

# Participatory Action Research, Youth Voices, and Civic Engagement

In what follows, we explore the question of what happens when teachers and students become researchers and the focus of inquiry is student generated and specific to students' day-to-day lives. We do this by discussing two projects in two separate after-school programs in which we worked with youth using multiple artistic affordances to affect community change. These two projects resulted from a community–university partnership that sought to connect youth to their neighborhoods, to foster intergenerational communication, and to encourage youth to speak up and out about the ways their neighborhoods could be more responsive to their needs.

In both projects, youth not only learned to ask, “What is this experience and how could this be?” but “How can it be otherwise” (Goodman, 2003, p. 47). In turn, youth also began to see that literacy is an accomplishment that affects how others see the world. In the process of interpreting and creating multimodal texts, the children began to learn strategies for deliberating, arguing, inquiring, and using evidence to create more equitable conditions for youth living in neighborhoods fragmented by economic development.

## Photovoice and Multiple Affordances for Literacy

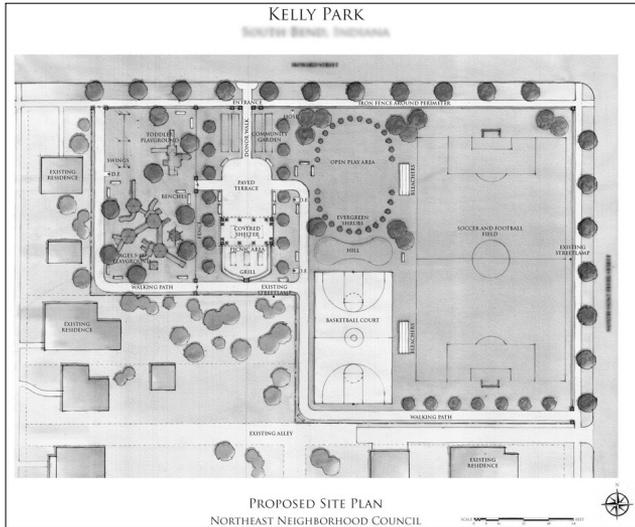
To address what happens when teachers and students become researchers focused particularly on the experiences of kids in the places of their lives, we explain the ways that youth use multiple literacies and art in after-school Photovoice projects to explore the inextricable relationship that exists between identity and place and to use the tools of research to identify problems in their neighborhood that they want to change (Zenkov, 2010; Zenkov, Harmon, Bell, Ewaida, & Lynch, 2011).

Kids consume images in the world around them, and school can enable them to start looking critically at these images, pose questions, and use art to affect how others see the world, that is, to both read and produce texts. As a tool for participatory action research, Photovoice provides children with a rich space to represent their social worlds and order their place within particular environments.

For the project represented in Figure 1, we worked with 12 middle-school-aged youth through a local neighborhood center. Participants used their newly cultivated research skills to propose and carry out a renovation of a local park, represented in Figure 2. Youth used blocks to build what they saw as flourishing communities and used their artwork—collage, drawing, map-making, and whiteboard art—to help adults understand what the children saw as assets in the surrounding neighborhood, as well as some of the problems they felt city planners could help solve. This artwork served “as a living learning tool that create[d] the possibility to identify, acknowledge, and validate the multiple realities that inform and influence their understanding of multiple contexts” (Guajardo, 2013, p. 10). They



Figure 1. Youth coding of research findings



**Figure 2.** Architectural rendering of Kelly Park created with youth input

worked at length to code their own data about the changing face of the city, paying particular attention to what they saw as assets and challenges.

In turn, they discussed how they could go about refurbishing a local park. As Figure 1 shows, students categorized who would use the park, the features they wanted to include, and ways to keep it

safe. To develop priorities, they identified and then voted on those things they valued the most, as shown with square stickies on the whiteboard. The process of identifying priorities informed the proposals and the researched arguments they made to the city. They used evidence to support their position that city leaders needed to

change the conditions in their neighborhood—in this case, a park that could serve as a safe haven for youth and adults.

As we explain below, a second group of 11 primary, middle, and secondary youth enrolled in a year-long leadership program. After participating in a Photovoice project, this group agreed to meet monthly to develop leadership skills by learning how to conduct interviews, map assets and problems

in their community, and plan a course of action to address ways to create meaningful change in their neighborhood. This group also produced a letter to the editor of the local newspaper focused on the need to keep the library doors open in an under-resourced neighborhood.

Our work has benefitted from Freire's (1970) argument that critical reflection not only leads to discovery and action, but ideally to the social transformation of inequality through counternarratives. Using counternarratives, we also draw upon Critical Race Theory to challenge deficit perspectives of low-income minority youth. In this frame, counternarrative values youth's experiences as sources of knowledge for identifying forces of oppression, turns the focus on the assets youth possess rooted in community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and embraces a transformative view of social action and racial justice (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The value of counternarratives for research using visual images as a method is perhaps best asserted by Delgado (1989) as the need for "naming one's own reality" (p. 2073).

In the case of Photovoice, the counternarratives are strengthened by the visceral nature of visual images. We think, as well, that counternarrative is a ready vehicle for aiding students, as they name their own reality, to move toward accessing certain forms of social capital that will become useful in the engagement with the political process. If we consider social capital "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1983, p. 249), we can consider the process of Photovoice as the building of durable networks through powerful visual imagery to tell different kinds of stories about the spaces of the lives of youth.

## Youth Participatory Action Research

In the youth participatory action research (YPAR) we describe, the students have created viable counternarratives informed (outlined and inscribed) by racial and socioeconomic realities that are often ignored both in policy and in research. We

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alternately refer to the children who are participating in this work as co-researchers, youth, and kids. The term co-researcher stems from a methodological lens that pays the same deference to the lived realities of individuals participating in a given study as the researchers' own interpretations (Christensen & James, 2000; Mazzoni & Harcourt, 2013; Norton, 2006). This is deliberate on our part because we privilege children's voices in the adult-centered space of academic writing. Their counter-stories are what we attempt to make sense of in this article.

As apprentices in the research process, youth are empowered to use the tools of research to challenge whose knowledge matters, and YPAR gives legitimacy to youth's experiential knowledge as a lens through which to define problems that have a direct impact on their day-to-day experiences. In this way, YPAR "carves out a space" (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013, p. 2) for youth to share what they know as experts and renders youth as subjects—as opposed to objects in traditional research—who can, along with other community members, examine their daily lives to make progress toward the goal of creating meaningful change. Thus, youth participatory action research takes advantage of youth's position in the

community and their insights into the assets and challenges facing a given community or neighborhood. The perspectives of youth of color, especially in working-class, urban areas, are integral to collecting and analyzing information and to implementing collective action.

Action is, of course, the operative word that distinguishes action research from other forms of inquiry (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). YPAR centers the voices of youth and encourages them to take a critical perspective by naming the problems (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and the assets that adults may often overlook in assessing questions of value in framing what we know. We have thus positioned youth to carve out a space for themselves. After all, they experience firsthand the kinds of exclusionary practices that marginalize them in decisions about what matters in their neighborhoods and schools. Still, we

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## INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org show additional ways students can make connections with their community:

### **Connecting Past and Present: A Local Research Project**

In this unit, students become active archivists, gathering photos, artifacts, and stories for a museum exhibit that highlights one decade in their school's history. <http://bit.ly/14o3vXD>

### **Our Community: Creating ABC Books as Assessment**

As students study the theme of community, they collect vocabulary words and key concepts. With the information they've found, students create alphabet books—individually, in small groups, or as a whole class—using an online tool. <http://bit.ly/1K8nbOP>

### **Not Your Usual History Lesson: Writing Historical Markers**

Students will develop their summarizing skills while learning about local history. They will learn to consider audience while selecting topics, conducting research and interviews, and writing historical markers for their town. <http://bit.ly/1K8oaOP>

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[www.ReadWriteThink.org](http://www.ReadWriteThink.org)

found youth eager to outline places that are safe, places where they can develop relationships with other children and adults, and places where they feel nurtured and enjoy a sense of belonging. These were, it should be said, often public spaces; our youth were tacit and overt advocates of the common.

In writing about youth voices, we recognize the tendency in research (James, 2007) to ignore the intersections of race, class, and gender in characterizing youth perspectives. As adult researchers, we were aware that most research re-inscribes power relations when youth's perspectives are used to advance an argument; we find as well that research

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on and with youth often assumes a universal childhood that speaks in one voice. However, the multiple affordances of literacy allow individual children to speak and to assert their own power in ways that are difficult to appropriate beyond their immediate context. Including youth as co-researchers mitigates, but does not eliminate, the dynamics of power. Nonetheless, as James (2007) points out, "giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children's perspectives can provide" (p. 262). Thus we seek to explain the particularities of youths' experiences in what follows.

## Learning about One's Self and One's Place in the Community

Drawing upon the research of others, we encourage the students we work with to reflect upon who they are and what they need. They explore the following questions (Guajardo, 2013, p. 4):

- What do I value?
- What is the foundation of my assets, challenges, and self-being?
- How do my values influence my practices as a leader?
- What is the role of leadership in making my vision for community a reality?

Underlying these questions is the assumption that personal reflection can enable kids to address their deepest convictions about what counts as a community, who will live in their community, and how residents will interact. For us, teaching and learning in this context of writing and discussion is fluid. Sometimes we just follow the kids, at other times we lead, and sometimes we work as partners as we shift conversations from familiar situations to the unfamiliar analysis of data abstracted from our co-researchers' day-to-day experiences (Goodman, 2003). We can accomplish together what kids might not be able to achieve on their own.

Telling stories is a key part of engaging the community and interpreting its needs, assessing its assets and challenges. Kids learn best when they personally connect to and engage with a given subject like place. Consistent with Kim (2013), we have worked to "provide opportunities for young people to speak freely—safe spaces for them to speak their mind and reveal their truths and confront their truths no matter how convenient or inconvenient they might be, for others or for themselves" (p. 398). Moreover, telling stories and speaking freely in the midst of discomfort provide kids with an opportunity to (re)author their own identity in what Goodman (2003) describes as a story-making process, one that is critical to building community based on trust, relationships, and empathy. We are reminded of Zenkov and his colleagues (2011) who found that "city youth trust people—leaders, teachers, family members, and adults in general—who have the courage and wherewithal to interact with them personally, even if doing so involves sharing unfavorable information" (p. 129).

With the value of emplacing narratives, creating trust, and building the capacity to share hard truths in mind, we ask kids to write "Where I'm From" poems (Christensen, 2000). Writing this kind of poem invites them to connect who they are to the places where they live. They write their poems after they have spent time considering what they believe defines a place, drawing maps of their neighborhoods, reading and discussing Sandra Cisneros's (1989) *House on Mango Street*, using blocks to build what they see as a flourishing community, and then watching a video of George Ella Lyon reading her own version

of “Where I’m From.” We then ask the students to circle the words they like from the poem and then share those words with the rest of the group. At this point, we tell the students to make a list of the memories from their neighborhood, sayings they recall from parents, friends, and relatives, smells of food they recall at family gatherings, words from songs, and the like. Many of our co-researchers choose to represent some of these elements in drawings as well. Finally, we ask them to write a poem like George Ella Lyon’s that they would be willing to share.

It is important to note that through writing “Where I’m From” poems, children can consider the complex relationship between place and identity. For instance, Leah tried to make sense of the memories of where she came from as opposed to where she is now in both space and time. We learned from our conversations with Leah that she moved from the urban decay of a large city to live with her aunt who works at the local community center where we conducted this study. The center and her aunt both offer stability, warmth, and a future unimaginable just a few years ago. Thus Leah writes with a sense of hope and renewal: “I am the tree with dead leaves during troubling times that has hoped to keep staying on.” Leah is also the little girl who “stares at her old street and look[s] at the abandoned houses and cracked up sidewalks.” The deteriorating houses with bricks crumbling near the center connect her past and present.

Writing gives children some sense of clarity. Freire (1987) refers to the “‘word universe’ of people who [like the children in our project] are learning, expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, and dreams. . . . Surveying the word universe thus gives us [children’s] words, pregnant with the world, words from the [children’s] reading of the world” (p. 35). Performing their poems helps them see their roles as public people and that writing is an accomplishment—something they are doing that affects how they see themselves and how their words affect others. As Freire (1987) has put it, they are learning to read the word and the world.

However, the movement from a private person to the position of leader, a transition so critical to empowering youth, is a learned process that requires the help of adults to scaffold the strategies needed to take on roles as social agents. The theory of action that informs our work is that literacy, in its many affordances, serves as an instrument for youth to imagine, explore, and act to change their own and others’ circumstances.

### Youth Voice and Agency

The social developmental work of teaching, learning, and leading helps us get to the sharing stage in our work. First and foremost, this means building relationships. But there are challenges: students from diverse backgrounds, schools, and neighborhoods

## NOW ACT!

Photovoice asks students to take pictures of their neighborhood documenting assets and needed changes. We’ve found disposable cameras to be useful because it keeps the task bounded by a limited number of photos. Walking with the students through their neighborhoods as they look for pictures to take is invaluable. It is in this space that they are able to narrate their understanding of the spaces that are valuable and to delineate their sense of where their neighborhood begins and ends.

From here you might consider extending to other modes of literacy. We’ve found that teaching kids basic coding activities (as in our example of formulating an argument for how to rehabilitate the park near the community center) helps them feel fully engaged as co-researchers. At this point, it’s perhaps worth asking them to imagine, using architectural (or really any kind of) blocks, their ideal neighborhood. We find that the process of building allows them to work through complex imaginative spaces. We recommend, as well, reading in companion to this work “Where I’m From” (Lyon, 2010) and *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1989) to provide models for how kids might write about the experiences they are creating with their photography, building, and narrated walks.

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must find ways to negotiate differences, make choices, and develop a common vision for their work. Thus, we work with children to help them listen to the voices of other children in a trusting space where they can take risks, explore ideas, and challenge one another in fruitful ways, all the while taking “ownership” of their ideas with voice and “critical habits of mind” (Goodman, 2003, p. 58). As Kim (2013) puts it, “When young people change the nature of conversation itself, we witness the fundamental practice of voice that is literacy” (p. 394).

We share others’ concerns that youth’s voices have not been a part of the ongoing conversations about educational disparities along

racial lines (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), the consequences of gentrification on low-income families of color (Burke, Greene, & McKenna, 2014), and the effects of poverty on the life paths of children (Jones, Newman, & Irsay, 1997). Indeed, the “omission not only silences those most affected by educational inequalities, it also denies the research community valuable insights” (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013, p. 1). Kinloch (2013), too, has called attention to the “silenced dialogue” that excludes the perspectives and voices of youth. James (2007) shares a different concern centered on the appropriation of youth voices, noting that there is a genuine risk in using children’s voices merely to confirm established prejudices rather than to highlight new insights available to all through the words of youth. Further, she notes that the unified category of “children’s voices” risks essentializing the myriad and nuanced ways in which individuals address problems in their lives. Our work seeks to

## FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

There are many resources available for supporting teacher preparation and implementation of student action research. Here are some that have worked well for us:

- <http://www.richblockspoorblocks.com/>

In the text we mention that we’ve used Zipskinny to help the students get a bird’s-eye view of demographic and socioeconomic pictures of their spaces. This website links to different data and can be used in lieu of Zipskinny software. We also find the *New York Times* 2010 Census Map very useful for putting pictures to abstract concepts: <http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/map>

- <http://captura.llanogrande.org/>

“Since 2001 the Llano Grande Center has employed digital storytelling for community change initiatives, as well as to help students gain admission into college. In many cases, students’ digital stories become their personal statements for college admission. In other cases, youth and adults have produced digital stories to build public support for various causes such as to renovate a town park, to pass a bond election to build new schools, or to train teachers on how to be more responsive to student and community needs.”

- <http://www.evc.org/tools>

“The Educational Video Center is a non-profit youth media organization dedicated to teaching documentary video as a means to develop the artistic, critical literacy, and career skills of young people while nurturing their idealism

stress the “value of each individual voice” (hooks, 1994, p. 40) while working to say something larger about the value of listening to youth voices.

Unfortunately, studies of low-income minority students’ underachievement emphasize pathology in a “culture of poverty,” the lack of parental support and stability, high drop-out rates, and the extent to which schools support a school-to-prison pipeline (e.g., Wright Edelman, 2012). The statistics can indeed be alarming. But children’s research and writing enables them to name problems they face, to show adults assets where we might see deficits, and to reframe who they are—to challenge the media’s portrayal of kids as out of control or dangerous. We use our work with youth to help them name their realities through multiple literacies in the varied spaces where they live and go to school. In this light, then, we discuss the second of two projects supported by the principles of youth participatory action research (Fox et al., 2010).

### Asking for the Specifics of What You Need

Over the course of the last eight months, we have been meeting with kids from both elementary and middle school who are part of a youth leadership program we designed with a nonprofit organization tasked with revitalizing low-income neighborhoods. This kind of partnership between community activists and university researchers reflects a push to move research out of the ivory tower and into communities (e.g., Paris & Winn, 2014). The partnership that we describe in the pages that follow also stresses the value of understanding youth perspectives on the dearth of affordable housing in their neighborhoods, the threat of the loss of vital goods and services through increased tax cuts, and the need to provide safe spaces for kids to be kids.

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and commitment to social change.” The site has curriculum materials, study guides, and research articles in support of the documentary work it has done and for teachers to access in and for their classrooms.

- <http://www.humansofnewyork.com>

Brandon Stanton “began Humans of New York in the summer of 2010. [He wrote] I thought it would be really cool to create an exhaustive catalogue of New York City’s inhabitants, so I set out to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers and plot their photos on a map. I worked for several months with this goal in mind, but somewhere along the way, HONY began to take on a much different character. I started collecting quotes and short stories from the people I met, and began including these snippets alongside the photographs. Taken together, these portraits and captions became the subject of a vibrant blog.” The site is a compendium of multimodal visual and written texts that tell the story of a place (New York City) in literally thousands of ways. Students might benefit not only from the digital rhetorical positions demonstrated on the site, but also from the very concept of telling the story of a city through the photos and words of its inhabitants.

- <http://documentarystudies.duke.edu/about>

The Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and particularly their project “Literacy through Photography” (<http://www.cdsporch.org/archives/tag/literacy-through-photography-2>) provides links, texts, and visual, audio, and written representations of the activist possibilities present through multimodal texts. The LTP section would be helpful for teachers seeking ideas for ways to use Photovoice in their classroom to connect kids to local and neighborhood-based social issues.

We are continually struck by kids' belief in relationships, community, intergenerational communication, and a democratic sense of participation and inclusion. Unfortunately, we have also learned from kids that they often feel silenced, even invisible, when adults speak about what it means to revitalize neighborhoods. The adults in their world often ignore the value of green spaces, parks, and public spaces that draw people together. Still, communities are vital sources of student learning, and increasing spaces where children learn can develop intergenerational relationships that may help kids see that their ideas matter. This is particularly true of the ensuing discussion.

We invite you for a moment to listen to an elder in our community who we invited to talk with 11 children in our youth leadership program. Opportunities for youth to talk

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with community elders are far too rare, and yet this discussion and others like it help youth build a community that can support their vision of what they want for themselves. Indeed, this is an underlying purpose of both projects that we describe in this article—to connect people, young and old, and strengthen their abilities to act as citizens.

Charlene, a former city councilwoman, activist, and faculty member at a local state university, was one of three elders who spent two hours talking with children about community and engagement. All of the participants encouraged the kids to reflect on what they believed, urging them not to be afraid to ask for what they need to flourish. In the excerpt below, the former councilwoman asks what the kids need—a question (we have been told over and over again by the youth with whom we work) that no one has ever asked them in or out of school:

**Charlene:** One of the things I am really interested in is [pause] . . . so I was born in 1947 right after WWII, and I was 18, 19, 20 during the Civil Rights movement, which I am sure you have studied in your books, so I am very interested in what young people need. . . .

What do you need from us to achieve your dreams, desires, and goals? What do you need from *us*? And by us, I mean your community.

**Ariel:** I think we need good role models . . . because I can get a little discouraged when I don't see black women who are doctors and I want to be a doctor. . . . there's not a lot that relates to me. I get a little discouraged when my studies get hard.

**Charlene:** So what can the community do for you . . . when your studies get harder and harder? How can the community help you with that? So you won't get discouraged in relation to your studies?

**Ariel:** I think programs like this [our youth leadership program] to meet African American women leaders are important.

Charlene listens to Ariel and gives Ariel her contact information with the promise of introducing her to a number of black female doctors whom she knows. In this instance, we see the value of extending Ariel's sense of community and well-being, particularly the value of social capital that comes from meeting people who can support kids and help them find ways to do things for themselves.

Charlene turns to another child and asks "What about you, Nicholas?"

Nicholas is a quiet, thoughtful young man who has also participated in a prior Photovoice project with us. He hesitates and says, "A good education, learn as much as you want and not having restrictions . . ."

**Charlene:** Could you be specific? A good education is . . . what do you need exactly? What do *you* mean by a good education for you and nobody else? Just for you . . . what can the community do to help you realize your aspirations and dreams? If you do not ask for what you need, you will get discouraged because you're not getting it . . . because you're not specific. So I would encourage you to be specific. . . .

We contend that this type of conversation represents an important opportunity for youth to develop

relationships with community leaders—to sit at the same table and have a discussion as partners sharing the common goal of improving a neighborhood, but more specifically their own and their peers’ lives. In this excerpt, Charlene teaches the kids some of the strategies that she has learned to get things done. As Nicholas begins to think through what he wants, Charlene wants him to make an argument that also underscores the tension between agency, voice, and social structures that often limit kids’ opportunities to flourish. It’s one thing to give voice to what Nicholas needs; it’s quite another to recognize the roadblocks that often stand in the way of educational opportunities.

Below, we illustrate the ways we can help kids “be specific” by doing research and developing a collective voice. Social capital is not enough. Working with others in crossing generational lines needs to be combined with political capital. The kids are learning through collective agency to obtain resources and services to help them flourish, and they are learning that “high levels of social capital enable people to assert their political capital” (Goodman, 2003, p. 106). Our students exist in a space where adult influence can be made to facilitate access to communities that will inevitably foster connectivity to powerful social and political actors.

### Students Become Stakeholders through Community Stories: Saving Our Libraries

In what follows, we return to two key questions from above: *How do my values influence my practices as a leader?* and *What is the role of leadership in making my vision for community a reality?* To address these questions and demonstrate our approach to teaching leadership and civic engagement, we provide another snippet of the conversation between the children and Charlene. In the excerpt below, Maria prompts Nicholas so that he can be more specific about what he needs from the community. Maria uses the language that the kids have adopted when she asks, “What’s one of the community assets that you [Nicholas] use all of the

time . . . that you need?” Nicholas struggles to be more specific, and Maria tries to help with some leading questions. Then Charlene offers specific strategies to advocate for what the children feel strongly about:

**Nicholas:** The library . . .

**Maria:** Why?

**Nicholas:** Because it can help you learn like when you’re studying . . . books and things.

**Charlene:** So are our libraries adequate? Are you getting what you need from our libraries?

**Nicholas:** I think so, yeah.

**Charlene:** Okay.

**Maria:** Do you wish they were open at different times? Do you wish they had different people in place to help you? Do you wish there were different things there?

**Nicholas:** Yeah, sometimes. I know one day they’re closed when most people have free time.

**Charlene:** What day?

**Nicholas:** I forget the day when they’re closed. Would that be on Sundays? [Turning to others] Do you know?

**Maria:** The library is not open as long on Sundays.

**Charlene:** The library has a board of directors. . . . I would encourage you to go online to find those people and communicate with them. I would encourage you and at least five other young people and maybe some parents—some adults or some teachers—to go before the Board and ask for that [to have longer hours on Sundays]. I have to tell you one of the things that I did was . . . they tried to close the LaSalle branch library twice, and I was one of the group that *fought* [her emphasis] not to close that branch. And we watch them like a hawk. Over our dead bodies will they close that branch. And I mean that. So you have to speak up.

We see this exchange as a poignant moment of intergenerational communication and a teachable moment. An elder in the community, Charlene had referred to her own youth and participation in the civil rights movement. She has told Ariel that she will help her meet African American female doctors. And now Charlene harkens back to her own activism to ensure that a library kept its doors open, while also telling Nicholas and others ways to organize for change. She ends by encouraging them to keep thinking about what they need.

Fast forward to a winter morning. We are talking with this same group of youth about a recent set of cutbacks that will force schools and libraries to make some difficult decisions. We give them an article in which the director of libraries is quoted as saying, “Despite our efforts to keep the LaSalle Library open and busy, it experienced a 10.9% decrease [as measured by borrowed media] during the first ten months of 2013.” He subsequently recommends closing the same library that Charlene said she and others fought to keep open 10 years ago. In addition, he has suggested limiting Saturday hours at the remaining branches, except for the main branch downtown.

We talked to the children about libraries and their purpose. We brought up the fact that the first library was built in 1778 in Philadelphia, just two years after the Continental Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence. Libraries, we explained, are democratic because they are open to all people who wish to use them, but they rely on taxes for support, and they are governed by a Board. Now we were getting specific, and the kids responded forcefully and indignantly.

Next, we showed them a map of all of the branches of the library in the city and circled those in three areas that are furthest from the city branch that the director of libraries planned to keep open. The library on the far left in Figure 3 is the library that Ella uses and that the director has said he wants to close to save money. We then asked the kids to

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**Figure 3.** Map of libraries in the city

go to the whiteboards in the room where we met and process the situation of the potential closing. The kids filled the whiteboard: Where will people go if you close it? How many people actually use it without necessarily borrowing books? How many events are held at the library? Are there other social spaces where children and adults can meet? Is the building cool in the summer and warm in the winter? These questions asked us all to consider libraries as social spaces.

In this inquiry activity, we worked to help youth develop “the capacity to work toward a more deeply democratic public sphere that not only includes youth but relies on and incorporates their intellect and voices” (Kim, 2013, p. 396). Equally important, the kids were coming to believe that borrowing books is not a sufficient metric for determining usage. One child wrote, “It’s a meeting place, a safe place that people can escape to . . . it’s a place for knowledge for all ages, especially our generation.” So the kids argued that the Board needs to do a survey to gauge how often people use the library. One outraged child asked, “Why aren’t the adults thinking of these things?” Clearly, kids were coming to voice in meaningful ways that reflected their investment in a place that was meaningful to many of them because it was “their” library.

We also stretched the children by introducing new “variables,” such as who lives in the neighborhoods surrounding the libraries in Figure 3.

How can we describe their backgrounds, are there bus routes nearby, and what other goods and services exist in these neighborhoods? To examine these variables, we told them about various websites, mentioned here, they could use to be specific about the effects of closing a library or limiting hours, especially in low-income neighborhoods. We showed them how to get this information, seen in Figure 4, including how many kids live in a given neighborhood, income levels, and the percentage of residents who are unemployed or who live at or below the poverty level. As we discussed these concerns, we were well aware that we were showing that closing a library is a social justice issue.

More important, we were equally aware that we were helping to equip youth with a skill set that they could use to create a plan for action. In this

case, we would write a letter to the Board together. By examining the data, youth could provide leadership and direction for a director, and presumably the Board, who, without understanding the community’s story, had ignored the consequences of closing the library. The youth could easily put a face on the problem because *they* were the kids who were affected by such a decision.

After examining in small groups the demographic information they got from their web research on the two laptops available to us, youth again took to filling up whiteboards with ideas. On one board (replicated in Figure 5) students began to draw conclusions about what is a relatively low-income neighborhood where the median income for approximately 57% of families is between \$10,000 and \$34,000. The youth argued that the

**Figure 4.** Neighborhood demographics for area surrounding LaSalle branch library

Social Indicators		Economic Indicators	
Educational Achievement	Marital Status	Household Income	Occupation
<i>(Among people 25 or older)</i>	<i>(15 years or older)</i>	<\$10,000: 8.7%	<i>(employed, over 16 years old)</i>
Less than 9th grade: 4.9%	Never Married: 29%	10k-14,999k: 7.1%	Mgt/Prof.: 27.2%
9th to 12th grade (nongrad):15.8%	Married: 50.7%	15k-24,999k: 15.1%	Service: 16.2%
HS graduate: 35.6%	Separated: 3%	25k-34,999k: 15.9%	Sales/Office: 28.1%
Some college: 20.6%	Widowed: 7.1%	35k-49,999k: 20.5%	Farm/Fish/Forestry: 0%
Associate degree: 4.6%	Divorced: 10.2%	50k-74,999k: 20.1%	Construct/Maint.: 6.7%
Bachelors degree: 11.8%	<b>Stability/Newcomer Appeal</b>	75k-99,999k: 7.8%	Product/Transp: 21.8%
Graduate/Professional: 6.6%	Same home 5+ years: 56.8%	100k-149,999k: 3.5%	<b>Unemployment/Poverty</b>
High school or higher: 79.3%	<i>Based on 2000 Census data</i>	150k-199,999k: .4%	Unemployed: 5.6%
Bachelors or higher: 18.4%		200k+: .9%	Blw Poverty Ln: 13.3%

**Figure 5.** Whiteboard notes from youth

**Stable Neighborhood**

56% have lived 5+ years

20% (1/5) are kids 18 and younger

**Bus Route**

50% of people in neighborhood make \$34,000 or less

20% of St. Joe County and 13% of LaSalle Neighborhood are at or below poverty line; 6% are unemployed

neighborhood around LaSalle library on the far west side may seem impoverished, but it is a stable community. Important to youth in our leadership group was that 20% of the population consists of kids who probably use the library.

Youth were telling a story about their community that was simply unknown to decision makers, or these decision makers were ignoring the evidence that youth found vital. In the end, they provided a roadmap for research in their collaboratively written letter to the editor and raised important questions about whose interests are served by closing a community asset:

As a community, we need to know more about how people are using this library. How can we support our community? Are the choices we are making benefiting everyone, or just some? These are points we need to take into consideration. As a council, we feel until all these questions are thoughtfully answered, there has been insufficient planning for the removal of a community asset.

## Conclusion

Youth's uses of different literacies to represent their worlds complicate the idea of counternarrative and

*Youths' stories prompt us to reimagine after-school programs as places that can serve as bridges between the struggles students experience in the neighborhoods they inhabit and the vision for community they may offer with their stories.*

offer us a multitextured understanding of the ways children make sense of the urban landscape. Children come to voice and a belief in their capacities that we wouldn't see without these multiple affordances of building with blocks, writing poems, using the whiteboards, and coding the information they collected. We see changes in the children's collective belief in themselves

and the role they can play in creating meaningful change in a world where little space is given to children's input about decisions that affect them.

How can we measure learning? Children's use of multiple sign systems enabled them to develop

a sense of agency as authors of their space within the structural forces of racial segregation and economic development that would naturally marginalize and silence their voices. Youth also began to see familiar spaces in new ways (Hull & James, 2006) by reimagining possibilities in what can be conceived of as youth's performance of literacy (i.e., through reading, writing, speaking, and taking photographs). It seems appropriate to characterize children's enactments of self through image and text as performance, because the ways in which children construct meaning are always in concert with others (Hull & Katz, 2006). They used cultural tools of language, image, and text in new contexts and reappropriated these tools in ways that enabled them to develop a sense of agency.

Youths' stories prompt us to reimagine after-school programs as places that can serve as bridges between the struggles students experience in the neighborhoods they inhabit and the vision for community they may offer with their stories. As Goodman (2003) points out, reimagining the school day for urban kids "can create opportunities to connect and bring relevance to their varied experiences of school, mass media culture, and community life" (p. 100). We argue that programs like the one we discuss here provide a logical starting place for reinvesting time and energy in opportunities for relationship building with children.

We also think it is vital to understand how an anchored, community-based organization provided the kind of structure necessary for kids to flourish. The argument for community and university partnerships requires that we recognize how educators, community leaders, and activists can work together to ensure that we distribute resources more equitably. To marginalize the kinds of experiences we describe risks "isolating youth from the communities" where they live and limits educators' abilities to understand children's emotional, social, and intellectual needs (Goodman, 2003, p. 101). Understanding youths' perspectives on what it means to flourish is especially important at a time when neighborhood schools are disappearing and policies have eroded public spaces (Greene, 2013) where

youth have opportunities to build relationships and a sustaining sense of community. Without schools as anchors in neighborhoods, it is more essential than ever to understand how to create and maintain vibrant communities that support youths' sense of identity, agency, and development.

Moreover, we have learned from youth that providing opportunities for analysis and critique of the discursive tensions between what is and what could be is not enough (Weinstein & West, 2012). Multiple literacies serve as a discursive space through which to examine these tensions and the structures that stand in the way of a more equitable distribution of material resources that would enable youth to flourish. But while helping to give voice to the tensions that exist between what is and what could be, we would be remiss if we did not also take responsibility for helping kids navigate the economic and institutional barriers that they confront each and every day (see also Weinstein & West, 2012). Low (2011) puts it well when she observes that teachers and after-school programs can forge connections between home and school in order to foster children's emerging sense of leadership, creativity, initiative, and civic responsibility as a form of social action. It is important that these things are "recognized and supported in both places" (p. 151).

In the end, we echo Kinloch's (2013) sense that research should continue to examine how children, youth, and adults "make sense of our own spaces, how we come to, or are taught to, question the meanings of the spaces we occupy, and how spaces help to foster our sense of agency, of power, and of belonging to something, someone, or somewhere." We would argue further that engaging youth in the multiple affordances of literacy can help complicate both the visible and invisible signs of inequity within schools and communities that mask seemingly democratic principles of equal opportunity and access. Youth need both educational and rhetorical spaces that value their experiences (see also Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008), give them the ability to engage in critical, creative analyses of their lived experiences, and engage them as full partners in their own learning.

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