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Learning Together—Exploring a Nonprofit-Museum-Preschool-Family Partnership Model

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Voices From the Field

Editor’s Note: We know that the American educational landscape is marked by inequalities between children from low- and high-income households, including access to in- and out-of-school time learning opportunities. We also know that there are some targeted interventions and approaches that can lessen this opportunity gap, including anywhere, anytime learning activities that are integrated into and build upon what happens during the school day.^{1,2}

Cool Culture, an organization that helps more than 50,000 families from income-eligible households enjoy free access to 90 of New York City’s cultural institutions, has created a variety of activities and programs to help eliminate the barriers to achieving learning and literacy gains in early childhood. The Cool Culture approach as a whole, along with that of the Literacy Through Culture (LTC) program that is described in this article, demonstrates how an organization can provide rich learning opportunities for young children from low-income households; increase families’ enthusiasm and appreciation for learning that happens in a variety of contexts; and build strong parent–child interactions around fun learning activities.

Cultural institutions provide families and their children with opportunities to learn together, jointly participate in novel experiences (e.g., seeing a 1,300-pound helicopter hanging from the ceiling at the Museum of Modern Art), and gain new knowledge (e.g., learning at the New York Botanical Garden how to plant a seed). These moments of shared inquiry and discovery can also turn into moments of surprise for families when they encounter unexpected instances that reveal how their children are taking in the world. As families reflect on their recent visit to a museum, garden, zoo, or monument, for example, we often hear them say, “I didn’t know my child could do this at this age,” or “I didn’t know my child would be interested in this,” or “I didn’t know my child had so many ideas to share and questions to ask.” Through Cool Culture’s Literacy Through Culture (LTC) program—a New York City–based effort designed to increase museum visitation and empower families to make visual inquiry a part of their children’s learning experiences early on—we build in lots of opportunities for this joint learning to happen.

Sedric: My favorite part [about LTC] is when we get an assignment. We have to go see a statue or we have to sit down in front of a piece of art. We have to look at it. I have all these questions to ask my son and I have to

PARENT’S PERSPECTIVE

We are pleased to introduce Sedric Choukroun, the father of a four-year-old son who is in the Literacy Through Culture (LTC) classroom at Dorothy Day Early Childhood Center. Sedric was drawn to Dorothy Day because of its focus on the arts. Reflecting on his first tour of the Center, he told us, “When I stepped into Dorothy Day, I saw all the arts that the children had made and there was really a lot of it. I just remember feeling that art being so present in the school will definitely stimulate my son’s imagination...it will definitely make the place an attractive place and make the place more alive and joyful and that he would be happy to go there and be there. I had seen a

write his answers down. We are partnering. It's a process of witnessing him focusing and then me trying to ask the questions the right way, to try to help him but at the same time not influence him. And the things he comes up with are always a lot of fun.

lot of other preschools...and there was nothing like it." **Look for Sedric's comments throughout in dark green.**

LTC is a collaborative initiative that involves museum educators and teaching artists from six cultural institutions across the city. Each is partnered for the school year with a teacher, an assistant teacher, a family liaison, families, and children from a classroom in one of six early childhood centers in Harlem. Staff members from Cool Culture and Bank Street College of Education organize, support, and facilitate the pairs. In addition to receiving unlimited access to their partnered cultural institution, families from each classroom receive a Cool Culture Family Pass, which provides free general admission to 90 cultural institutions in New York City anytime the institutions are open to the general public. Annually, LTC serves 125 children and their families.

Sedric: The Cool Culture card is amazing. I always have it with me. We can decide at any time to go into any museum or park in the city—and they are all over the city.

The yearlong work of each cultural institution—preschool pairing is focused on a theme or essential question. One pairing, for example, involves the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and a classroom of four-year-olds at the Dorothy Day Early Childhood Center. The essential question that guides their partnership is: How does an artist create? Children, families, and museum and early childhood center staff carefully look at the everyday objects that artists use.

Sedric: The partnering with MoMA has been great. Modern art is somehow maybe more accessible to young kids. It really talks to the kids in a very direct way. Maybe that's because it uses familiar material. I'm thinking about how lots of artists use recycled things or things from the street. Kids can identify with it.

Each cultural institution—early childhood center pairing works to answer their essential question, whether it's about how artists create using everyday objects or how to foster and respect the environment by observing the world around us, in a variety of ways. They answer their question through:

- Parent workshops that give families an opportunity to meet with their peers and early childhood center and museum staff, engage in a conversation about a piece of art, reflect on how it felt to be a learner, and discuss how their children might benefit from similar experiences.
- Family probes like, "Identify an object from your home that is important to you and bring it in to the classroom to share."
- Journal prompts such as, "Pick one color from Alma Thomas's *Space* painting. Find five objects in your home that match that color, and name them out loud together. Make a list of the objects in your journal," which is sent home with families.
- Facilitated museum visits, which provide an opportunity for museum educators to model curiosity and question asking—the habits of lifelong learners—for families, and for families to model these behaviors for their children.
- Museum-designed activities that ask families to complete activities such as: walk through the museum, pick out a piece of art that they would take home with them if they could, and think about where they would display it.



As museum staff, educators, and families engage in these activities, we hope to see many different but connected results. We want museums to increase their capacity to collaborate with community partners to create accessible, relevant, and age-appropriate programming for new family audiences. We want to demystify what the museum visit is and can be for families. We want families and children to have an increased comfort level in visiting cultural institutions, for both enjoyment and development. We want to positively affect the communication and interactions that happen between families and their young children. We want families to understand that open-ended inquiry can lead to children discovering things about their caregivers and caregivers discovering things about their children. We want parents to say things like, "Before this program, I didn't understand that looking at art would help my child with her language development and increase her confidence." We want children to use what they learn from engaging with art to engage with the larger world

around them.

Sedric: [My son] now has an amazing ability to focus that he didn't have in the beginning [of the LTC program]. And I really clearly saw how it evolved. It went from the very first time when we went to the museum where he wasn't really interested; he didn't want to focus and he didn't want to answer the question. Now, it's a natural thing to him. He has a critical, visual inquiry thing and it's not only in the museum. I also saw that [the LTC program] keeps the kids curious and it makes them want to always discover things and always keep that excitement of discovering new things. It makes them more of out-of-the-box thinkers.

We're looking forward to the program's eighth year, which will bring greater opportunities for family leadership through the introduction of a parent ambassador training and peer-to-peer outreach program currently piloted by Cool Culture in another community.



¹ Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (2014). *Restoring opportunity: The crisis of inequality and the challenge for American education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press

² Friedman, L. (2014). What's Lucy reading? [Web log]. Retrieved from <http://expandedschools.org/blog/whats-lucy-reading-10#sthash.w9uciKQJ.HDz4Ndeq.dpbs>

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