Cultivating Literacies of Belonging within an After-school Program with Court-Involved Youth

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Lalitha Vasudevan
Teachers College, Columbia University

Introduction

Youth occupy contested spaces in our social imaginations. They are neither children nor adults and they are overwhelmingly caught between discourses of victim and perpetrator; as a group to be simultaneously protected and feared. This dichotomy is especially evident in the research and policy discourses surrounding court-involved youth. In the United States, like in many parts of the world, incarceration disproportionately affects the lives of families and youth whose cultural affiliations and economic realities place them at the margins of social institutions. The affiliations of court-involved youth are often interpreted through the prism of gangs and violence, and while it is true that many youth do seek the comfort and belonging afforded by gang membership, this is but one possible analysis of their everyday acts and practices of affiliation (Conquergood, 1997; Mahiri & Sablo Sutton, 1996; Moje, 2000).

In recent years, alternatives to incarceration and detention have begun to garner support as evidence revealing the lack of positive effect of incarceration and detention for adolescents has continued to grow. In New York City, this has resulted in a noticeable funding shift away from detention facilities such as Bridges Juvenile Facility[1] and toward alternative to detention programs such as the after-school program where the research reported in this article is located (see also Fratello, Salsich, & Mogulesco, 2011 for additional background on New York City's juvenile detention reform).

Youth who become involved with the justice system experience a plurality of consequences that result from their arrest and incarceration including unemployment, economic hardship, discrimination, and inequitable and interrupted access to education. The latter has been the focus of recent research and debate surrounding the "school to prison pipeline," a phrase used to describe the experiences of an increasing number of inner city youth who seem to be set on a prison track of schooling from the earliest grades. While research on the "school to prison pipeline" (Christle, Jolviette, & Nelson, 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003), the phenomenon of high school dropouts (Fine, 1991), and the increase in zero tolerance policies (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Ferguson, 2000; Polakow, 2000) has done much to demonstrate the perilous trajectories that school infractions can lead to – namely incarceration and court involvement – we are less informed about the movement of youth in the opposite direction and their negotiation across institutions in between school and jail. The focus of the findings shared in this article is the

[1] Bridges, formerly Spofford, was known for its fights, abuse of youth, and inhumane living conditions. Its closing was celebrated in popular media (i.e., Beekman, 2011) and across various social media networks in which I am connected to former residents of Bridges.

concept of belonging that can be nurtured in the space in between school and prison, such as at an after-school program for court-involved youth. Belonging is not merely a felt sense, but is also an expressed concept that is made manifest through the engagement of various modes of communication, composing, and meaning making. Just as youth are said to show signs of affiliation to socially challenging entities such as gangs, they also can and do form affiliation and a sense of belonging to institutions that can inspire trajectories away from the justice system. Understandings of multimodal literacy and adolescents' literacies that follow next are important in an inquiry about belonging in the lives of youth.

Multimodal Literacy

A multimodal theory of literacies illuminates the multiple modes through which we write ourselves into the world, metaphorically and quite literally. Through the orchestration of multiple modalities of expression and communication – such as multi-function mobile phones, digital cameras, a pen, social networking platforms – individuals, and youth in particular, compose a variety of texts for a variety of purposes. The theoretical concept of multimodality provides a framework for understanding composing, and more precisely, for making sense of how multiple texts and multiple modes collectively express a multi-layered narrative (Hull & Nelson, 2005). A digital story, for example, is a text that not only brings together audio, image, written text, and narration, but also one that communicates a unique message because of its multimodality; furthermore, it is an artifact of the space in which it was produced, and can be read as such. A multimodal approach to analysis of meaning making allows educators and researchers to attend more fully to the resources involved in composing, which are especially visible in the composing of a digital story (Jewitt, 2008).

Literacies and Court-Involved youth

Young people involved with the criminal justice system are engaged in a varying range of sanctioned and unsanctioned forms of citizenship across various cultural contexts that transcend the institutional labels by which they are often defined (Alvermann, 2002). Labels such as "low literate" and "dropout" strip youth of their agency within the purview of the institutions that they negotiate daily. Youth whose narrative authority is squelched in classrooms seek out alternative spaces of citizenry where they are actively making themselves known (Nayak, 2003; Vadeboncoeur & Patel Stevens, 2005; Weis & Fine, 2000): through their consumption and production of diverse texts and media, participation in various social networks, and through their expression of related cultural practices.

Embedded in their varied repertoire of communicative and participatory practices are indicators of engagement and affiliation. However, despite a rich terrain of youth cultural and communicative practices, the opportunities for youth to represent themselves, their varied literate identities, and cultural affiliations in these self-directed and participatory ways contrasts sharply with the constrained measures of meaning, knowledge, and literacy that are dominant within the school walls and across educational research. "Court-involved youth" refers to youth who are involved with the criminal justice system in some way. This can include incarceration in jails,

prisons, or detention facilities; or it can refer to youth who are on probation or who attend programs that are designed to provide an alternative to incarceration.

The meanings that circulate about youth, which are gleaned mostly through these limiting measures and thus lack the richness that more robust representations might offer, come to have consequential effects – in the form of policies, laws, procedures, curricula, assessments, and pedagogical expectations – on how young people experience the institutions they negotiate (such as schools), and more broadly on the subsequent research conducted about their lives. In this study, my research team and I sought to expand understandings of court-involved youths' literate lives by increasing the possible modes of participation and engagement by which participants could contribute to and participate in the project overall.

Context

Choices is an alternative to detention program that provides after-school activities, community supervision, and legal services for adolescents ages 11-16 who are referred to the program by Family Court judges. The organization currently has two locations, one in downtown Manhattan and the other in a community center in partnership with another organization in East Harlem. Participants at Choices attend the program for varying lengths of time, averaging approximately four weeks. There are three tiers of participation that correspond to the frequency with which participants are required by the courts to attend the program. Often, but not always, participants' mandated frequency decreases as they meet various benchmarks such as regular attendance, fewer or no disciplinary concerns at the program or at school, and progress in the program. Choices also partners with several programs designed for teens including a teen pregnancy awareness class and an organization that holds periodic information sessions about adolescents' legal rights.

In order to more fully understand the context of Choices, the alternative to detention program in which we enacted the Reimagining Futures Project, it is important to understand the context of its parent organization, the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES). For five years between 2004 and 2009, I conducted a longitudinal, ethnographic study of literacies and media in the lives of court-involved youth at CASES. During that period I developed relationships with the program staff including the teachers, counselors, case managers, the director, and volunteers who passed through as part of various organizations that CASES had partnered with for the purpose of supplementing the services it provided the 17-22 year old participants who were court-mandated to attend the program. The nature of my participation also varied and in addition to my ongoing role as an ethnographer I also worked as a tutor, teaching assistant, and teacher of a digital media elective. Of note was an ethos of care that was evident throughout CASES in which organizational staff, from the security guard at the entrance to the program suite to the teachers and the program coordinators, engaged in practice of "unknowing" and thereby undoing the essentializing and reductive perspectives that often circulate about court-involved youth (Villenas, 2010). This ethos permeated the pedagogical, interactional, and even administrative practices that were evident at CASES (for more info, see Vasudevan 2008, 2010; Vasudevan et al., 2010; Vasudevan & Rodriguez, In press).

It is significant, therefore, that Choices, the ATD where we have spent the last few years and where we were primarily located for the duration of 2011, was launched by CASES staff. And thus, the same ethos of care also carried over, although the structure of an after-school program poses some challenges to the staff at Choices as they carry out their instructional, programmatic, and other related services. These challenges also impacted the ways that we, the Reimagining Futures Project, were able to work within the evolving structure of Choices.

Methods of inquiry

In the study reported here, the RF Project operated as a participatory research space in which arts-based and media workshops were designed, implemented and documented using ethnographic methods. Thus our data collection goal was twofold: on the one hand, to understand Choices as an after-school program and the ways in which the existing program attended to the social and emotional well-being of the youth participants; and on the other, to explore how youth participants experience and navigate their court-involvement within Choices. We approached this dual-sided goal through an approach called multimodal storytelling (Vasudevan, 2008).

The project was carried out by a core team that is comprised of three doctoral students – two of whom have worked with the project for at least a year previously (Kristine (Rodriguez) Kerr and Melanie Hibbert) and a third who joined the project in the autumn of 2011 (Ahram Park) – one independent youth researcher (Eric Fernandez)[2], and me. We have also had two youth interns work with us during this period. Each member of the team has cultivated a slight different focus related to the issues of belonging and community, two grounding ideas in our exploration of how young people encounter, make sense, and can come to re-imagine their trajectories. I continue to maintain a focus on two layers of the project: the intergenerational interaction across and within the research team and with the participants (including the staff at the organization).

As a team we collected a variety of artifacts and other forms of data including: participant produced multimodal artifacts including short videos, collages, writing reflections, and animations created using the online animation software Xtranormal; audio recorded group conversations around a variety of topics (e.g., global events, personal educational trajectories, imagining futures) that have involved approximately forty different participants; and interviews with the staff and eight youth participants. As a group, we also wrote field notes about workshops, observations of the program during non-workshop days, and our ongoing interactions with participants and staff. Each member of the research team also composed occasional analytic notes that reflected on particular aspects of the data collected.

We maintain a private, password-protected project blog to which we upload our field notes, post reflections that include ongoing analysis, share resources, and conduct interim workshop planning. We also hold regular project meetings – weekly during the academic year, and bi-monthly during the summer – during which time we discuss field notes, identify emerging patterns of practice, share significant texts or other artifacts, and identify key participants around

[2] Eric was formerly a court-involved youth and is an integral member of the team that conceptualized this project. His title is something we are continuing to develop as his educational designation does not fall neatly into the usually available categories (e.g., high school student, undergraduate or graduate student).

whom to develop the multimedia case studies, which we aim to do in a second phase of our analysis. Throughout this project, in addition to weekly project meetings, we have also held two extended data analysis sessions to collectively analyze various aspects of our data corpus. For example, in June 2011, all five members of the research team at the time created a data analysis collage that provided a starting point to our analysis of video, interviews, field notes, and other multimodal data from the project. This approach to data analysis maintains the tenor of storytelling and pedagogical multimodality with which we approach the data collection.

In this article, I draw on a variety of data to highlight select themes that emerged following analysis of data collected between January and October of 2011. This time period is significant for a few reasons. First, our partner organization, Choices, underwent a few organizational changes including location shifts and staff expansion that has informed our research. Second, as we operate on academic years, the Reimagining Futures Project transitioned into its third year of work with Choices and with this transition came changes in the way we work, which are further detailed in the sections below. Finally, this time period includes our own expansion as a project as we brought on an additional graduate student, worked with two youth interns, and presented results of our pilot explorations as a whole project team at a local ethnography conference.

Seeking and Finding a Space to Belong

Effective educational support for court-involved youth is desired and advocated for by scholars from various disciplines including justice studies (e.g., Smith, 2000), sociology (REFS), and education (e.g., Fisher, 2009; Kinloch, 2010). They echo sentiments that I have heard from youth throughout the last fifteen years of working with incarcerated or otherwise adjudicated youth, including the experiences and insights that we learned from the adolescents at Choices who were involved with the Reimagining Futures Project. This project was built on initial work that we had initiated with court-involved youth at this same program, and one of our main objectives had been to further develop our understandings of belonging within the lives of the youth participants.

Based on my prior work with court-involved youth, I have long appreciated the complicated realities of their lives as they navigate multiple institutions and, consequently, multiple sets of rules, regulations, and policies. An after-school context is especially fraught because young people carry with them the weight of their school days, and sometimes that weight lingers well into the afternoon hours. Ours has been a mission, in part, of using multimodal approaches to create spaces for adolescents to initiate and nurture a sense of belonging, that echoes the ethos of the organization and its staff who are very clearly committed to the well-being of the young people.

Still, the question remains: how to make each moment count? This was a tall order for both research project and after-school program, alike – and from a research workshop series perspective, it is a question to which we are continuing to refine our response – yet this question seemed to be at the heart of many if not most of the interactions we observed between the staff and participants at Choices. Thus, this ethos also inspired the design and facilitation of our workshops that were at the center of our research activities.

Making 90 minutes meaningful

Youth cross the threshold of Choices with the day's goings-on written all over their bodies. On some occasions, this is almost cruelly apparent as in the case of several young people who walked into Choices with an injury they had incurred either earlier in the day or en route to the program. In most instances, however, youths' embodiment of their school days was evocative of a long day spent in a sort of battle. Such a description is not meant to be melodramatic, but rather underscores how the youth talked about school on a daily basis. This general malaise toward schooling, while abundant, was not wholly resistant to the occasional expressions of appreciation for the various types of access that school afforded: playing on sports teams and competing against other teams,

The program staff is aware of the young people's feelings and their understandings about the youths' schooling experiences are confirmed based on phone calls and visits made to the numerous schools that program participants attend throughout the city. This awareness is translated into a daily pedagogic vigilance that is adopted by each member of the Choices staff, from the receptionist and the youth advocate to the educational specialist and program director. Each person takes seriously the possibility that one or more of them may form a connection with the participants who, in some cases, they may one see for a few weeks or days. Sharief, the youth program coordinator, described this approach in an interview as something that was both intentional and happenstance, and most importantly is a stance that all of the staff actively adopt and enact. This enacted pedagogy of care was central to our understandings of how an ethos of belonging was being nurtured and cultivated at Choices.

The staff members thoughtfully select program partners, such as those noted above, that are responsive to participants' needs as well as those that are meant to expand challenge the adolescents' experiences. Outings, both local and more long distance, are another example of this ethos and include a visit to the prison Sing Sing as well as mountain biking and overnight camping. A few members of the staff have also had experiences with the criminal justice system ranging from profiling and arrest to trial and incarceration. Their stories reflect their personal experiences as well as those of friends and family who have witnessed firsthand what many of the youth participants are struggling to make sense of, some for the very first time. When asked to describe the programming at Choices, Ana, the education specialist, emphasized one point repeatedly: "We try to keep things different from school." Even as the staff at Choices, like their colleagues in their parent organization Cases, strive to support young people to stay committed, and in some cases re-commit, to their schooling and educational trajectories (Vasudevan, 2009), they are also aware and respectful of the participants' varying, interrupted, and oftentimes problematic relationship with schooling.

We came away from several of our conversations with young people with a sense that they were not entirely sure of the purpose of school other than that it was an institution that demanded their attendance and attention, placed in front of them a series of benchmarks in the form of tests, filled their days with things to read, calculate, and respond to on demand. Among the contours of

this schooling malaise discourse we found were notable expressions of disdain for how youth felt both misunderstood and rootless in schools.

During previous research experiences (see for example Vasudevan et al, 2010; Wissman & Vasudevan, 2012) as well as current discussions in the field of adolescent literacy (Black, 2010; O'Brien, 2006) further affirmed the restlessness of belonging that we were sensing among the adolescents at Choices. To begin to explore this question of how and where one feels a sense of belonging, from time to time, we asked of the youth a variation on the question: "Where do you feel at home?" Responses varied from the overly specific – e.g. "on my bed reading a magazine" – to the broad – e.g., "with my friends" – to the negative – e.g., "Not at home."

Given the varied lengths of time that young people are enrolled in the program, and the sometimes fickle nature of judges' decisions about whether to continue or change participants' Tier status, consistency of participation was not something on which we could rely. Our challenge was to design one-session activities that were meaningful in and of themselves for new participants, and that also held resonance with previous activities and conversations that would hold the interest of repeat participants. Hearing "This is just like school," raised caution flags for us and we delighted in moments when a skeptical look or vocalization of "What are we doing this for?" shifted ever so subtly to a more shared inquiry around "What are we doing?"

In March of this year, I facilitated a discussion with six youth participants about recent world events, namely the devastation wreaked by the earthquake in Japan. I had printed out color photographs, many of which depicted Japan and others that visually captured moments around the world from the same week, including images of the Arab spring and refugees in Sudan. Prior to my arrival that day, the rest of the team had been working with the adolescents on reading visual images from various perspectives including responding to films through the creation of multimodal texts (such as movie posters and DVD covers) and discussion short social issue films. Thus, my goal that afternoon was to build on this visual literacy work and to build on existing connections between local and global happenings by asking participants to select and image that caught their eye for whatever reason and to write in response to what they saw happening in the image. The actual activity, which we did accomplish, was temporarily put on the back burner as the responses to my opening prompt gave me pause. "Tell me something you've heard in the news recently or something you've heard about the world this week," is the invitation I posed to the group that resulted, initially, in silence. My suspicions that the words "news" and "world" had thrown them off were affirmed as a couple of the participants said dismissively that they didn't watch the news and that they don't necessarily care what's happening in the world. So we started again. This time I clarified my question and invited them to think about the world as large or as small as they wanted to imagine it. The responses were plentiful: there was an earthquake in Japan, a tsunami, a bus crash in the Bronx, a neighbor who was shot, the Celtic lost, and Charlie Sheen tweeted something inappropriate. For the next twenty minutes, the young man who made the comment about the infamous actor was center stage and fielded the taunts and questions from his peers with aplomb. At twelve years old, he was among the youngest participants in the program at the time, and his observation opened up a dialogue about sources and content of what counts as "news." The activity that followed, in which participants made local connections to an image depicting an event a world away,

occurred with a low hum of chatter as they looked on each other's paper, asked me and the two youth facilitators questions, and made observations about the images themselves as well as the stories they foreshadowed. A young man who seemed quite hesitant to write anything down – and I later learned from Ana that he was self-conscious about his print literacy proficiency – took up my invitation to dictate what he saw happening as I transcribed the first few lines for him. "That's it," he asked me with surprise, as he took the orange pen from my hand and wrote an additional two sentences about the scene of wreckage in Japan in the photo he selected. This young man was taken with a little boy who was almost hidden amidst the rubble, and wrote about what he mused was in this boy's head. In a small way, we had shifted from obligatory activity to collective composing. Our continued challenge is to harness this energy to create continually meaningful moments that resonate with as well as complement the existing program at Choices.

As the calendar year unfolded and the move from downtown Manhattan location to two new locations was finalized, the research team and I revised our methodological approach to accommodate this change. In the fall, we introduced three distinct but related workshop strands that grew organically from our work earlier in the year: media workshops, writing workshop, and a discussion group. The emergence of these strands also directly corresponded to the research team's growing familiarity with the project site and rising level of comfort with planning and leading workshops on their own.

Media play

Play and playfulness continue to be hallmarks of media work with young people. Along with the room to play – with ideas, technologies, and artifacts – laughter has also emerged as a significant practice. We have begun to explore how laughter is and can be used to cultivate and nurture community, and also how instances of laughter are suggestive of myriad other responses participants may be experiencing. An example of the convergence of media play and laughter occurred on a late spring afternoon when Melanie brought a video camera to Choices. After being taught a few basic operations on the small, handheld camera, two young men, Darius and James, began to walk around the confined space of the main room and filmed themselves engaging in "fake high-fives" with the program staff and Reimagining Futures Project team. The sounds of their laughter and joking around was contagious and even Nicole, the program receptionist, broke out into a smile as she good-naturedly admonished them for pointing the camera in her direction.

Melanie's initial plan was to provide prompts around which the participants might produce images and media using the various cameras, still and video, that she would then stitch together as an introduction to video-editing as a form of storytelling. One prompt was for each of the participants to film or photograph a single color in various forms – for instance, the blue of the sky, a metallic blue paint on a car door, the deep royal blue of mailboxes, and so on. A group of six adults (four RF Project facilitators and two Choices staff) and five youth participants headed out toward the South Street Seaport, just steps from where Choices was located until July. The short walk was peppered with youthful antics including challenges to one another to jump over this or copy that.

And suddenly, seemingly spontaneously, Hector, one of the participants, began to exclaim "Free Hugs! Free Hugs! The world needs hugs and I'm here to supply them!" In her fieldnotes, Melanie described her reaction this way:

> "And incredibly, strangers on the street gave him hugs. [Thanks Eric for explaining how this video idea happened, I thought it just emerged out of nowhere]. Darius and James switched between using the camera. Of course some people said no, but a lot of people were responsive. It was a much better reaction than some of the people we were approaching near Ground Zero[3]. I don't know if that was because [at Ground Zero] we were in the midst of rush hour, surrounded by people just trying to get home, or if the Seaport has more tourists who are friendlier, but in any case we had a lot more willing participants. It was pretty amazing, actually, because approaching strangers takes courage, and [Hector] was talking to all kinds of people, including businessmen in suits, Japanese tourists, a woman rummaging through trash, etc. He even convinced a few people eating dinner at an outdoor eating area to get out of their seats and give him a hug. After [Hector]. reached ten people, he responded, "okay, let's make it 20!" Eric helped him make a nice, bigger sign saying "free hugs." And [Hector] made it to 20 people. I heard him say a couple of times, "I feel like I accomplished something today." (fieldnotes, 5.25.2011)

This impromptu video-making allowed various participants to participate in different roles. In addition to taking turns behind the camera, three of the young men took on the role of lead hugger and approached strangers with their homemade sign. For one young man, Pedro, this afternoon provided a space to showcase a less reticent side.

During a pre-writing conversation earlier in the spring, participants were asked to think of a skill or practice they could teach another person. Pedro had responded by saying that he could teach someone to sleep. "I know how to sleep!" he said with reserved enthusiasm while seated at one corner of the makeshift square table made up of two non-matching rectangular tables. Most of the remaining six chairs were filled with boys, all of whom looked younger than Pedro who, at barely fifteen years old, had features that made him seem, on the surface, much older; his thick, black hair was held back in a ponytail, he wore colorful sneakers on his feet, and had adopted his own uniform of a large white tee shirt and slightly baggy jeans. Hints of a mustache created a permanent shadow above his lip. This was the lingering image of Pedro until his energetic, grin-bearing visage was at the center of "The Hugs Show," and even he seemed a bit surprised by his extroverted ways during a re-viewing of the video that Melanie subsequently edited together.

During the Hugs outing (as it came to be called) as with many others, participants brought in their existing knowledge as well as material resources such as the Nikon digital SLR that Ravon had brought with him in the hopes that he would have occasion to document using technology with which he was familiar. As some of the other boys took turns with the video camera, Ravon continued to experiment with the settings on his own camera, occasionally seeking advice from

[3] In this post, Melanie is referring to another afternoon of filming during which she took participants to Ground Zero and they engaged in on the spot interviews with people in the vicinity. They were met with mixed reactions, as she alludes to in her description. These outings also allowed us to open up conversations about how public perceptions of youth are mediated and interpreted.

Melanie and Eric, and beaming as Leon and Adrienne, two Choices staff members, asked to see what he had photographed. In subsequent experiences with media play, we learned more about Ravon's musical proclivities that he traced back to first hearing a tape that was played by his uncle who had performed with the rap artist Nas. Ravon was taken with this moment in a profound way and referenced it when asked to describe how he began to learn and explore music:

> "I heard it. I was like, "Wow, that's my uncle." His sound was good. I want to do that.
>
> I got older, I started writing. My cousins used to laugh at me at first. "Oh, that's not going to sound right. You're wet," basically. So then, I kept at it. Then, I put it down because my grandmother passed away.
>
> After she died, I kept listening to music more and more. I started to expand my music mind."
> (Interview with Ravon)

This young man was sixteen years old at the time and lived and breathed a do-it-your-own code that was alive in his neighborhood wherein "[y]ou get knowledge from being out there. You live and you learn, basically." He was not alone in adopting this code and the challenge to cultivate collectivity of a different sort was one that was met by the staff at Choices as well as by the research team. How can an after-school program build on participants' existing knowledge and commitments while still encouraging them to consider other ways of being, knowing, and belonging?

In working with the 12-16 year olds at Choices, we have come to appreciate that while reflection can be an extremely effective practice in interrupting adolescents' impulsive behaviors, a twelve-year-old, for instance, may not yet possess the necessary ability to enact this practice. What we have found is that multimodal activities such as collages and video making, and a pedagogical stance that is responsive to laughter and play, lend themselves to a studio-like space wherein the collective ethos is also individualized; everyone is doing the same thing, but for a period of time they are working on their own. Unlike traditional classroom spaces where adolescents are often working on their own, a studio space is inherently collective and collaborative with room to speak, interrupt, suggest ideas, and comment. However, by providing multiple ways into an activity increases the likelihood of participation and invites participants to engage with one another's artifacts beyond a merely superficial level (e.g., "I like it" or "I don't like it"). Based on these emerging findings, we have begun to draft a curriculum[4] that nurtures these practices more deeply. In addition, we are continuing to refine, through subsequent data collection and analysis, our inquiry about belonging in the lives of court-involved youth so that as researchers, as educators, and as adults who work with adolescent more generally, we can continue to cultivate and create spaces in which to engage in meaningful work together.

It has been our experience that an after-school program such as Choices, which is focused on supporting the educational, social and emotional well-being of court-involved youth, must find ways to attend to four key goals. First, they must work actively and even tirelessly to find

[4] See Appendix A.

connections with each participant, and this involves in part seeing each adolescent as a participant who is, in his or her own way, participating. Second, they must recognize the educational value of arts-based, multimodal, and media-rich activities and projects that do not readily resemble familiar models of school-based instruction and assessment. Third, after-school programs that work with court-involved youth, in particular, but adolescents more broadly, must create regular opportunities for participants to bring in their own knowledge in a variety of forms; thus the curriculum needs pedagogical flexibility (Campano, 2009) as well guided facilitation. Fourth, after-school programs must recognize that all adults in program are potential and actual teachers, and that teaching and learning is always and readily occurring.

Our hope of developing a curriculum that is responsive to the context in which are working, and with the move to a new site we are better able to imagine and implement project ideas that incorporate the surrounding context and neighborhood. This goal resonates with our emerging findings about the need for after-school spaces to break the frame of the day in intentional and explicit ways to allow the multimodal literacies of adolescents to flourish. Our inquiry at Choices leads us to believe that is through their expressions and compositions – in writing, in gesture, in media production, in text choice, and more – that adolescents communicate their sense of belonging. What others (e.g., Smith, 2000; Sullivan, DATE) have described as "attachment" we understand as the dynamic, changing, sometimes fleeting, always in flux notion of belonging that seems to be crucial in how participants experience a program. The opportunity to engage in a program through multimodal ways can impact the extent to which and ways in which they belong.

Looking ahead

In turning our attention to the next phase of this longitudinal study, the preliminary findings move us to ask questions that are both methodological and conceptual:

- How do participatory research projects create spaces for themselves within the organizations with which they partner?
- How does location – including geography, atmosphere, room arrangement – inform participants' experiences in an after-school program? How do they respond and engage with the spaces that different locations afford?
- How do adolescents reconcile various literacy spaces in their lives? Those spaces in which multiple literacy practices are encouraged and those in which literacy continues to be viewed through increasingly limited lenses?
- In what ways can the arts, media, and multimodal engagement serve as both intervention and innovation in the educational lives of court-involved youth?
- How can participatory research approaches provide new forms of evidence that are recognizable to funding agencies and that would allow greater resources to be earmarked for arts-based, exploratory inquiry with adolescents?

Commitment to engaging in this practitioner-grounded inquiry and creating meaningful moments, even if we only see a participant one time, continues to guide this work. In this way, we share the commitment that Choices makes to the young men and women for whom they provide services by locating program design and implementation within an ethos of care that, in

our case, is mediated by and enacted through the engagement of multiple media and modes of expression, and the creation of arts-based and literacy-rich spaces.

References