

In between Work and School: Youth Perspectives of an Urban Afterschool Multimedia Literacy Program

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Executive Summary

In recent years, afterschool programs have come to be envisioned as sites for addressing the failure of urban schools to provide adolescents with the requisite skills and knowledge to participate in a rapidly shifting social, political, and economic landscape. The purpose and nature of such educational endeavors has taken many varied forms, as a growing number of stakeholders become invested in shaping the direction and implementation of afterschool programming. However, youth, as the recipients of these programs, have rarely been looked to as sources of experiential knowledge about the potential roles of afterschool programs in their personal development and academic education. Drawing on data from a yearlong ethnographic project documenting a media arts program housed in an urban comprehensive high school, this article foregrounds youth perspectives on their experience in an afterschool program, addressing in particular the ways in which this arts-based program functioned as a hybrid space between work and school. An investigation of youth perspectives invites us to rethink the potential of such educational spaces to enhance the learning of students who are most often marginalized in traditional school settings. It also raises important questions about knowledge production, skill development, and youth empowerment in afterschool programming.

The failure of urban schools across the United States to educate adolescents has received wide attention in recent years. Though concerted efforts have been made to reform urban public schools, a large segment of the adolescent population remains underserved. In response, policymakers and educators have looked to afterschool programs as a means to complement, supplement, or replace the education students receive in school. As school curricula have become increasingly scripted and tied to high-stakes testing, many afterschool and summer programs have been designed to conform to the goal of improving academic achievement. Alternatively, educators have turned to afterschool programming as a way to build on students' interests in academic and social arenas in order to sustain their participation in school. In recognition of the importance of drawing students into their education, these programs are designed around content and skills that engage students in the process of learning.

Although different afterschool programs have various purposes and serve youth of various ages, research has focused on afterschool programs geared to students between the ages of six and fourteen (Halpern, 2003). Further, this research has documented primarily external structures and outcome measures (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Fashola, 1998; Halpern, 2002). As the recipients of afterschool education, youth themselves have rarely been seen as sources of information about the role of afterschool programs in their development.

Drawing on data from a yearlong ethnographic project to document a multimedia literacy program in an urban comprehensive high school, this article presents youth perspectives on their experience in an afterschool program. We argue that the insights gained by listening closely to youth offer critical knowledge for understanding and reconceptualizing the role of afterschool programs in the education of urban adolescents. In particular, this article addresses youth perspectives on the ways in which a technology and arts-based afterschool program functioned as a space between work

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and school. Located inside a school building, yet outside the mandated curriculum and beyond the school day, this program represented a hybrid space for learning. Student perspectives on their participation in the program invite us to rethink static notions of educational, community, and work locations and identities. These perspectives push us to ascertain how afterschool programs can enhance the learning of students who are often marginalized in traditional school settings. Before we describe the program that is the focus of this article, we provide a brief overview of the history of afterschool programs in the United States.

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Afterschool programs first appeared in the U.S. in the late 19th century as boys' clubs, often located in storefronts or church basements and staffed by middle-class volunteers (Halpern, 2002). The growth of such programs can be linked to labor laws that instituted compulsory schooling and banned children from factory work. As a result of being released from work, particularly in cities, youth found themselves with free time after school. Social service agencies developed afterschool programs in response to concern that youth were endangering themselves and others in their unsupervised street life. From their beginning as supervised playground activities intended to "improve" working-class youth, these programs gradually expanded to include indoor activities (Gagen, 2000) and academic content. During the early 1900s, many afterschool programs followed Dewey's (1963, 1966) principle of providing children with opportunities to learn by actively following their interests. Afterschool programs during this time often attempted to close gaps between learning and doing and between school and work. They aimed to protect youth from the "unhealthy and dangerous urban environment" and teach them technical and social skills (Halpern, 1990, p. 215).

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in designing and funding a range of afterschool programs. These programs are developed for a wide variety of reasons, including the extension of youths' school learning

through supervised, structured learning and play. In addition, concern about failure in schools has led to the development of afterschool programs that provide direct academic support for students. Some programs aim to teach students new skills related to their interests or to future work. Others are designed as enrichment programs that provide cultural awareness and knowledge through arts-based projects. Some programs also emphasize sports, crafts, and other leisure activities to promote athletic skills, social interaction, and enjoyment. As Noam and colleagues (2003) explain, there seem to be two distinct purposes for afterschool programs. On one hand, school-based educators and those concerned with school reform emphasize academic alignment. On the other, community organizations tend to develop programs that focus on athletic or leisure activities, leadership development, and democratic participation, though the avenues through which these programs attempt to reach their goals vary.

At the same time that programs' goals have diversified, the number of youth participating in afterschool activities has grown considerably. It has been estimated that youth in the U.S. spend almost a third of their organized time in afterschool programs (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003). Further, an estimated three to four million low- and moderate-income children attend afterschool programs in the U.S. (Halpern, 2002). In 2001, 67 percent of public school principals reported having afterschool programs in their schools; 60 percent of these programs had begun in the previous five years (Zief, 2004). Parallel to this growth in participation, funding for afterschool programs has increased dramatically, illustrating renewed interest in such programs as educational sites. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, for instance, increased its budget from \$1 million in 1997 to \$1 billion in 2002 (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003). In 2004, these programs are projected to reach nearly 2.5 million students (Zief, 2004).

CATEGORIZING AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

Afterschool programs can be categorized along several different dimensions. One such dimension is programs' location and the extent of their connection to schools. Community-based organizations (CBOs) and youth-based organizations (YBOs) are located primarily in the community and often have tenuous relationships with schools. They provide alternative educational models and opportunities frequently not available in schools. As Heath (2004) explains:



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Within the out-of-school ecological zone of learning provided by YBOs, the young develop a sense of themselves as learners within community contexts and pursue information, skills, and contacts in the course of high-risk work tightly governed by rules they themselves develop. (p. 46)

A wide variety of CBOs and YBOs in the U.S. offer afterschool programs for adolescents, including national organizations such as the YMCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Boys and Girls Clubs. These and more locally based youth programs, which may be located in religious institutions or in community centers, are often tied to grassroots organizations. They are structured around arts, sports, and other activities that draw on the interests of the leaders and the youth themselves (Heath, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994).

In contrast, school-based programs, often physically located in school buildings, are closely connected to aca-

demical programs, designed to extend the school day by linking academic assistance directly to classroom requirements. Other school-based configurations include programs located beyond the physical boundaries of schools that nevertheless provide students with opportunities to reinforce their school learning. Alternatively, programs may be physically located within schools yet draw on students' interests and connections to the community or on community center programming. Afterschool programs located in school buildings can be classified according to the sponsoring organization: school personnel, CBOs, or school/community partnerships (e.g., Dryfoos, 1998, 1999; Polman, 2004).

The Multimedia Literacy Program (MLP) we describe in this article falls into this final category. MLP was designed to build on students' interests in learning new skills related to technology and the arts, to provide an opportunity for students to work and earn money, and to draw on community resources to engage students in learning. Located in a large urban comprehensive high

school that serves low-income students and students of color, and staffed by school teachers and a community-based artist, MLP drew from several of the configurations described above. In the program's final year, student participants received payment for their work. Providing this wage added a new layer of complexity to the afterschool program. Our description and analysis of the program from the perspective of its participants—the high school students—suggest both the opportunities and the difficulties of implementing such a program.

LISTENING TO YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Most research on afterschool programs has focused on quantitative studies that measure participation rates and student outcomes in relation to attendance (Eccles & Templeton, 2002). In addition, several researchers have conducted surveys as well as descriptive and comparative analyses of programs. Results from this empirical research have yielded varied findings. For instance, in its evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers' elementary and middle school programs, Mathematica Policy Research found little evidence that

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participation in afterschool programs improved students' academic, social/emotional, or behavioral development (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Qualitative analyses complicate the quantitative findings by adding nuanced analyses of descriptive data on what happens in programs. Such studies suggest several dimensions for understanding the learning that transpires outside classrooms. However, the perspectives of the participants themselves are often missing in evaluation and outcome-based research.

This article adds to the field's understanding of afterschool programs by analyzing youth perspectives. Our analysis suggests questions about learning that can, and we argue should, be pursued across varied educational settings and research methodologies. We argue that systematic interpretive analyses can help us under-

stand the impact of afterschool programs, particularly those that are markedly different from classroom practice. Close description and analysis of a single site can provide a generative framework for the design of larger-scale research projects.

In response to the push for increased test scores fueled by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, afterschool programs—particularly those located inside schools—have tended to mirror traditional school practices. Afterschool programs focused on the arts and community work have become less common. Our research documents the knowledge and skills students gained in a program that built on, yet diverged from, the school curriculum. While afterschool programs are often evaluated by achievement measures tied to classroom learning, such as standardized tests, we argue that a different set of indicators can help capture the broad array of experiences possible in afterschool programs. In particular, our project emphasized youth perspectives and analyses of the Multimedia Literacy Program as a site for education and work. The research questions that guided our project were:

- What are the youths' reflections on and understandings of their experience in the afterschool project?
- What are the salient experiences, skills, and knowledge that youth took from their participation in the program?
- What are the guiding roles and relationships between and among students and staff in this program?

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Multimedia Literacy Program (MLP) was located in a large urban comprehensive high school in a major east coast city. During the years of this project, the school district in which MLP was located experienced constant turmoil, which resulted in a state takeover. The high school, one of the oldest and largest in the city, had six principals during the three years of the program. As a result, plans to house the program in a small learning community in the school and to use team teaching to connect the afterschool program to the school day never materialized for more than a few months. Relegated to afterschool time, the program had to be layered on top of the busy lives of the teachers and students.

MLP began as a collaboration between the two classroom teachers on a school newspaper supported by a local university. The newspaper project brought the teachers' interest and talent in writing and computer use together with their commitment to working on community-based

projects with their high school students beyond the school day. The close collaboration between Carrie Morris¹, an African-American English teacher, and Meryl Lewis, a white computer teacher, crossed both racial and subject-area lines. Soon after the two teachers began their collaboration and planning for multimedia work, they were introduced to Lori Green, a white video artist interested in bridging institutional settings by bringing the community into the school. Lori Green became the third member of this collaborative team. Over the years of the program, these leaders solicited participation from school colleagues, some of whom worked briefly with MLP.

Program Focus

With support from the university and a CBO, the teachers wrote a grant to fund a program in critical multimedia literacy. They received funding from an arts-in-education initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education to support their work with MLP for three years. From the beginning, the program was designed to support groups of students to produce videos for the community and websites for the school, with a focus on critical media skills. As Carrie Morris, the English teacher, explained:

We started in January 2001. We had a small group. All boys. We thought, how are we going to teach them camera skills? We decided on video biographies. We asked them to write about their lives and put it on tape. There were three boys. They had a series of unsuccessful experiences in schools. So they wrote about their lives. Then they went out and made videos. First they went to one boy's elementary school. He related how people would pick on him, and how he would fight. He acted that out. In the end there were three biographies about these young men and how they were turning themselves around. (Interview, CM, 5.20.03)

Early on, the program leaders also decided to produce video projects commissioned by a community organization that would serve as the client. Learning about and producing videos in the afterschool program would thus be built around ideas or products desired by local nonprofit organizations. The critical media focus of the afterschool program receded into the background as the emphasis developed around the creation of videos—one at a time—for nonprofit community clients such as a literacy program, a community garden, and a nutrition initiative. Despite this shift in the program's focus, the teachers held on to the central idea of providing a space



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for students to respond to issues that affected their lives and communities.

Describing her own commitments to the project, Carrie Morris explained that her goals began with the belief in:

Cutting down violence in the community, in our own ways. The kids we've been involved with will not get involved in doing various things. We are part of a process, developing young people who will become assets to the community, now and as adults. Seeing how adults can work with kids. The joy of learning new things. Opportunities that pop up because we know them. It all comes down to the idea of cutting down violence. (Interview, CM, 7.29.03)

Thus the concept of MLP mirrored the goals of the early 20th century reformers, who envisioned afterschool programs as protected spaces for young people to pursue their interests and to develop as leaders. In a high-poverty urban community, the MLP teachers sought to provide new opportunities for their students. Further, they saw



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the program as a means to foster community among the students. As Carrie Morris explained:

Our goal was to develop the collective, the community, the collaboration. We wanted students to see that it's never just one person. We wanted them to find success when they worked together to translate what they learned after school into academics. (Interview, CM, 7.29.03)

The teachers made explicit connections to school learning while emphasizing the importance of forming a group, an aspect of learning they found nearly impossible to achieve in a large comprehensive high school.

The teachers used the afterschool program to reconfigure their relationships with students in ways often not possible during the school day. As they attempted to create a sense of family within the program, the teachers also maintained close connections

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to the youth's families. Carrie Morris described this connection:

Family. We talk to all their families and guardians. They know and trust us. We take them home. We're like school mothers. There are things we'd do like we'd do for our own children. Sense of family. We call home so often, parents trust us enough we can take them places. (Interview, CM, 7.29.03)

The goals of community and of knowing youth as individuals through their identities in and out of school were critical to the program leaders, each of whom was committed to providing multiple opportunities for youth to succeed through education, broadly defined.

Program Design

MLP took place three to five days a week for up to three hours after school, in a schedule that changed each year. In addition, the program was run during the summer following each of the three school years. The program had two sites in the school building: a computer classroom, where students often gathered immediately after school, and a video production room in the basement that had sophisticated equipment and large open spaces

for meeting and working. For the most part, the three leaders divided their time among small groups of students who worked on smaller projects that would later be incorporated into the final media production. At times they held discussions with the whole group or some subset of it. For instance, during one session, one teacher led a large group in a critical discussion about a series of *Adbusters* magazines while small groups of students explored animation techniques on computers. The classroom teachers taught some, although not all, of the students during the school day; over the years they developed close personal relationships with students.

MLP had two clients during the first summer of the project; each project began in the summer and was completed during the school year. First, students and leaders documented Arbor Day in the neighborhood as a project for the university; next, they made a film of the children in a family literacy program. During the second summer, they initiated work for a community-based nutrition project located at two nearby schools. They followed the same pattern of work from the previous year, initiating the filming for the video in the summer and continuing with the production after school during the school year. This film took almost a full year to produce, in part because of disruptions due to the instability of the school that housed the program.

When the leaders found themselves competing with students' need to earn money after school, they decided to find a way to pay the students. Through their relationship with a CBO, they found money through two different school-to-career grants—one federal and one sponsored by the city—to pay students to apprentice in work placements. Students were offered a weekly salary—but not without a cost to the integrity of the program. In the year of our study, 2002–2003, the school-to-careers grants required that students attend the program five days a week, more days than either the teachers or the students would otherwise have chosen. The red tape and paperwork required to pay students often filled entire afternoons. Students went for long periods of time without payment, requiring the leaders to spend additional time to track down the money and to create procedures to ensure students were paid. These periods without payment led the students to feel disillusioned; they connected their work with employment rather than with learning and enjoyment. The employer/employee relationship changed the dynamic between teachers and students. All the same, in their description of the program, the leaders explained that students attended because they wanted to work on this particular topic with these particular people (Interview, ML, 7.29.03).

RESEARCH DESIGN

With funding from the Robert Bowne Foundation, our research team began to document MLP during its third and final year. Our research project was designed to foreground the experiences and understandings of the students. Employing ethnographic research methods including participant observation, interviews, and focus groups with students and facilitators, we documented the lived experiences of the youth in the program. In

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particular, by observing as participants in the program, we gathered rich, nuanced data; learned participants' perspectives; and collected students' narratives of their experience. In addition to collecting data, two of us acted as mentors to students in the program, spending substantial time nearly every week during the school year assisting with various activities in order to foster relationships with students. We were committed to creating a reciprocal relationship with the project by providing assistance to the students and program leaders in exchange for their involvement in the documentation.

Building on our initial observations, we gave surveys to approximately 40 out of a total of 57 students who participated in the program in its third year: those who were still in school or whom their teachers could locate. We used this information, along with our developing understanding from observations, to conduct a series of focus groups and interviews with youth and with program leaders. These focus groups and interviews, which generally took place on the university campus, were designed to augment our initial understanding. Becker (1996) describes the importance of collecting participants' words and perspectives in qualitative research: "It is not enough to honor, respect, and allow for the actors' point of view. One must also allow them to express it themselves" (p. 58).

We began this phase with two student focus groups and with interviews with program leaders. The focus group discussions centered on student experiences in MLP and the relationship between students' learning in the afterschool program and their daily experiences of school; students described how their afterschool learning differed from school activities. In addition, we asked students to draw connections to their communities and activities outside school. In this way, we gave students

the opportunity to engage in a reflective discussion alongside their peers about their experiences in MLP. Afterward, we encouraged them to write down any further feedback they did not wish to offer in a group setting. From these two groups, we invited a few students to participate in individual interviews, based both on their interest in the documentation project, as shown in their participation in the focus group, and their availability. We also interviewed a few additional students who did not feel comfortable participating in a focus group. A total of 22 students participated in this phase of the documentation.

During this same period, we met individually and in small groups with the program leaders. These interviews supplemented the students' viewpoints, providing an historical overview of MLP's internal organization and design. The leaders also offered insights about the context of teaching and learning both in and after school, as well as about their shifting roles in relation to these contexts. Though we conducted focus groups with teachers in order to supplement the students' stories and perspectives, we made a concerted effort to focus on the voices and words of the students as the primary source of data for our findings. The leaders' perspectives were used to provide context and background.

The information collected from these multiple data sources was analyzed for themes and patterns according to standard ethnographic methods (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Erickson, 1986). We compared data sources to uncover points of convergence and discrepancy. We drew our findings in this paper from themes that recurred across the various data sources.

Despite our systematic collection and analysis of data, there are several limitations to this study. First, we spent a limited amount of time collecting data from the program. Ethnographic and qualitative research relies strongly on the element of time in producing reliable and valid analyses. Second, we had limited access to student participants. Because we were introduced to the program in its third and final year, we were not able to speak with or observe the initial participants who had already graduated from high school or otherwise moved on. We were thus restricted from using a potentially important data source, one that could have provided insight into the program at its inception, when it was perhaps more reflective of the leaders' original vision. In addition, many of the students moved in and out of the program, making participation in MLP somewhat transitory. As a result, we sometimes had difficulty in devel-

oping and sustaining relationships with particular students or in encouraging them to continue to participate in the documentation project.

Our findings thus reflect a relatively limited exposure to the research site and constrained access to student perspectives. While we believe that our research was sufficient to offer some preliminary insights and questions about afterschool programming, a more comprehensive investigation over a longer time period would have strengthened the validity of the findings and provided greater scope to our overview and representation of the program. Hatch (2002) elaborates this point: "Ethnographers who claim to have captured their participants' perspectives in field notes and interviews and then written these into accounts that objectively represent the cultural experience of those participants are said to be *creating culture* rather than representing reality" (p. 5). Nonetheless, we argue that our findings raise critical questions, contain valuable insights for program designers and leaders, and suggest avenues for future research.

A THREEFOLD SPACE

Several educators and researchers have called for the creation of educational *spaces* for youth (e.g., Fine & Weis, 2003; Weis & Fine, 2000). Some have also suggested that we understand youths' learning in school as extending beyond the school day and outside the space defined by the school building (e.g. Schultz, 2002, 2003). The nature of out-of-school spaces for youth and the quality of the time they spend after the school bell rings are most often described in three different contexts: afterschool programs, employment opportunities, or unstructured free time in front of the television or on the street. Students' reflections on their experience in MLP indicate that this program was a hybrid space that crossed and extended some of these distinctly drawn categories, suggesting new ways we might conceptualize afterschool spaces for youth.

Initial descriptions of MLP offered by both students and leaders centered on the program's physical location in the school. They described MLP as an afterschool and summer program, lead by two teachers and a videographer, that was located in specific spaces inside a high school. However, when asked to describe their experiences in the program, youth often added three dimensions to this initial description, describing MLP as a:

- Location for the production of knowledge
- Community that extended beyond their classrooms and school building
- Site of employment

Students' descriptions of the Multimedia Literacy Program thus complicate common understanding of spaces for learning in afterschool programs and form the framework for our discussion of findings.

Site for the Production of Knowledge

Students articulated several ways in which MLP functioned as a site for them to acquire a wide variety of skills, as well as a disposition toward learning, both independently and as members of a community. Many students viewed the program primarily as a place for learning new skills in video production and website design. They described this learning as differing significantly from the largely skill-based academic curriculum in their school. Some of their comments on their learning were general, as reflected by one student in the first focus group: "We learned stuff we probably wouldn't have learned until college, or never learned." Often, however, students made specific reference to new knowledge of media technologies or to new facility with software such as Adobe Photoshop, Dreamweaver, and Flash. Students also discussed aspects of producing films, including

work with cameras and video production. Several students chose to engage in the program because they wanted to acquire these technical skills. Although one original intent of the program was to teach critical media literacy, students gave scant evidence that this was a central aspect of their learning. Instead, the focus of their learning was work for clients on videos and websites that frequently took several months to complete.

Though they began by describing technical skills associated with video and web-based media, students also articulated additional aspects of learning, including skills related to working in a group or independently. For instance, when asked to identify the most important aspect of the MLP experience, a student in the first focus group immediately responded, "Patience." Asked to elaborate, the student explained, "Cause things may not get done like they're supposed to. Or for me, my people skills aren't all that good." In their interviews, several students elaborated this idea of having learned patience, adding that in the program they learned to work with others and get along with people who were not necessarily like themselves.

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Bringing together these academic and social skills, students described how their confidence grew during their time in the program. Students described particular situations, especially public presentations, that led to increased self-confidence. As one student explained, “When you do a movie or something, and then you have to show it to everybody else and hear what they have to say, sometimes you don’t like what they have to say, but it helped me learn to deal with it.” Another student described an unrehearsed presentation about her work on a public service announcement: “I’m doing better at that. I ain’t scared of nobody no more.”

Although they emphasized the collective nature of the projects, students frequently mentioned how much of their learning occurred independently. The balance of independent and collective activity was both part of the program design and a consequence of the multiple demands on leaders to both manage and lead the program in a sometimes tumultuous school context.

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Because teachers could not always be available, students often taught themselves or each other the requisite skills for producing video and web-based materials. As one student explained:

I gained many strengths. I became very computer literate. Like, I was able to go further with that. Because it pushed me to do things on my own. Like, I would also say that I want to do things on my own but never do it.... But this time it pushed me to do that because I was the only one working on web page design.

This student went on to explain that he carried these independent learning skills into his school day, using his time to accomplish tasks on his own. While some students complained that they didn’t get enough guidance from the leaders, one student described the benefits to the group of having learned to work together on their own. Asked whether community-building activities would have helped, she replied, “Yeah, I think it was better if we figure it out on our own. Because if they had tried teaching us how to do it, we would’ve resented each other, and resented them, too. So it’s better if we learn by ourselves.”

While the conception of an afterschool program as a site for learning new knowledge and skills is commonplace, academic learning was not the only or, for many, the overriding goal of MLP. Students rarely mentioned specific skills they learned in MLP that supported their academic learning or engagement during school. However, they frequently included their abilities to work both independently and in collaboration with others as a significant part of their learning. Their comments suggest that broader measures of outcomes should be sought in the evaluation of afterschool programs.

Site for Building and Bridging In- and Out-of-school Communities

A critical goal of MLP was to provide youth with an experience of working collaboratively on projects. Leaders worked to develop a sense of community by deliberately designing projects that required students to look to each other for knowledge and skills. In addition to fostering relationships with and among the students, leaders sought opportunities to bring youth’s outside communities and experiences into the school building. They did so primarily through projects that required the students to collaboratively produce a film or website for an outside client, often from the surrounding neighborhood.

Throughout this work, students held various conceptions of community. We began the initial focus groups by asking students to define the term *community*. In one focus group, students offered these words and phrases in rapid succession to a question about what community meant to them:

- S1: People get to know each other.
- S2: Friends.
- S3: Neighborhood. Water ice.
- S4: Building.
- S5: Cousins.
- S3: Murals.
- S6: Fun.
- S3: [The name of the city’s public transit system].
- S6: Neighbors.
- S3: School.
- S4: Sharing.
- S7: Working.
- S8: Flowers.
- S9: Thieves.
- S10: Cars.
- S9: Thieves.
- S11: Being on one accord.

Given the pace and flow of their conversation, as well as its purpose, we did not ask why students offered these terms. Nonetheless, the range of descriptors students offered included both concrete images and more abstract notions. This interweaving of particularity and multiplicity suggests that students used shifting lenses to construct, experience, and understand community. Several responses, such as “water ice” and “murals,” marked community as a concept closely connected to the city where the students lived. In addition, the coexistence of terms related to work, school, neighborhood, and family reflects students’ multiple notions of space and place and their understanding of community as a shifting state rather than a fixed condition. Students’ definitions of community also included notions of cooperation and conflict, a theme that recurred throughout our interviews and focus groups.

In focus groups and individual interviews, students frequently mentioned that they valued the ways in which the afterschool program itself functioned as a community. For instance, they offered analogies connecting their work in MLP to their understanding of family. One student explained, “It’s like working with your family. Sometimes you have good times, sometimes you have bad times.”

Another student elaborated the idea that MLP functioned as a community that included both harmony and discord. When we asked him what it was about the program that helped the students get along with each other, he replied:

One thing, we were all in the same community, in the same [small learning community in the school]. . . . Another would be, we went to middle school with one another, so we knew each other from middle school, some from our childhood. And, we generally got along with each other in the classroom. Because, like [Multimedia Literacy] forced us to, kind of like, become friends because we. . . . we’re working with each other so we might as well make peace.

This student went on to elaborate the histories students brought to their interactions in the MLP program. He described the range of their relationships: “friendliness,” “professional,” “hating,” and “liking more than liking” (that is, more than amorous loving). He elaborated: “I would say the friendliness put it over the top. Because for the most part we were all friends, no matter what. We could be sniping at each other one day, hugging the next day, emailing each other the next day, all that stuff.” He attributed their care for each other to both their prior his-

stories and the community developed in the program. His description of the community included ways in which the program overlapped with other communities in the school and neighborhood, drawing on participants’ shared urban context. He echoed the sentiments of others when he explained that the MLP community included both harmony and conflict.

Another student iterated the importance of MLP as a space that supported students to be members of a community that extended beyond the time and space of the program:

Like, in regular school, we didn’t talk to each other at all. We, like, ignored each other. But now that we’ve gotten through the program, we see each other in the hallways, we say to each other in class, like, “Do you need help with that?” or, “Can I help you?” or, “I need help” or something like that, or “I’m doing this, you wanna join, too?” It’s like we all grouped together from that point on, since we learned that. We became a pact, a silent bond between us all. There didn’t have to be no words, did not have to be on paper, we just knew we were going to be friends from after that point on, and we were—in school, and the streets—“Hi, how ya doing, everything okay?” And we also be at each other’s houses, and we knew each other’s families. It was good.

This description of community, which bridges MLP, school, and home, illustrates the ways in which students transported their experience of community across place—the typical boundaries of school—and across time—during and after school.

Afterschool programs are often set up to provide safe havens for students, though this aspect is most frequently analyzed in relation to programs for young children. An added layer of the community students in MLP experienced was their trust in the leaders. One student explained:

The teachers act a certain way towards people. If [there] weren’t good in [those students] somewhere, [the teachers] wouldn’t, um. . . . let’s see, the proper words. . . . They’ll probably be more distant from them and be more strict with them. But no, they trusted them. So of course we trusted them. We look to adults to [see] who to trust.

Following cues from teachers and adult leaders, students constructed a community that, while in no way devoid of conflict, nonetheless drew heavily on a sense of intimacy and trust.



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Even as they explained how MLP allowed them to draw on their community knowledge, students articulated ways that the program did not take up this knowledge. One student discussed the connection between a video on urban environmentalism she worked on in the program and her own efforts to promote recycling and conservation in her neighborhood. She expressed disappointment that she was not given the opportunity to follow up on these interests in her multimedia work. Others complained that the program's restricted structure meant that they worked on a single project for a client, so that they had few opportunities to build on their own interests or experiences from outside school.

Students understood *community* both as a way to describe the collaborative nature of their work and as the

connection between their work in MLP and their work in their school, homes, and neighborhoods. Students explained that the community of the program, like their other communities, included both harmony and conflict, along with a commitment to work through difficult times.

Site of Employment

During the final year of MLP, the leaders found a way to secure weekly payment for the students, which transformed the afterschool arts program into a job site for some participants. The leaders had discovered that many students chose not to participate in the program because they felt the responsibility to work after school in order to earn money for their families. As mentioned earlier, the introduction of stipends brought new requirements for students and teachers such as attendance five days a week and seemingly endless amounts of paperwork. Leaders and students spent countless hours filling out forms and making phone calls to ensure payment.

The decision to build film projects around service to nonprofit clients also connected the program to the notion of employment. The leaders negotiated with one nonprofit program to serve as project client each year so

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that students would have an authentic purpose and audience for their work. Because of this relatively formal client relationship, students did not focus on learning to critique media, though this was one of the original goals of the program. They did not simply experiment with and learn the skills of multimedia and technologies. Instead, the students' work was focused on specific products they designed for outside audiences.

In their discussion of MLP as a work site, students most often mentioned responsibility, maturity, and the ability to meet deadlines—qualities they did not associate with school—as aspects of their work that distinguished it from schoolwork. Their sense of responsibility for their work in MLP motivated them to take it seriously. The students did not necessarily tie this sense of responsibility to their wages but rather to a belief that the work was important. As one student explained:

We were expected to act not like we did in [school]. We were expected to act more mature, and we had our deadlines. In school if we had like a report due or something like that, you can always bring it in a week from now and you might get 50 points off or something like that, but at a job you can't do that.

Students treated the afterschool program differently from school because MLP brought expectations similar to those of a job. Setting up outside clients not only provided authentic audiences and purposes for students' work but also meant that people the students did not know were anticipating its completion.

In addition, students took on different identities corresponding to their understanding of the program as a site of employment. As one student explained:

Before, I was like, not a private person, but normally what I'd do in school, I would do at home. So if I was quiet in school that day, I would be quiet at home. If I was loud at school that day, I would bring that loudness home. And it would normally mean that I was loud that morning at home and brought it to school and brought it back home again. So, it was like, it wouldn't really be so much as personal, so much as out there in the open. Until [Multimedia Literacy] started, like, okay, I'm gonna have to try to change it up a little. Like, there's a work persona, and then there's a relaxed one, and then there's a school one.

This student described how his participation in the MLP project helped him to develop an identity or "persona" different from his usual demeanor at home and

school. He explained that when he became engaged with work in the afterschool program, he reconsidered and reconfigured his identity to match the work context. Articulating his understanding of MLP as a hybrid place between work and school, he elaborated:

[Multimedia Literacy] would be sorta in between the work and school, because I was at work and I was in the school at the same time. So it would be like a little bit of seriousness, and then like a little bit of almost playful, and then the seriousness again, because I'm very serious about my school work.

Bringing together school and work, afterschool time and school itself, students articulated their understanding of where MLP fit as both a work and an afterschool space. Students acknowledged the connection to real projects that carried consequences and attendant responsibility as central to their conception of MLP.

At times, especially in the summer, students identified MLP teachers as bosses because the leaders were responsible for monitoring attendance. The relationship of the students' work to a product for an outside client meant that the leaders had to be critical of the work and, at times, to dictate the kinds of changes students should

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make. Students frequently bristled at these revisions to their work, but, as one student added, "But then you like, you can't really say nothing 'cause they the boss and must've wanted it this way for a reason." As workplace roles became more dominant, the dynamics of the group shifted, with the adults critiquing students' work as if they were the employers.

Students also said that they felt they had an advantage over their peers because they knew and had experience with their teachers in various roles both during and after school. One student described the leaders of the program as "teachers during work and sometimes as employers during school," suggesting that he had little difficulty negotiating these changing relationships. Another student combined the two roles

in her description: “They were there to help us learn how to relax and learn how to work in a workspace environment. They wanted to make sure we learned.” As the leaders of MLP took on multiple roles as teachers, bosses, and nurturers, students’ perceptions of them shifted according to the context.

The MLP project was not specifically designed to teach workplace skills. However, when it became a site of employment, some students used their experience as preparation for work. One student explained that his work experience in MLP prepared him for a paid position outside school.

No, I wouldn’t have developed that sense until, like, the summer time when I was—when I’m working at [his summer place of employment]. Because, I had that work experience during the school year that gets me started. So, like, that’s also a good thing, too. ‘Cause I do many other things during the school year. It’s just that that one work experience helped me out in the long-run.

USING STUDENT VOICES TO RE-IMAGINE AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

Afterschool programs are most frequently categorized into three distinct components: homework help and tutoring; service learning and other projects not directly related to school learning; or non-academic areas such as sports, crafts, and play. Many programs include one or two of these areas, often balancing academic activities with projects that are considered enjoyable. The Multimedia Literacy Program did not fit squarely into any of these categories. Students articulated their under-

These distinct, yet overlapping, spaces suggest that simple categorization or design of programs might miss at least some of the critical knowledge and experience students gain from participating.

standing of MLP as a hybrid space bridging work and school. This fluidity allowed the program to function as a set of distinct spaces for students. Students’ understandings of the program cross conventional categories and suggest a new set of dimensions for conceptualizing afterschool programs: as spaces for learning, as venues for developing relationships and connections between school and community, and as locations for participating

in a work environment. These distinct, yet overlapping, spaces suggest that simple categorization or design of programs might miss at least some of the critical knowledge and experience students gain from participating.

Evaluation of afterschool programs often focuses on a single aspect of the programs, drawing on outcome measures typically associated with schools to assess effectiveness. An analysis of this single program from the perspective of its participants suggests that academic skills were only one salient aspect of the program. An understanding of the program as multiple sites for learning provides a framework for seeing possibilities for youth engagement in afterschool programs beyond academic learning.

We are living in a time characterized by enormous changes in social, cultural, political, economic, and technological domains (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) and changes in the ways in which learning transpires. While schools are often slow to respond to these changes, afterschool programs provide us with opportunities to rethink not only teaching and learning but also the skills and dispositions essential for the future. This analysis of an afterschool program that used technology and multiple learning modalities suggests possibilities for reconceptualizing both how we evaluate programs and how we design afterschool spaces in the future. Understanding a single program as providing multiple sites for learning suggests several questions that can serve as a guide for future programs. These questions address the following themes: definitions of space, discourses of work, and youth empowerment.

Definitions of Space

The evolution of MLP demonstrates the ways in which the constraints, values, and complications of a particular space and context can alter the shape of an afterschool program. Initially conceived as part of a broad vision of youth empowerment programs at multiple sites, MLP was reconfigured under the constraints of an urban comprehensive school that lacked the resources and stability to accommodate the designers’ original intentions. Because the school did not include MLP in the curriculum and made at best inconsistent connections to students’ out-of-school lives, plans for alignment between the formal school curriculum and afterschool programming, and between these and community-based activities, never fully materialized. Furthermore, emphasis on critical media literacy as a means to encourage youth empowerment and self-determination gradually gave way to emphasis on acquiring technical skills for projects

defined by the interests of outside clients. What began as an attempt to forge a dynamic experience that would enable students to become critical learners ultimately came closer than the leaders ever intended to the more modest forms of learning and production of knowledge that typify many urban comprehensive high schools.

This is not to say that MLP was a failure; students did express appreciation for the skills they acquired and the sense of community they developed through the program. Indeed, MLP's location in an urban comprehensive high school facilitated learning and community building, making the program an advantageous space and experience for students in several ways. Our documentation project illuminates some of the trade-offs to situating an afterschool program within a school, especially a comprehensive high school in an under-resourced urban district (cf. Polman, 2004). While such settings can facilitate certain forms of learning and a sense of community, they can also impede afterschool initiatives whose objectives are not easily accommodated by the limited resources, institutional instabilities, and emphasis on skills-based learning often found in urban public schools. Situating a program in an urban comprehensive high school raises such questions as:

- What opportunities and challenges do such locations present?
- How should afterschool programs draw on—or resist—the interests that shape learning in such spaces?
- What are the effects of proximate and distant relationships between afterschool programs and school buildings?
- How are these spatial relationships translated into relationships between students and teachers during the school day, and between youth and leaders (or employees and employers) after school hours?

Students' perspectives on the tensions between the multiple notions of space that informed their participation in MLP and the interests and constraints imposed by the school setting raise additional questions:

- How can we structure afterschool programs located within schools to acknowledge, value, and incorporate the identities, experiences, and knowledge students bring with them from out-of-school contexts?
- How can we negotiate the roles and responsibilities of, and the power dynamics between, adults and youth in afterschool programs as both groups invoke multiple understandings of space and time?

Discourses of Work

A second area for further investigation is the discourses of work that marked the MLP project. The gradual transformation of the afterschool program into a work site had a significant effect on the program. On the positive side, providing stipends was necessary to allow some students to even consider participating in MLP; the decision was motivated by a sincere desire to make the MLP experience a viable option for young people from modest financial backgrounds. Moreover, the perception of MLP as a job encouraged some participants to develop a sense of responsibility, maturity, and self-awareness that they did not evidence in school. However, student reflections indicated that opportunities for learning in programs like MLP can be undermined in significant ways by the dynamics brought about by receipt of payment. As students increasingly perceived program leaders as bosses, they accepted changes in their work from adult authority figures without questioning or careful thought. Their own sense of agency as learners and producers of knowledge was unintentionally, yet undeniably, compromised by

How are these spatial relationships translated into relationships between students and teachers during the school day, and between youth and leaders (or employees and employers) after school hours?

their compliance as workers. Furthermore, some students abandoned the program when payments were delayed or perceived to be insufficient. We also found some evidence that the discourses of work prompted some students to police the quantity and quality of each other's labor.

Eliminating the possibility of stipends from programs such as MLP seems both rash and unfair to students with pressing financial needs. In recent years, schools have responded to the demands of employers by adding workplace skills to the curriculum. If afterschool programs follow suit and begin to pay participants, the mixed reactions to the introduction of stipends in MLP—and to the discourses of work that accompanied this change—suggest several important questions:

- What are the trade-offs in conceptualizing an arts-based afterschool program as a job?
- How does paying students for their work change the goals of a program?
- Whose goals should be prioritized in decisions to shift the focus of a program in this manner?



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- How can we invoke discourses of work in afterschool programs to facilitate students' emerging sense of responsibility, maturity, and self-awareness, without also positioning them as compliant workers?
- What theories and arrangements of power might enable afterschool programs to pay students without also positioning them as compliant workers to adult authorities perceived as bosses?

What theories and arrangements of power might enable afterschool programs to pay students without also positioning them as compliant workers to adult authorities perceived as bosses?

- How might discourses of work in afterschool programs enhance or hinder participants' relationships with each other?
- What funding sources should afterschool programs secure, and what disbursement procedures should they establish, to ensure consistent and timely receipt of student stipends?

Youth Empowerment

The implications of locating afterschool programs within schools, as well as the dilemmas that emerge when programs are constructed as workplaces, lead us finally to

raise questions about definitions of youth empowerment. The educators who originally conceived MLP held notions of youth empowerment in which young people would critically assess the world around them, apply their assessments to the production of knowledge, and use the knowledge to respond to critical issues in their home communities. Though the students who participated in MLP valued the learning and the sense of community that characterized their experiences in the program, their experiences diverged in important ways from the program designers' original vision of empowerment. The work produced through MLP did not emerge as organically from students' own interests as initially intended. Although students were able to reflect on and address issues of social justice and equity, these foci were not as integral to the work as the program designers had envisioned. Nevertheless, there were signs of students' critical investigations of self, peers, school, community, and society at large. With increasingly savvy understandings of the spaces through which they traveled, some students went on to explore, shape, and complicate the constructions of their own multiple identities within and between these myriad spaces. While the production of knowledge related to media technologies was ultimately driven by client needs and adult/boss dictates, students found ways to explore their identities and understandings through this work. Such understandings, taken together with the acquisition of technical skills and the creation of community, point to opportunities the stu-

dents in MLP encountered to engage in both vocational and critical learning. Thus, throughout the evolution of this program—from its initial conception as being closely tied to social justice goals, to its final configuration under the constraints of an urban comprehensive high school in a district undergoing upheaval—multiple definitions of student learning, youth development, and student empowerment were enacted.

As educators; policymakers; private foundations; federal, state, and local agencies; community organizers; parents; students; researchers; and a growing list of stakeholders direct their attention to afterschool programs, the vision of how such programs might empower and enrich the lives of young people is destined to become more contested. As afterschool programs become more varied, and as a burgeoning host of constituencies become invested in their direction, envisioning the future of afterschool programs leads us to old and familiar questions:

- What are the purposes of our educational enterprises?
- How can multiple stakeholders work together to establish and further common goals in afterschool programming?

As afterschool programs venture into the unexplored terrain of combining work, community, and school, we must revisit these questions using multiple lenses. Student perspectives give us a critical starting place for this investigation. Of all the many stakeholders in the afterschool enterprise, the one we can least afford to ignore is the young people whose education is at the center of our programs.

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NOTES

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.