



SPARKING CHANGE:

Assessing the Impact of Performing Arts Education in the Lives of Young Children



WolfBrown helps funders, nonprofit institutions and public agencies understand their potential, set priorities, and fulfill their promise.



New Victory brings the whole world to New York City through adventurous performing arts so that New York families and communities can connect to new cultures, ideas, and ways of thinking. The theater is part of New 42 where the mission is to make extraordinary performing arts a vital part of everyone's life from the earliest years onwards.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation for their generous support in realizing this research. We would also like the staff and students of participating in New Victory Theater's SPARK (Schools with the Performing Arts Reach Kids) programs for their contributions and dedication to the fields of live performance.



INTRODUCTION

Why does performing arts education matter?

It is hard to imagine anything more important than understanding yourself and others. This skill, often called social emotional skills, can be cultivated and activated through thoughtful and imaginative reflection and activities.

There is growing evidence that the performing arts offer children the chance to develop those skills. Unfortunately, access to and participation in the performing arts is uneven in the United States. For example, though children may experience drama as part of other classes, only 45% of secondary schools in the U.S. offer theater education.¹ This percent is even lower for children growing up in under-resourced communities. One way we can begin to change this is to offer powerful demonstrations of the impact of performing arts education – especially for children who could benefit the most.

To help expand access and ensure more students experience the benefits of performing arts education, **New 42's New Victory Theater** launched the **SPARK** (Schools with the Performing Arts Reach Kids) program.

Over the course of three years, our team alongside the New Victory team studied the impact of live performances and arts programming for all students involved in the program.

OUR STUDY

To assess the impact of live performances and performing arts education on children, nine schools participated in the SPARK program between 2015 and 2019.

When selecting partner schools, New Victory prioritized schools that:

- did not have a formal arts education program prior to their partnership,
- received high levels of Title I funding (75%+), and
- served economically disadvantaged populations.

What is New Victory's Schools with the Performing Arts Reach Kids (SPARK) program?

SPARK is a multi-year commitment to infuse arts-deprived school communities – schools with no arts teachers, arts programming, and for which at least 90% of its students receive free or reduced lunch – with live performing arts and arts education.

By leveraging New Victory's existing school engagement programs (e.g., live performances by international arts companies, a highly trained ensemble of Teaching Artists, smartly designed classroom curricula, etc.), the program embeds performing arts in SPARK schools through teacher professional development, classroom workshops, and invaluable resources.

Over a 3-year period, participating students saw 9 live performances, engaged in 45 performing arts workshops, and increased their creative skills in circus, puppetry, theater, dance, and more.

¹ Parsad, B., & Spiegelman, M. (2012). Arts education in public elementary and secondary schools: 1999-2000 and 2009-10 (No. NCES 2012-014). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.



In order to collect a rich array of information about the impact of the program, WolfBrown researchers worked closely with a team of teaching artists to collect the data for the evaluation. This gave us eyes and ears on the ground and insights from trusted partners to young people and teachers. At the same time, researchers were also trained by the artists, strengthening and flexing our interview and observation skills.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Theater is about witnessing the interactions between characters, following how characters encounter challenges and change, and stepping outside the limits of the here and now.

Based on these fundamental qualities, we wanted to know what would happen if an innovative theater company partnered over a three-year period with the children and teachers in public elementary schools that had long been without arts programs. In that spirit, we wanted to know if engaging and sustained theater residencies could have a measurable impact on young peoples':

- Sense of belonging in a theater world,
- Social emotional skills,
- Sense of themselves as capable learners, and
- Belief that they have a positive future.

METHODS

We worked longitudinally with students in grades 3-5 and 6-8. This three-year span allowed our teams to research the impact of continued access to performing arts education. To ensure the creditability of our findings, we followed both treatment and control groups, allowing us to make sure that any observed changes were the result of children's participation in SPARK.

MEASURES

To investigate these questions, we collected a wide array of quantitative and qualitative information that combined well-established research tools and exploratory artistic activities and student reflections designed to help us understand what might be driving the changes we observed:

Measure Type	Frequency	Treatment	Control
Social-Emotional Learning Survey	2x annually (Fall and Spring)	Yes	Yes
Post-Show Survey <i>(investigating students' immediate reactions to the performance)</i>	3x annually (after each performance)	Yes	Yes
Artistic Performance Tasks <i>(improvisation, storytelling, reflective interviews, etc.)</i>	2x annually (Fall and Spring) <i>Subsample focused on 15 treatment students.</i>	Yes	No



OUR FINDINGS

How does performing arts education matter?

In many ways, our study provided substantial support for what so many of us feel in our bones: access to and engagement with the performing arts impacts young audiences. For example:

INTEREST IN THE PERFORMING ARTS: When compared with their peers who did not participate in the program, **SPARK students expressed a 20% greater interest in the performing arts.** They see themselves as welcome participants.

TEAMWORK & COLLABORATION: When we asked students which of their classmates they would include in their own theater company, **SPARK students had a 55% larger team size than their peers** who were not in the program, showing an interest and appreciation for how collaboration is linked to success.

CREATIVE THINKING: After three years of completing improvisation exercises through the classroom programming, **SPARK students showed a 50% increase in improvisation skills,** embracing their abilities to take positive risks and to think on their feet.

FUTURE ORIENTATION: When we asked students about their aspirations for their futures (e.g., graduating high school, getting a good report card, etc.), **SPARK students' future orientation scores increased 10% in one year's time.** During that same period, their peers' scores *decreased* by 5%. This is a promising result as it highlights the ways in which arts education and in-depth arts programming can ignite hope for what comes next.



OTHER IMPACTS OF THE WORK

For New Victory Theater:

This project was an opportunity for an already quite successful performing arts presenter to build its capacity as a reflective and inquiring organization. In this process, New Victory:

- Received five years of funding to support the program and its evaluation in New York City schools.
- Received an additional year of funding to research, document, and disseminate the work.
- Created expanded roles for its teaching artists as thinkers, observers, and authors (see the references below).
- Took on an active role in sharing the work and its implications for the field at conferences and professional meetings as varied as Theater for Young Audience national conference and the World Alliance for Arts Education.
- Has appeared in numerous publications (see the references below).

For WolfBrown:

This work was an opportunity to for us to invent and imagine as evaluators. More specifically,

- We combined our outside researcher perspective with the insider perspective of New Victory teaching artists. In the process, we apprenticed in the performing arts, learning how to use activities like warm-ups and improvisation to infuse a research study with surprise and delight.
- The mixed methods study was an opportunity to pilot several new research tools that draw on the performing arts, such as improvisation and storytelling. Through these tools we earned deeper insights into the skills and attitudes that may underlie the changes we observed. For example, participating children showed increased ability to grasp the inner life of others and to invent new scenarios – capacities that may fuel their investment in collaboration and their capacity to imagine a future that contains many possibilities.

Photo Credit: New Victory Theater





Photo Credit: New Victory Theater



IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

What comes next?

At the broadest level, our findings are a call to action.

As children return to school after the trauma and loss of COVID-19, we should be using the performing arts and performing arts education to support and enhance students' well-being. To do this, we must form new partnerships on behalf of theater: for instance, how do performing arts organizations partner with school counsellors?

Additionally, theaters, large and small, must go beyond hosting school assembly performances and offering reduced-price tickets to supporting substantive educational programs that can have profound effects.

Finally, we need to get out of our echo chambers to tell these stories of impact. We need to share findings from this project (along with those from other projects) in innovative and effective ways: billboards, bus shelters, and grocery stores – whatever it takes to break through.



FURTHER LEARNING

Publications:

To learn more about this specific partnership and research, consider reading:

Holochwost, Steven J., Thalia R. Goldstein and Dennie Palmer Wolf, “Delineating the Benefits of Arts Education for Children’s Socioemotional Development,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13 May 2021. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.624712/full>.

Holochwost, S. J. (2017, May 8). The Impact of Re-thinking Research and Practice. New Victory Theater. <https://newvictory.org/stories/the-impact-of-re-thinking-research-and-practice/>

New Victory Theater. (2021). *SPARK Change: Investing in performing arts education for all*. <https://newvictory.org/about/research/impact-of-performing-arts-on-kids/>.

Roach, J. (2017, May 23). The Impact of Investing in Human Capital. New Victory Theater. <https://newvictory.org/stories/the-impact-of-investing-in-human-capital/>

Weber, B. (2018, September 23). A Day in the Life of a Research Teaching Artist. New Victory Theater. <https://newvictory.org/stories/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-research-teaching-artist/>

Additional Sources:

To learn more about WolfBrown, go to www.wolfbrown.com.

To learn more about the New Victory, go to: <https://newvictory.org>.



Photo Credit: New Victory Theater