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The Transformative Power of Youth Action Coalition's Multimodal Arts-for-Change Programming

K.C. Nat Turner, nturner@educ.umass.edu

Kate Way

Robin R.R. Gray

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Abstract

This article analyzes the potential of a series of Youth Action Coalition's (YAC) Arts-for-Change (AfC) youth programs for literacy and identity development, as well as for engaging youth in addressing issues of social justice. Drawing primarily on transcripts of interviews, surveys, and participant-observation fieldnotes inventorying changes in youth participants, the article identifies specific learning the participants ascribe to the AfC youth programming, including the development of critical multiliteracies, increased self-confidence and identities as leaders, as well as greater engagement with issues of social justice at the local, national and international level. The authors describe the aspects of curriculum and pedagogy common across the AfC programs and analyze the specific contribution of multimodal arts production to the benefits that participants identify from the AfC programs. This article draws on Cope and Kalantzis (2006) concepts of available designs, designing, and redesigning, to explain how the AfC youth are transformed through their involvement in YAC's Arts-for-Change programming.

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Introduction

*Video Vanguard*s has taught me to be critical in a way...I think more as a director or like a cameraperson, like when watching movies or when I'm walking down the street or thinking about things. I don't know. I think about things...more critically (Noel¹, 11th grade female).

The AfC programming in which Noel, quoted above, participates is part of Youth Action Coalition (YAC), a non-profit youth advocacy organization located in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts. YAC specializes in unique programming that combines immersion in the arts, social justice education, and activism, and builds on a tradition of community and youth organizing that seeks to transform individuals, communities and institutions through building knowledge, relationships and ultimately power. AfC programs reach out particularly to middle and high school-aged youth who are “marginalized due to their experiences with race, class, gender and sexual orientation oppression, as well as allies who face other forms of marginalization and actively want to work with a diverse group of youth for a common cause” (Youth Action Coalition, n.d.).

The core of YAC are the organizations' central to Arts-for-Change (AfC) programs—Video Vanguard, Girls' Eye View, Get Up Get Down—each of which is described in detail below.

Unlike many youth organizations that claim to be youth-centered, YAC is truly a youth empowerment organization. YAC expects youth input and ownership in all of the realms of the organization, from the make-up of the Board of Directors, which according to the bylaws requires 50% youth membership—including a youth co-chair—to the development of AfC curriculum and strategic planning at annual retreats. YAC has developed a strong network of peer leaders and paid youth interns who are continually involved in documenting and evaluating the programs and planning for their futures.

Noel's opening quote communicates well the value and emphasis placed in all AfC programs on bringing a critical analytic lens to both the art and media they view, as well as to their own productions. This article aims to delineate these and other key components of the most effective curricular and pedagogical strategies used. Specifically, this study analyzes and evaluates the ways in which AfC programming leads to the development in participants of increased self-confidence and a sense of leadership, multiliteracy development, as well as greater critical engagement with the community and issues of social justice.

Core Arts-for-Change (AfC) Programs

This article represents the culmination of a year-long study of the AfC programming during the 2009-2010 academic year, during which time YAC ran two 15-week sessions of the three AfC programs. The three programs were: Girls' Eye View (GEV), run in the Massachusetts towns of Amherst and Ware, as well as Get Up Get Down (GUGD) and Video Vanguard (VV), both run in Amherst. YAC's Arts-for-Change programs served 50-60 young people in the 2009-2010 academic year, with each program meeting twice per week for 2-3 hours each day, with additional time made available to youth in open lab hours. Each of the AfC programs were

composed of groups from 8-15 youth members with one staff and 2-5 interns. All AfC youth also met collectively each week for a series of readings and performances, in a project titled *Education for Liberation*, which was designed to deepen their knowledge of and engagement with social justice issues. During the fall session, *Education for Liberation* was put on in collaboration with Food for Thought Books, a progressive, local book store.

Girls Eye View (GEV).

Girls Eye View works with predominately White young women in grades 7 and 8. Youth learn to use the tools of photography and creative writing to explore issues of growing up female, and share their work through public exhibitions and by selling their photographs. The Amherst GEV teaches the traditional form of black-and-white film photography and darkroom techniques, while the Ware GEV uses digital cameras and computer-based editing tools. Since 1997, GEV crews have hosted over 40 public exhibits in each community.

Get Up Get Down (GUGD).

Get Up Get Down participants are predominately co-ed White high school-aged youth, but also include students of color. They explore the intersections between public art and community engagement. Since 2000, members have created large-scale public murals, puppet theatre performances, and sculptural installations that speak to the community about their response to social issues such as 9-11, Hurricane Katrina, environmental issues, and consumerism. The group is also in the second year of an intensive exploration in “fire arts”—metal work, blacksmithing, and glass work—elements of which become part of their public exhibitions and performances.

Video Vanguard (VV).

Video Vanguards participants are majority youth of color and allies, ages 12-18, many of whom have been marginalized due to their experiences with race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. The group focuses on the production of high-end video skills, and, as YAC’s website explains, engages “in deep dialogue and training to create socially-conscious pieces that address issues that are overlooked by the mainstream media” (Youth Action Coalition, n.d.). YAC has noted an increase in the number of mixed-race and queer youth joining the Video Vanguards project seeking a space to unravel and understand their complex identities. Youth who join the project come in with the interest in and commitment to exploring these complex issues, learning how to forge alliances within a diverse group of youth and adults, and using their artwork as a vehicle to advocate for their views with the broader community.

Multimodal Arts Production as New 21st Century Literacies

Increasingly, rather than the more traditional view of literacy as the acquisition and mastery of a fixed set of skills—usually fluency with written text—many theorists are now defining literacy as something contextually created and multiple in forms. The “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) movement (Gee, 1991) first furthered the notion of literacy as a hybrid phenomenon, and one that is always socially and culturally constructed and positioned within relations of power (Street, 2003). Likewise, Mahiri (2004) defined literacy as a set of skills used to produce meaning from texts in a context. In this vein, a body of work has emerged on the notion of

“multiple” literacies—or multiliteracies—which can be seen as a logical extension of movements such as NLS and others that seek to rethink pedagogical approaches to literacy.

A pedagogy of multiliteracies centers on the concept of “design,” which according to literacy theorists and educational researchers Cope and Kalantzis (2006), has three main components: “available design,” in which “are the found discernible patterns and conventions of representation”; “designing,” through which learners make their own meaning from the available designs; and, finally, “the redesigned” in which “the world and the person are transformed,” and the newly designed becomes part of what is now available to others. Arts-for-Change (AfC) programming is particularly reflective of this concept of design given its focus on the use of multimodal media, and the cultivation of synesthesia, or the transfer and integration of learning processes in differing modes (Hull & Nelson, 2005).

Youth Action Coalition’s AfC logic-model goals are divided into four categories: Self-Empowerment and Strengthened Identity (I AM); Skill Development and Arts Learning (I CREATE); Commitment to Social Justice (I BELIEVE); and Community Building and Engagement (WE CONNECT). Cope and Kalantzis similarly suggest four major learning processes, or “pedagogical moves,” which they argue can serve as the basis for important reflection on the part of teachers and educational programmers. These four processes—experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying—can be mapped onto the Arts-for-Change program curricula, revealing the affordances of multimodal arts production in developing critical multiliteracies.

Critical Multiliteracies and Counternarratives

In addition to critical multiliteracies, much of what is cultivated by AfC programming is students’ development of a strong sense of identity and self-confidence, and their ability to envision their futures in a positive light. For historically marginalized youth, multimodal media production therefore can serve as a “counterhegemonic practice” (Sholle & Denski, 1993) that affirms their possible selves. The construct of possible selves developed as a critique of what was been seen as a neglect of temporal and future-oriented aspects of self-definition in psychological research (Markus & Nurius, 1984, 1986). This research has been picked up by scholars working with youth and adults in areas from cognitive development and school counseling (Carey & Martin, 2007), in studies of African-American Language, (Lanehart, 2008) and with critical multimodal literacies (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001).

AfC programs make for a particularly rich form of imagining and providing spaces for exploring different times and spaces, while also developing critical literacies and dispositions that will allow students to actualize new futures. Even with this research on the importance of how youth view their possible/future selves, relatively little has been written about forms of authorship using multimodal arts production that offer students opportunities to construct their future selves while developing critical media literacies. Many students are left performing their identities in ways contrary to how they imagine their ideal futures, and remain stuck on a time/imagination continuum centered on the past and the present. In addition, even if they are able to envision positive change, many students are unable to enact these visions of their future selves precisely as a result of the detriments of poor schooling. Thus, Arts-for-Change (AfC) is also examined

here as a site for the construction of counternarratives for marginalized youth to explore their future selves.

The development of community involvement and critical engagement with issues of social justice are also central to AfC programming. If we are to build on the scholarship which argues that literacy involves learning how to perceive social, political and economic injustices and take action (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1987; McLaren, 1988), the ability to produce counter-hegemonic multimodal media would seem to be a natural companion. In the 1990's, scholarship emerged dealing with the role of media in youth development (Buckingham, 2003; Willis, 1990). Goodman (2003), who worked with youth in New York City at the Educational Video Center, argued that in addition to the computer-based drill and kill exercises usually given to students of color in urban schools, “[students] need to be engaged in the study of the systemic roadblocks in their way—such as police brutality, unequal resources, substandard housing and so on—and what sort of collective action they might take to move those roadblocks aside” (p.3). Here Goodman suggests that students of color in urban schools be taught counter-hegemonic media production to articulate their own interests (e.g., reducing poverty, or promoting racial and social justice) instead of reflecting and behaving in the interests of multinational corporations whose interest in profits often run counter to their own (Stiglitz, 2002).

This suggestion essentially defines critical media literacy, that is, to teach students how to decipher, critique, change patterns of interaction and to produce media that reflects their own interests and concerns. An essential component to this kind of education is getting students directly involved with the issues relevant to them in their own communities. Contrary to the model of education currently being pushed by politicians and reformers—which seeks to hold students accountable for a narrowly defined set of standardized skills, many of which are far removed from the concerns of their actual lives—the social justice focus of AfC programming invites students to grapple with issues that have direct impact on their and their families’ lives. Further, through working with adults in the community—artists, activist, scholars, and others—YAC students are exposed to positive role models, and make connections and build relationships that open new opportunities for them in the future. More importantly, students are actively involved in the democratic process and in civic life, rather than having to wait until they are of voting age, or remaining disconnected from political life altogether, as so many young adults do.

Methodology and Findings

The research questions that guided this study were:

What are the specific aspects of AfC programming and curricula that:

- a. contributed to students’ development of a sense of identity, both of self, and others?
- b. contributed to the development of multiliteracies?
- c. fostered greater critical engagement with issues of social justice and connection to community?

In order to answer these questions, data collection occurred over a year-long period, through participant-observation fieldnotes, interviews and a year-end survey. Interviews related to students’ identity development, literacy development, sense of community engagement and the

content of students multimodal media productions. The survey asked questions related to students' perceptions of themselves (i.e. Identity Development) as well as students' levels of community engagement and awareness of issues of Social Justice. A total of 20 periods of instruction were documented (with a minimum of six visits to each of the three individual AfC programs that make up the YAC programming). Three researchers collected and coded the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, and then did a content analysis using open coding looking for both emergent themes, as well as confirming and disconfirming evidence of change in the three areas established by our research questions. In order to increase inter-rater reliability we meet regularly during the coding process to confirm that our coding was consistent.

Using this “grounded theory” approach we noticed that specific codes could be collapsed into more general or axial codes (Creswell, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example under one axial code, identity development and self-confidence, we included the following five categories of ways students developed a deeper sense of themselves and identity: 1. diversity, 2. leadership, 3. collaboration, social networks, peer mentoring, 4. future selves/college and career interests, and 5. personal history of marginal or high achieving academics. We also want to point out that each of the three main categories we chose to focus on in our research questions is inextricably intertwined with each of the others, and that in some ways the distinctions between them obscure these connections. We have separated them out in order to do a closer analysis of each, but attempt to draw the lines between them wherever possible.

Identity Development

A consistent finding in our data was that all of the YAC programs help students to develop confidence in themselves, socially, politically, and academically. We coded more than 110 instances in the interviews and fieldnotes under our axial code of identity development. Additionally, AfC youth were asked about YAC's impact on their sense of their own identities in both personal interviews with researchers and in a Likert scale survey inventory. Ranging from 5 (Very True) to 1 (Not at all True), the survey asked specific questions as to whether YAC had contributed to: their sense of intelligence; their academic achievement; their sense of being liked by others; their ability to contribute to a group; and their acceptance by community, school, friends, and family. Of the AfC youth across all programs that were surveyed, 85% felt it was Very True or True that YAC had impacted their sense of their own intelligence. The same held true in regard to their academic achievement, their likability to others, and their ability to contribute to a group, to which 80%-90% of AfC youth across all programs responded that those statements were Very True or True.

Interestingly, there were two deviations in this pattern. In the “Self-Esteem and Membership in a Group” section of the survey, only 60% of the participants in Girls Eye View (GEV) answered Very True or True when asked if they considered themselves high achievers. Similarly, when asked if they felt accepted for who they are in their school and community, only 50%-60% of participants in Video Vanguard (VV) could respond Very True or True. As researchers, we view these survey results as a reflection of the fact that the GEV and VV programs are specifically geared toward two populations of youth that are marginalized due to their experiences—in the case of GEV in Ware, MA in terms of class, gender, and rural isolation, and in the case of VV with race, class and sexual orientation. Both instances speak volumes for why

the continued existence and identity development work done with youth in the AfC programs GEV and VV are so critical. Our interpretation of these responses also bore out in many of the personal interviews that were conducted, several of which are referenced below.

Often, it was the act of sharing and presenting work on a regular basis that served to boost confidence in students. One GEV student, Aaliyah, described this in the following passage: “I have awful stage fright and a really quiet voice, and I stutter when I’m nervous, and all of those things make it really impossible to be a public speaker, but I’ve had to go on stage a couple times and give presentations and I’ve been getting better at it.” For other students, the source of greater self-confidence seemed to be a sense of knowing themselves better as a result of the collective nature of the work they engaged in for YAC. When asked about the impact Girls’ Eye View has had on her, Alice, a participant in the program, responded by explaining: “It’s kind of helped me to come out of my shell. I used to be really shy and couldn’t show anything to anybody and now I can kind of spread my messages because I have ideas but [before] I couldn’t really get them out.” A GUGD student, Kevin, explained that all the programs at YAC shared a “similar message”: “if you have the opportunity, you can pretty much achieve anything that you can think of... And you don’t really have a lot of the restrictions that you think you have when you’re growing up... or even when you get older.”

The self-confidence developed in students is, according to many of them, often connected to YAC’s emphasis on the specific applications of Arts-for-Change in the community. The activist focus of all the YAC programs encourages students to “go public” with their ideas and with their art, and students are greatly impacted by this interface with the “real world” and authentic audiences where they are able to see the importance of their work beyond school, both in the present and in their futures. John, a Get Up Get Down participant, reported in his interview that “the program gives you a little self-worth to know that you can be part of something, you can do something that’s really great that can affect people... I know how to handle myself and I’m less afraid of just leaving and being on my own because GUGD did teach you how to handle talking to people..., businesses, finding a job and just being mature in general.” This statement reflects much of what has been explored in future selves research, that students gain a concrete understanding of how to navigate the world, and thus have more confidence and ability to envision a future that includes further education and fulfilling work. Zaid, a senior member of Video Vanguard, perhaps explained how being able to compose multimodally was linked to the vision he has been able to craft for his future most concretely: “Video Vanguard helped me to further realize my dream of being a film director. I know what I specifically want to do after high school. It’s a part of my life goal. Learning that from VV has not only helped me learn artistically, but also helped start a career.”

Critical Multiliteracies Development

In addition to the essential development of self-confidence and a strong sense of identity and purpose, critical multiliteracies were found to be greatly developed in YAC programs. In contrast to a school-based academic curriculum, most of which strongly privilege standardized knowledge and verbal forms of expression, YAC programs serve to develop critical multimodal literacies through fluency in arts production through a variety of mediums. Perhaps most important, there is a strong critical literacy component to the YAC programming, and to literacy

development in particular, through which students are exposed to issues of structural and institutional power and asked to engage critically with them. The strong social justice bent, discussed further in the next section, also stems from this commitment to engaging students critically with the inequities in the world around them.

We coded more than 67 instances under the axial code of critical multiliteracies, which included a strong subcomponent of other multimodal and information communication technology literacies. Noel, a VV participant, explained the literacies she developed through learning video production in the following way: “You have to conceptualize what you want to talk about and you have to think about...how are you [are] going to show this to people? How are you going to make people understand what you’re thinking?” Further, Noel stated that ... “[the program] has taught me to be critical in a way, like, if I’m walking down the street and trying to figure out what I want to do for a movie, [I say] ‘Hey, that shot. If I just stood right here at the right moment, it would look really good.’” Noel is expressing both her consideration of perspective—how she will best be able to capture a subject in the way that she wants—and how what she sees will best be conveyed to her audience. These skills are quite similar to the cognitive process one must go through in the more traditional literacy of composing something in writing, and reflect the process of design and redesign described by Cope and Kalantzis. Later in the interview, Noel goes on to describe how her critical thinking has been developed by engaging in multimodal arts production: “...if I’m watching a movie and the plot of the movie is horrible it doesn’t make any sense, [I say], ‘This is a crap movie.’ I think more as a director or like a cameraperson...when watching movies.” Alexis further describes her ability to transfer both the skills she has developed and her passion for her work from the context of her YAC work to that of her regular academic work:

Well...going to Girl’s Eye View, I mean, we don’t do just strictly photography...we’ll talk about different issues and...different artistic principles that aren’t necessarily related to photography. We do a little bit of writing. All that stuff...gives you better frame of reference for your classes and things. And...it kind of it presents it in a way that’s not so like, structured. So you don’t have to like, habitually hate it.

This student identifies the less structured atmosphere as increasing her enjoyment of and engagement with the program, and she is able to contrast this to her day-to-day experience in a mainstream academic setting. Elaborating on this, she explains that the YAC environment works for her “because it’s not structured, and it prompts you to do things, and kind of educates you kind of sneakily, without you really knowing it, it kind of helped me develop my own style, I guess.” The literacies that emerge in this less formal academic atmosphere will be directly relevant to her work in the mainstream classroom.

Noel described the ways in which critical multiliteracies were developed through the careful consideration of structure, style, and audience in the AfC curriculum: “...a lot of people are like ‘When are we going to make movies?’ [But] it’s not just about that. You have to conceptualize what you want to talk about, and you have to think about [it] like, how are you going to show this to people? How are you going to make people understand what you’re thinking?” Alexis also echoed this same emphasis on form and style in the work she had engaged in: “I just

think...the best example of art that I made...was ah, that stayed true to its purpose and was able to serve its purpose, that it was done in an aesthetically pleasing way so that people would actually pay attention to it.” Alexis is considering her audience and how she can best craft her “text” to most effectively reach them, a literacy practice needed in effective communication across all genres (Hyland, 2004). It also, again, speaks directly to the sense of available design, design and redesign highlighted by Cope and Kalantzis. These students are calling on the components of their given art form and the skills they have mastered within each, carefully choosing how to assemble them in light of their message and their audience, and expressing a sense of personal transformation in the process.

In addition to the skills specific to each multimodal art form, another student, Kevin, describes the development of his organizational and interpersonal skills, both of which are essential in any academic environment or workplace:

I think that even with GUGD, y’know some of the underlying stuff, like organization, or sequencing—like how to turn off a welder accurately, properly, safely... even organization within the shop, like separating things that would go together or wouldn’t go together, whether it’s pieces of machinery, or chemical treatments, or people’s work. Any physical or mental organization in the shop...as well as an organization of peers...you need to be aware of your surroundings to stay safe, and to be as productive and efficient as possible.

This kind of creative skill development in students throughout the AfC programs is further evidenced by the video, metal sculptures, and photography exhibits they produce and murals they paint. Each of the students’ multimodal arts productions demonstrates both a strong command of the literacy practices needed within the medium, as well as an ability to use these literacies to explore issues of personal and social concern for them.

Critical Community Engagement and Social Justice

Engaging with the community is fundamental to the work of all YAC programs, evidenced both in their ongoing activities and in their final products, almost all of which are exhibited publicly. Many of the YAC programs partner with local community organizations and institutions. For example, Get Up Get Down held many of its sessions in the Art Barn at Hampshire College, where students learned about metalworking and graffiti art. Essential to all of GUGD’s projects is a commitment to issues of social justice. The group has been responsible for creating and installing three large public murals in the community all of which invite viewers to think critically about issues of inequality. Further, an ongoing project involves ideas for creating a sign for the ABC House, a residential program for inner-city teenage boys.

The connection between community engagement and critical analysis of issues of social justice really go hand-in-hand, given that it is through democratic, civic participation that students are able to see how their exploration of ideas can lead to actual change. Zaid, a member of VV, made perhaps one of the most articulate points about how the AfC programs helped to increase his awareness of issues of social justice and his feeling that he has the ability to effect change:

...those things that we do in VV [are important]... such as watching different movies. Like... *Bamboozled*, and [we learned that] from Spike Lee's perspective, the black man in the entertainment industry was pretty much a puppet, I mean he was a tap dancing, you know, like Sambo character really, and... that definitely made me view black people in the media and in the entertainment industry differently. It's things like that that we do in VV [that] really changed my perspective and enable me to view social issues with a little more critical eye.

This kind of analysis of the media, and the messages of media-makers, rarely has room to make its way into the traditional classroom, particularly around culturally sensitive topics such as race, gender, and sexuality. Further, YAC youth are encouraged to take their work into public dialogues about the issues they are exploring. "In VV we've [gone] to many different conferences, including the... United States Social Forum. And even though I didn't go the first year when I had the opportunity to, I didn't realize how important it was [to share our work there] and now I do... going to conferences or lectures and participating in discussions or lectures... allowed us to open up and view things with a critical eye." Zaid's development of a critical perspective in turn informs his own productions, which are then put into the world to teach others, along the lines of Cope and Kalantzis' concept of "redesign."

Not only are issues of structural power often made invisible to most citizens, and to children in particular, but the opportunity to explore them through shared civic dialogue is rare. The multimodal media productions AfC youth are putting out into the world serve as sites for counterhegemonic narratives that advocate for greater social justice. One of the AfC youth in GEV shared a similar sentiment regarding how she began to critically interpret media and produce media that could address issues that were coming up for her in her community, and how powerful it was for her to be able to take this into a public sphere. In talking about the basis for picking the topic for the 'zine page Alice created in GEV, she said: "then I talked about in history how women weren't treated equally... and, the main topic was... women's rights in history and in other cultures." These experiences researching social issues that were important to students, and then presenting their research in public, elevated the students' confidence in their public speaking abilities and their desires to reach more people with the information they were learning about. Alice again stated,

I'm not really good at speaking in front of people. The show was kind of long, but I enjoyed having people being able to look at my photos and look at the 'zine pages, and really get my message across. I think I probably should have talked more or stood there by my photos to say what I did and how I thought of taking them.

Another student, Kate—who participated in the GUGD program—described the incredible feeling of seeing the mural her group had done on permanent display in the center of town. When asked how she felt, she said, "I was basically like, 'we are... awesome!' [laughing]... 'Cause it was the first mural I've ever done... it kind of made me feel like... I don't know if 'hopeful' is the right angle... but I hoped that it affects people." Another student explained that the public exhibition of the work made her "realize that there are actually people who pay attention and so, it kind of encourages [me] to actually make an effort ...and I get to practice with the public

speaking and the organizing is good practice for actually doing that kind of stuff on my own, once I'm too old for this program.”

We coded more than 67 instances under the axial code of social community engagement and social justice where YAC students expressed how meaningful it has been to be included in conversations about the potential causes of and solutions to glaring inequities in society. These instances ranged from explanations of how many had become more engaged with global, national, and community issues concerning social justice, to an acknowledgement that having an authentic audience for their multimodal media productions made their work more meaningful. On the year-end survey under the sections about “Students’ Sense of Empowerment in Addressing Community Issues,” the majority of AfC youth expressed important growth in these areas. Over 80% defined themselves as being knowledgeable of people different from themselves, and regularly engaging with people of different races, social classes, religions, and sexual orientations than themselves; further, they reported being eager to learn about people different from themselves, and being aware that there were issues that needed addressing in the community and wanting to be a part of the addressing some of these issues. One statistic that stood out to the contrary, however, was that only a little over 60% of AfC youth in both VV and GEV reported that they knew a lot about people who are different from them. Again these results speak to the importance of YAC’s continued push for more cultural awareness, diversity training, and anti-racism work, both within its own programs and in the wider communities within which it operates.

There were, however, several points of disconfirming evidence from survey results regarding students’ interactions with adults and AfC youth’s feelings about whether they could contribute to improving their community. Only 30% of GEV participants agreed that it was Very True or True that adults around them are interested in hearing their opinions. Similarly, only 50% of the GEV participants agreed it was Very True or True that they could contribute to improving their community or that being involved in trying to improve local social issues and problem in their community was important. This particular statistic stood out because youth in the other two programs overwhelmingly (between 90%-100%) reported that these statements were either Very True or True. While we are not certain, we conjecture that this might have to do with either, or both, of two factors that distinguish GEV from the other two programs—first, that it is comprised of all female students (who, as females, may feel less seen, heard, and honored by their community), and second, that the nature of photography itself as an art form that is somewhat more abstract—and perhaps less easily distributed—than the art being produced in the other AfC programs.

Conclusion

AfC programming, and multimodal arts production in particular, has been shown to develop in youth multimodal literacies a strong sense of identity and future goals, as well as strong critical engagement with community and issues of social justice. The data collected in this study reveals some of the ways in which multimodal arts production specifically engages students, particularly those who struggle with or seek alternatives to the mainstream educational paradigm. Our findings suggest that AfC programming strengthens traditional skills necessary for success in the academic mainstream and at the same time that it allows for the development of multiliteracies

and identities poised to critique current power structures and to engage in civics and democracy in the larger society.

More specifically, AfC programming makes use of alternative pedagogical tools, particularly in its ability to tap into students' existing literacies and interests in technology, media, and popular culture. It has already been established that multimodal arts production is an effective tool for the development of multiple literacies. The uses of new media as a tool in allowing students to explore and develop their "future selves" is just now being tapped, and programs such as those offered through YAC point to its being an educationally meaningful process with great potential in this area. While the power of a sense of hope and possibility for the future is widely recognized, it is incumbent upon educators who work in traditional school settings to develop multimodal pedagogy and curriculum that allow students to explore their potential futures while gaining the multiliteracies necessary to actualize those futures; AfC programming does just that. The affordances of new media are particularly suited to this kind of exploration, given the ease with which students can now research multimodally, mining video, audio, text, and graphics in their pursuit of new knowledge. Likewise, the ability to use all of these modalities in production allows students to access and develop literacies other than traditional academic reading and writing, with which many of them have struggled. In addition to these literacies, students gained through AfC programming inter- and intrapersonal skills and qualities that will help them to bring their chosen futures into fruition, namely the abilities to meaningfully collaborate, to make it through college, to increase self-confidence, and to persevere in the face of difficulty.

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ⁱ All youth participant names are pseudonyms.