying distinguishing characteristics to learn from:

- One mixed gender group of high school juniors and seniors at New Urban Arts in Providence
- One mixed gender group of high school juniors and seniors who engage in arts at NUA as well as non-arts programming at the Providence YMCA
- Two single gender groups at the Providence Boys & Girls Club
- Two single gender groups at the Dorchester YMCA
- One mixed gender group of 9th and 10th graders, and one of 11th and 12th graders at the Boys & Girls Club (West End House) in Boston, an in-house “partnership” with the Music & Youth Initiative

The objective of speaking with arts-engaged teenagers before launching the larger tween study is to explore their motivation behind the initial engagement, drivers of and barriers to sustained involvement, the nature of influence in the selection of arts as part of their OST activities, and the role of arts in their lives. These insights will be used to develop a more focused discussion guide with tweens and their parents/caregivers to understand where on the spectrum of access and engagement these 5th through 8th graders are, and gain further insight into how we can engage and retain participation in arts programs.

Our topline findings reflect themes across the groups. Distinctions are noted as appropriate. This summary is preliminary, and deeper analysis and juxtaposition against the tween research for a more comprehensive picture will be further developed after the tween research is complete.

Spectrum of Engagement

Our recruit profile called for highly arts engaged teens; the intent was to gain insights from the young people whose engagement we were trying to replicate. Because of numerous challenges in the recruit, teens represented a spectrum of arts engagement, with varying levels of passion, commitment to practice and pursuit, and relevance to core personal identity. As a group, the students at New Urban Arts (NUA) in Providence were

most engaged, exuding enthusiasm, physical energy and a passion and commitment to artistic practice. It is not surprising that this group would place farthest out on the spectrum; NUA is a visual arts organization focused on artistic exploration and expression. The local YMCA refers teens that are interested in exploring the arts to NUA and NUA, in return, refers teens that are interested in non-arts leadership programming to the YMCA. In addition, about half the teenagers we spoke with at the Dorchester YMCA were passionate about artistic pursuits, primarily dance and some poetry, and were effusive in their commentary around the role of arts in their lives. As with the NUA partnership, these teens are affiliated with YMCA non-arts activities (such as mentoring and leadership programs) and they engage in the arts through a dance company that uses YMCA facilities as practice space.

In contrast, the teenagers from the Providence Boys & Girls Club were least engaged in formal artistic practice and overall, appeared to be less artistically engaged or aware of artistic activity in their daily lives. Of the 16 boys and girls we spoke with, in single-gender groups, more than half of them either rated the role of arts in their lives as 5 or below on a 10-point scale, or did not articulate that artistic activity was important in their lives. While the boys did not point to artistic activities as key “free time” activities, a number of the girls did.

The teens at the Boys & Girls Club in Boston (West End House) were in the middle. These teens had a fairly high level of arts engagement (cited by many as one of their key “free time” activities) at a low level of time commitment (few felt that their art form represented a central activity, deep passion or long term committed pursuit.) In a word, they were dabblers. This club had newly renovated space with dedicated rooms for visual arts, musical instruction (including working with instruments) and freestyle practice, and a teen lounge. Programs here were developed in partnership with the Music & Youth Initiative, and the energy and variety of programs seemed to be stimulating interest and experimentation with new arts experiences.

Personal Identity and Role of Art

We probed the teens’ views of themselves, using both direct and indirect methods, listening for attributes, terms and language that indicated the degree to which they perceived themselves as artists and/or creative beings, and the role that art plays in their lives.

Typical of adolescents, social appeal, or being the kind of person who attracts others, was a strong and recurring theme in how teens self-identified. Across the groups, teens used words like “fun,” “funny,” “crazy,” “outgoing,” “friendly,” “energetic” and “awesome” to describe the way others perceive them or the way in which they perceive themselves.

The other consistent sphere of self-characterization was around being distinctive. There was very little suggestion that they *wanted* to “fit in”; instead teens indicated they were or were seen to be “weird” (many saying they meant this in a positive way), “unique,” “original,” “independent,” “unorthodox,” and “me.” Some made up words to emphasize their uniqueness, creativity and ability to go outside the lines. The level of intentionality around their self-characterization seemed to correlate with the degree of creative passion.

For teens that were most engaged in the arts (not the dabblers), self-identification or personal image descriptions often included words like “creative,” “talented” and “artistic.” These young people talked about art as an essential part of their lives, and cited artistic pursuit or development and practice of creative expression as core to their personal identity.

Across the groups, teens described artistic or creative people as “expressive,” “unafraid,” “imaginative,” “open minded,” and “original” and spoke of a belief that risking judgment and failure is an integral part of the choices that artistic people make, particularly around creating art.

The tenor teens used when characterizing themselves as distinctive and unique was similar to how they described an artistic person, and this was true even for teens that did not perceive themselves as artistic. This observation suggests further exploration as it might present an opportunity to bridge a perceptual gap for adolescents less likely to explore an art form because they do not identify themselves as artistic.

The heavily arts-engaged and committed teens from New Urban Arts reinforced the view of teens across groups that for them, risk-taking is a big part of creating art¹, an insight that is often discussed by experts in the field, as with Shirley Brice Heath's *ArtShow*. The teens discussed the often "unknown destination" of their work, saying things like "you never know what you're going to end up with" and "you try, and try, and try." When talking about the way he felt when dancing, one young man from the Dorchester YMCA group said, "Being fearless is the most amazing thing you can ever be in the world. You're more powerful than anybody else."

The context and language around teens' descriptions of themselves, and the concepts of uniqueness, distinction and creative expression, suggested social evolution of the "outcast" role. Regardless of the extent of arts engagement, and whether they themselves were passive or active, there appeared to be an appreciation of distinctive self-expression, a celebration of non-conformity and a stand for "be who you are." It was interesting to hear teens speak of "weirdness" as a distinctly positive attribute, possibly indicating a growing social currency to "being different." This may be influenced by the specific bias in the degree of arts engagement or peership that characterized the groups, or may be a more meaningful social evolution influenced by an increasing awareness and accessibility of the arts on television. Shows like *Glee*, *Smash*, *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Project Runway* all celebrate creativity and quirkiness as positive attributes, as well as keys to success. It is important to note here that we did not hear this explicitly, nor did we probe the role of television and relationship to view on artistic pursuits with teens, but it may be something we explore in tween research.

For almost all the teens we spoke with, arts participation held some element of escape, whether they were passionately engaged from a producer standpoint (creating something for presentation to an audience), from an engaged but minimally committed standpoint (dabbling) or from a more passive engagement standpoint (appreciating another's creative product). Regardless of where on the engagement spectrum they were, from viewing artistic engagement as an extension of themselves, to thinking of it as a hobby, to passive appreciation (e.g. listening to music as their key free time activity), all teens associated artistic activity as a valued means of "checking out" of their regular routine and day-to-day pressures. Their respective "doses" of the arts represented escape or freedom from a world characterized by social and academic pressures, and this was particularly keen for college-bound high school juniors and seniors, and for teens that indicated tension in family or home situations. This is not an insight per se; the arts, and specifically music, is widely acknowledged for and tied to these benefits. A number of KOLs identify an increasingly scheduled, priority-driven and stressful life as one of the ways in which the lives of teenagers are different today than that of previous generations, and it may be worth exploring the added value of arts within the context of this new framework.

We observed that for the less engaged, the arts was seen as a means to "break" from their routine or priorities (college prep, academic life, job, chores, family) and tension. For these teens, arts participation was more passive and social (having better dance moves to be the life of the party and the social benefits of such a position). For the more heavily arts-engaged, creative pursuits represented both a means *and* an end. In addition to the social benefits, a lot of value was placed on the development of camaraderie with artistic peers, and on the creative output itself; the end product or creative piece (whether of a performance, visual or verbal nature) was a manifestation of self-expression.

¹ We know that any form of self-expression carries a disproportionate sense of risk for teenagers, and this is not unique to self-expression through art, but this was emphasized by these teens within the context of conversation around art.

While not appearing to be a driver of engagement, teens said they experienced a surprising and satisfying encounter with previously unrecognized talents, perceived limits on artistic abilities, and interest in either art as a whole, or a specific discipline. As a general consumer principle, satisfaction drivers tend to lead to greater consumption, and as applied to arts engagement, may result in a deeper commitment to a single practice area or to experimentation with other disciplines.

Most of the teens in the groups were from economically disadvantaged homes and neighborhoods, and the context within which they live is distinctive. Although all teens face decisions that advance or detract from a path of personal success, these teens indicated a constancy and severity of negative influences.

The discussions illuminated three key contextual distinctions:

- 1) They perceive the crossroads keenly and on a daily basis
- 2) They are surrounded by myriad and constant negative influences at a peer level
- 3) They perceive the consequences of “the wrong choices” to be dire—keenly aware of what teens see as models of “failure” (surrounding adults who did not make “the right” choices and have not gained what teens see as successful outcomes)

These contextual observations are important because it would be easy to ascribe arts engagement to the myriad creative or academic benefits alone. But the reality is that for many young people, arts participation is one of the many OST activities that attracts and keeps them in a safe haven with positive role models and heightens the likelihood of a positive choice when they inevitably encounter those crossroads. The teens we spoke with make these choices with intention, although our sample would naturally bias toward teens making positive choices as compared with the general population. It will be interesting to explore whether tweens are equally aware of similar crossroads, or whether this is a driver for their parents and caregivers.

There is an inherent bias derived from speaking with teenagers who have made a voluntary decision to be a part of the Boys & Girls Club and YMCA communities and who have access to caring, supportive adults, mentors and role models who help in the process of making the necessary distinctions at a crossroads moment. This insight by itself cannot be considered a directional learning and projectable to the larger population we are trying to engage, but it does provide useful area to further probe in the tween research.

Genesis of Creative Practice/Expression

Across the groups, three sets of influencers emerged clearly, each of which was identified as the genesis of engagement in an artistic practice: family, the B&GC/YMCA and friends.

For teens that were engaged (generally in dance and vocal) at a young age and consistently over time, there was a correlation with having been introduced and encouraged by close family members or church (specific to vocal). This is in line with a commonly held belief that family, church (where applicable) and/or ethnic culture play an influential role with children, at a young age, in engaging them in an art form which develops for some (we don't have a line of sight as to the proportion) into a more lasting commitment.

For teens that were introduced to an art form and became engaged later on, in adolescence, we saw a correlation with exposure at the YMCA or Boys & Girls Club. This is not an insight per se, but rather a reinforcement of our belief that the role of a youth-serving organization with a range of quality arts programs is a potent one. The majority of the teens in this latter category were in the groups conducted at the Boys & Girls Club in Boston (West End House). The value of a variety of programs, visibly (“looked nice”) and audibly accessible (“sounded nice”), and an encouraging staff was evident in the stories shared by these teens as to how they came to experiment with various and/or their chosen art form. One young lady talked about getting hooked from the sound of a drum: “I'd come in and see some kids banging on the drums. Two years ago, I asked (the instructor) about it and he started teaching me. I liked the noise and how it looked.” A new

dabbler at West End House said: “I heard Brianna playing on the piano and it sounded really nice and I wanted to try it out. It’s fun. I’ll probably come every two weeks and see. I wanted to try it out.”

For teens in our groups, we did hear of friends as an influence or introducer, but the role tended to be indirect. Some teens cited friends as having introduced them to the YMCA or B&GC, not the arts activity itself. Through their participation in YMCA or Club activities and relationships with mentors, they became engaged with the arts.

Sustaining Creative Practice

Across groups, teens indicated that the engaging qualities, or “hooks,” that resulted in an initial commitment and compelled continued engagement were both social and skill-oriented in nature.

The social benefits of meeting new people, collaborating (when applicable) with like-minded peers as well as talented and interested instructors, and having fun were perceived as major factors in maintaining interest. We noted that for teens that had been very active and engaged for some duration, engagement waned when the social dynamic changed (older kids leaving program) and “I was in that class by myself. There was other people but I didn’t know them.”

Some teens indicated that once interest and engagement had been established, the desire to become better at the practice was a compelling factor in sustaining or increasing the level of commitment. For a number of them, competition seemed to be a compelling construct within which to apply themselves to the discipline of skill development and producing work. Although somewhat counter-intuitive, competition was seen to be inherently social and collaborative, and motivation toward “the win” created focus and determination. Indirectly, teens indicated that not achieving “the win” served to increase motivation toward the next competition. This was a fairly consistent theme, but sentiment was strong at the West End House where “Club Idol” was cited often as one such competition that engaged teens in a popular social and skill-building way.

As with so many other pursuits, adolescents are encouraged by positive feedback and reinforcement. With only a few exceptions, teens cited a close family member (often, a mother or older sister) who supported them most emotionally and this generally included the support of their artistic pursuit. For all teens, mentors at the B&GC and YMCA were a significant source of support and were noted for the consistent, empathic encouragement and support they offered. For those who did not have a strong emotional support base at home, B&GC and YMCA mentors were especially important. “Non-judgmental” was a strong and recurrent term and was seen to be a critical characteristic of a mentor, instructor or other staff member.

Teens indicated that having support was key to their continued engagement with, and enjoyment of, the art form. Teens who did not point to a strong emotional catalytic event but who nonetheless tried an artistic activity stated the important role of an encouraging and affirming adult in sustaining their participation, which for these teens led to enjoyment and appreciation, even if not passionate pursuit. One young lady said, “I tried it. People liked it. Teachers told me I was good at it,” and another laughingly told of her dabbling with splatter painting a few years earlier saying “Everyone thought my work was so amazing. I can’t believe they convinced me I was so great. I thought I was going to be the next Picasso.” We didn’t get into how she discovered she was not on Picasso’s track, but this teenager went on to experiment with photography and is still involved in activities at New Urban Arts. Yet another said she began singing when the music room at the West End House was established: “I never thought I could sing, but they asked me to. After that I was always there” but then a waning social dynamic and fun competition exerted opposing influences on her as “people grew up and left. After that, it was weird and I didn’t go anymore. But I still sing in Club Idol.”

Instructors’ skill set was an influencing factor in their participation, and was a critical component of an arts program for these young people. One young man talked about his first encounter with the guitar in a school

environment and “we just held the guitar on our laps, and then I went (to the Boys & Girls Club) and really learned to play the guitar”. Others said, “They have to be experienced in the class they’re teaching. You want a teacher that knows what they’re talking about” and “You want to know that they did that, that they’ve been where you want to be, that they can get you there.” Many KOLs insist that using professional accomplished artists is essential. While few of these teens had enough experience for a comparative analysis, their comments indicate a strong affinity for arts-accomplished instructors versus those who are friendly, approachable or relatable instructors alone.

Barriers to Engagement

Based on our literature review and KOL discussions, we believe that barriers to engagement for young people are likely to fall into one or more of the following categories.

1. *Functional* (cost, transportation, existence of programs, curfews)
2. *Emotional* (lack of interest in the arts, interest in the arts not valued by family or peer groups, perceived lack of talent or self-consciousness, discomfort with public display)
3. *Competitive*, which represents the opportunity cost of committing to the pursuit of an art form (job, school, college prep, other uses for free time)

Our discussions took place with teens that were, for the most part, more arts-engaged than their average peers, and it is more likely that they either overcame barriers or simply did not have them in great abundance. When barriers to additional participation were noted, they usually fell into the third category: *Competitive*. This makes sense because typically, the YMCA/B&GC arts-engaged teen is more likely to have already overcome *Functional* and *Emotional* barriers. The remaining obstacles to higher engagement in the arts constituted competition from other activities.

Less arts-engaged teens seemed to face more Emotional barriers. These teens were more reserved when speaking of arts engagement. One young man in Providence rated the role of art in his life as a 10 on a 10-point scale (music was very important to him) but went on to say “I don’t have an artistic bone in my body.” A young lady in Boston offered, “My mom tries to make me sign up for different things. She brings home flyers. I just don’t go for it. I’m too shy. It takes a while. Of course I’d like to [overcome it.]” An 18-year old in Providence quietly told the story of seeing ballet in the context of a teen show and believing it was “so pretty and elegant” and really wanting to take a ballet class, but being emotionally restrained by family members who said “People [around here] don’t do that. We do hip hop.” She finally worked up the nerve to ask her mom to sign her up, and having affirmed after several “are you sure?” requests, she bore the physical and emotional brunt of taking her first ballet class as a teenager, and of being “the only minority in the class”. She said “I couldn’t do anything those girls were doing. I was scared. [They were wondering] ‘What is she doing here?’ ...But I tried it and stuck to it.” She smiled and said softly, “And now I can [dance just like they can].”

Looking ahead to the tween research, it may be useful to explore what gets in the way of greater participation for those tweens who are less engaged but would like to be more so, and in developing an understanding of what programs can do to mitigate barriers in all three categories.

Next Steps

The Next Level SMG team will confer with Fluent Research this week to identify the practical and substantive implication for the tween research currently scheduled to be in market from mid-April to mid-May.

Subsequent to that meeting, we will distribute a detailed outline of the research plan and details, as well as the screener and hypotheses in development that will shape the discussion guide for the tween groups.