




2017

# Connected Learning In School: Making Identities In Youth-Led Affinity Spaces

Veena Vasudevan

University of Pennsylvania, [veena.vasudevan@gmail.com](mailto:veena.vasudevan@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Vasudevan, Veena, "Connected Learning In School: Making Identities In Youth-Led Affinity Spaces" (2017). *Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations*. 2623.

<https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2623>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2623>

For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Connected Learning In School: Making Identities In Youth-Led Affinity Spaces

## **Abstract**

This visual ethnographic account explores how students at an urban high school cultivated their own youth-led affinity spaces: a youth activism group, a dance team, and a film club. My research examines how and why these youth-led spaces emerged, the kinds of making students did within the spaces, and how their identities shifted or changed over time both within and outside of these spaces. My research responds to discourses that seek to reimagine school through interest-driven learning. The Maker Movement and Connected Learning are two such movements that argue that students' interests should be an integral part of their school learning experiences. These movements argue for students' learning and participation in school to be active and authentic, to build on students' out of school literacies, and to position students as creative agents. In urban districts, students are often subjected to test prep and didactic approaches that limit how youth express and demonstrate learning and are disconnected from their own interests or affinities. In creating youth-led affinity spaces, students were exercising agency, engaging in leadership, and pursuing their interests. Thus far, there has not been an examination of interest-driven learning, schooling, and identity. My examination of youth-making can create opportunities for youth to cultivate dialogic relationships with peers and adults, draw on their out of school literacies and media knowledge to influence their making, and perform new identities – within the institutional boundary of school.

## **Degree Type**

Dissertation

## **Degree Name**

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

## **Graduate Group**

Education

## **First Advisor**

Amy Stornaiuolo

## **Keywords**

connected learning, ethnography, making to learn, media, urban schooling, youth

## **Subject Categories**

Education | Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies

CONNECTED LEARNING IN SCHOOL:  
MAKING IDENTITIES IN YOUTH-LED AFFINITY SPACES

Veena Vasudevan

A DISSERTATION

in

Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2017

Supervisor of Dissertation:

---

Amy Stornaiuolo, Assistant Professor of Education

Graduate Group Chairperson:

---

J. Matthew Hartley, Professor of Education

Dissertation Committee:

Amy Stornaiuolo, Assistant Professor of Education

John L. Jackson, Dean of Social Policy and Practice, Richard Perry University Professor

Stanton Wortham, Dean, Carolyn A. and Peter S. Lynch School of Education, Boston

College

CONNECTED LEARNING IN SCHOOL: MAKING IDENTITIES IN YOUTH-LED  
AFFINITY SPACES

COPYRIGHT

2017

Veena Vasudevan

This work is licensed under the  
Creative Commons Attribution-  
NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0  
License

To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/u>



## Dedication

To the greatest ‘kiddos’ I’ve ever known, the Design School students. I want you guys to know that I love you all dearly. My friendships with you have been bright shining light of this experience and every minute spent with you was time that I sincerely treasured. I mean it when I say you changed my life. You made me a better teacher, a better friend, a better person. Thank you. I can’t wait to see where the world takes each and everyone one of you – and it better be ready – because you are amazing.

And, for Lalithamma, whose unused fifth grade yellow school frock always reminds me of how precious education is and how hard people must fight for this basic human right.

## Acknowledgements

My committee: Amy Stornaiuolo, John L. Jackson Jr., and Stanton Wortham

Amy, thank you for your enduring support throughout this process and for giving me the opportunity to be a part of this project. I've enjoyed working alongside you and learning from you as we thought together about youth, communities, and literacies. This has been a long and unexpected journey and it means a great deal that you helped me to tell stories that really mattered.

John, thank you for your enduring mentorship throughout my graduate experience. I am so thankful that you were one of my teachers. You helped me to cultivate a love for storytelling, filmmaking, and ethnography and pushed me to think critically about the boundaries of scholarship. Thanks for always encouraging me and seeing the value in my questions about the world.

Stanton, thank you for your support and guidance throughout this process. You illuminated the power of language and discourse which has really shaped my scholarly work. I am thankful that you were one of my teachers and appreciate that you helped me to continually cultivate my visual ethnographic practice.

I want to thank some GSE faculty members with whom I had the pleasure of working with over the last several years. They have offered important mentorship and opportunities in my scholarly journey and I am immensely grateful for their support: Yasmin Kafai, Kathy Hall, Rand Quinn, and Amit Das.

To my teachers: Sigal Ben Porath, Gerald Campano, Vivian Gadsden, Torch Lytle, Matthew Hartley, Sharon Ravitch, Janine Remillard, and Brian Street. The two years I spent in coursework were so rewarding. I had the opportunity and the intellectual space to grow as a scholar. Much of the thinking and inquiring I did in those two years were largely impactful on my dissertation and will continue to shape my work going forward.

To my dear GSE colleagues with whom I spent important hours, thank you for your friendship, camaraderie, and for your support along the way: Matthew Tarditi, Nora Gross, Grace Player, Erin Whitney, Emily Plummer, Jin Kyeong Jung, Sofia Chaparro.

Thank you to Charles Washington, Zach Nasin, Kamal Dreher, Mike Herzog, Veronica Aplenc, and Paula Rogers for your support over the years.

To the Design School staff, I am immensely grateful that you invited me into your community and let me be a part of something special. It meant the world to me that I got to work alongside such fantastic people whose enduring belief in the capabilities of young people will forever inspire me. The Design School is a place I always feel at home and that is due to the love, kindness, and empathy each of you show every day.

To the amazing students at the Design School: Ally, Aziz, Anya, David, Daymon, Denise, Kendrick, Mira, Nathaniel, Ruby, Star, and all the other amazing young people I had the good fortune of working with over three years. You shared your lives with me and became a part of mine. We started a great and unexpected adventure in the fall of 2014. Throughout, you entertained my questions, my theories, and my ideas. I am so thankful that I got the chance to learn and collaborate with you guys – it has been one of the greatest experiences in my life. Thank you for coming on this journey with me.

Batsi, thank you for listening. For your kindness, empathy, and genuine support.

My family has sustained me throughout and I am eternally grateful to them:

To my sister, Lalitha, your advice, questioning, and willingness to hear me talk things out, throughout this journey has meant so much to me. Your work and your way of being in the world inspires me and I hope my scholarship can be as thoughtful and impactful as yours has been. To my brother, Krishnan, thanks for your enduring support, camaraderie, and endless humor. Your perseverance and fearlessness inspire me, it felt good to be on this journey together. To both of you, I owe you so much, thank you for being there for me every day (literally and virtually) your friendship means the world to me.

To Matt, thanks for all the lunches and dinners peppering me up and our riveting debates about the weather, it was so good to have a big brother around in Philly. Sabine, you filled the last few years with so much happiness; you make me laugh and reminded me every day of the beauty in life. Mairead, thank you for all the self-care tips, for being my digital style guru, and for reminding me that keeping art in life is a beautiful thing.

Mom, thank you for your endless optimism and unwavering belief in me, now and always. Dad, thank you for pushing me to reach for the stars and being confident that I could make anything happen. I feel so fortunate to have parents who have always encouraged me to go after my dreams and who fostered in me a sense that we lived in a great big world that was open for exploration. It is not lost on me how fortunate I am to have this opportunity and I owe so much to you both for getting here.

To my in-laws, thank you for your support and reminders for us to stop and smell the roses and enjoy life.

Alan, my husband and best friend, thank you. You supported me and inspired me and kept me going. You listened as I theorized, imagined, and had ‘wonderings.’ You let me process days and weeks of school happenings, allowing me to share all the ethnographic details that were teeming inside my head at the end of each week of fieldwork. Amazingly, you did this while building a company and enduring so much professional stress. I can say confidently that without your love, patience, and humor, I would not have gotten through it.

ABSTRACT

CONNECTED LEARNING IN SCHOOL:  
MAKING IDENTITIES IN YOUTH-LED AFFINITY SPACES

Veena Vasudevan

Amy Stornaiuolo

This visual ethnographic account explores how students at an urban high school cultivated their own youth-led affinity spaces: a youth activism group, a dance team, and a film club. My research examines how and why these youth-led spaces emerged, the kinds of making students did within the spaces, and how their identities shifted or changed over time both within and outside of these spaces. My research responds to discourses that seek to reimagine school through interest-driven learning. The Maker Movement and Connected Learning are two such movements that argue that students' interests should be an integral part of their school learning experiences. These movements argue for students' learning and participation in school to be active and authentic, to build on students' out of school literacies, and to position students as creative agents. In urban districts, students are often subjected to test prep and didactic approaches that limit how youth express and demonstrate learning and are disconnected from their own interests or affinities. In creating youth-led affinity spaces, students were exercising agency, engaging in leadership, and pursuing their interests. Thus far, there has not been an examination of interest-driven learning, schooling, and identity. My examination of youth-making can create opportunities for youth to cultivate dialogic relationships with peers and adults, draw on their out of school literacies and media

knowledge to influence their making, and perform new identities – within the institutional boundary of school.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>xii</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction - Interest-Driven Learning in Urban Schools</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>In Pursuit of Educational Equity through Connected Learning</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<i>Maker Movement: Creating Spaces for Youth to Tinker and Fail Through Authentic Experiences</i> .....	9
<b>Study Overview</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<i>Establishing A Site</i> .....	12
<i>Finding My Footing</i> .....	16
<i>Youth Led Spaces</i> .....	18
Breaking Boundaries.....	19
Dance Team .....	20
Film Club .....	21
<i>Ethnography as A Window Into Understanding</i> .....	22
<b>Chapters Overview</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Social Construction of Identities</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<i>Cultural Constructions of Youth</i> .....	28
<i>Critical Race Theory of Education Reveals Persistent Educational Inequities</i> .....	31
<i>Institutional Identities: The Role Schools Play in Shaping Youth Identities</i> .....	35
<i>Nurturing Affinity Identities Led to In-School Affinity Spaces</i> .....	38
<i>Figured Worlds as a Framework to Explore Identities in Practice</i> .....	40
<i>Identities in Practice</i> .....	42
<b>Learning as a Social Process</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<i>Embodied, Dialogic, and Personally Meaningful Learning</i> .....	44
Making to Learn.....	47
Finding Time, Space, and Support to Make, Learn, and Fail. ....	48
Connected Learning.....	49
<i>Youth-Led Spaces as Learning Contexts</i> .....	51
<b>Multimodal Making and Composing: Expanding Modes of Expression</b> .....	<b>52</b>
<i>Expanding What Counts as Literacies: New Literacy Studies</i> .....	52
<i>Expanding Modes of Expression through Multimodal Composing</i> .....	54
Multimodal Compositions Create New Ways of Participating.....	56
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>58</b>

<b>Chapter 3: Site Context and Methodology .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Filling a Need for High-Quality Education: The Design School Starts Up .....</b>	<b>60</b>
Community Context.....	62
The Design School Model: Competency-Based, Design Focused, Personalized for Youth.....	63
Youth Development Focus Embodied in School Motto: Love, Dream, Do.....	66
School Demographic Data 2014-2015.....	70
School Demographic Data 2015-2016.....	71
<b>Writing and Picturing Culture to Understand Youth’s Worlds .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<i>Visual and Multimodal Ethnographic Methods to Enrich Data Collection .....</i>	<i>74</i>
<b>Research Design .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<i>Participants.....</i>	<i>84</i>
<i>Youth-Led Spaces.....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Data Collection.....</i>	<i>93</i>
Participant Observation.....	94
Participant Interviews.....	95
Student Artifacts and Compositions.....	96
General Ethnographic Data.....	97
<i>Data Analysis.....</i>	<i>97</i>
Discourse Analysis.....	98
Multimodal Data Analysis.....	100
<i>Validity and Reliability .....</i>	<i>102</i>
<b>Chapter 4: Youth-Led Spaces as Figured Worlds: Cultivating Connected Relationships With Self, Peers, And Adults Through Making Together .....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Youth Development Orientation Nurtured Student Self-Making in School.....</b>	<b>106</b>
<i>Authoring Artifacts: How Composing Multimodal Artifacts Communicate the ‘Self’</i>	<i>107</i>
<i>Denise Engaged in Self-Making Through Multimodal Composition.....</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Written Artifacts Can Carry Messages and Catalyze Change.....</i>	<i>111</i>
Self-Making Catalyzed Social Action and Group-Coherence.....	115
<i>Acts of Self-Making Shifted Students’ Understanding of School Positioning.....</i>	<i>121</i>
<b>Cultivating Relationships with Peers: Making/Dancing as Collaboration.....</b>	<b>122</b>
<i>Finding a Rhythm: Students Collaboratively Compose.....</i>	<i>123</i>
Collaborative Compositions Lead to Expressions of Joy.....	129
Developing Trust and Comfort Takes Time and Effort.....	131
<i>Dance as a Pedagogical Space.....</i>	<i>133</i>
Identifying the Problem: David and Ruby Work to Discern the Pain Points in a Dance Sequence.....	134
Collaboration With Trusted Partners Reveals Humility.....	137
Problem Solving Together: Close “Reading” of Dance as a Pedagogical Move. ..	138
<b>Students’ and Adults Work Collaboratively To Make Things That Matter.....</b>	<b>145</b>
<i>Youth Voices Spur Change.....</i>	<i>145</i>
<i>Dialogic Relationships: Students and Adults Co-Creating and Learning Together ..</i>	<i>150</i>

<i>Collaborative Work Sessions Create Opportunities for Sharing and Composition ...</i>	155
<b>Cultivating Connected Relationships Within the Boundaries of School .....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Youth as Agentic Curators of Their Mediascapes: Immersions in Self-Imagining and Composing In and Out of School.....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>Youth’s Mediascapes .....</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Designing Mediascapes as Figured Worlds .....</b>	<b>169</b>
<i>Interest-Driven Mediascapes As Windows into Self-Imagining .....</i>	170
<i>Messages and Images In Media Can Inspire Action .....</i>	173
How Media Images Can Inspire Us To Feel Confident About Who We Are. ....	173
Images Can Inspire Action.....	175
How Media Can Inspire Youth to Channel Several Passions into Media Production. ....	178
<i>Media as an Aspirational Looking Glass .....</i>	181
Aspirational Media: How Images Can Facilitate New Kinds of Self-Imagining. ..	181
Media Facilitates Big Dreams.....	184
<b>Making in Youth-Led Spaces Invited Youth Mediascapes Into School .....</b>	<b>186</b>
<i>Mediascapes Bringing the Global to the Local .....</i>	189
<b>Mediascapes Reflect Youth’s Identities .....</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>Chapter 6: How Making Activities Within the Youth-led spaces Created Opportunities for Students to Adopt and Try Out New Identities .....</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Identity is Constructed, Improvised, and Performed.....</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Making an Event Happen: How A Bake Sale Gave Students Opportunities to Perform New Identities.....</b>	<b>201</b>
<i>Being Positioned as Leaders: The Role of Improvisation in Figured Worlds.....</i>	205
<i>Urgency Within Making Activities Leads to Amplification of Identity Performances of Leaders and Group Members .....</i>	214
Voicing Their Concerns: Student Members Become Fuller Participants. ....	218
<i>Leadership Identities Thicken Through Making Activities .....</i>	227
Having A Voice: Socially Positioning Students as Leaders Nurtured Agency. ....	229
<b>Civic Identities: How Making Together Creates Opportunities for Fuller Participation .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>235</b>
<i>Towards a Theory of Connecting to Youth .....</i>	235
<i>Pathways to Civic Engagement Start with School Citizenship.....</i>	238
<i>Non-Dominant Youth Need to Be Prepared for the New Economy.....</i>	240
<i>A New Standardization: Personalized and Interest Driven Learning .....</i>	243
<i>Towards Connected Classrooms .....</i>	246
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>248</b>
<i>Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Students.....</i>	248
<i>Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Key Educators .....</i>	250



<i>Transcription Conventions</i> .....	252
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>253</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1 - STUDENT LEADER PROFILES: DENISE, ANYA, MIRA.....	86
TABLE 2 - STUDENT LEADER PROFILES: RUBY, DAVID, STAR .....	87
TABLE 3 – BREAKING BOUNDARIES 2014-2016.....	89
TABLE 4 – CAUTION DANCE TEAM 2014- 2016 .....	91
TABLE 5- FILM CLUB 2015 .....	92
TABLE 6 - PARTICIPANT DATA COLLECTION 2014 - 2016.....	95
TABLE 7 - DENISE'S SPEECH ABOUT BREAKING BOUNDARIES .....	113
TABLE 8 - RUBY & STAR BRAINSTORM NEW CHOREOGRAPHY .....	127
TABLE 9 - STAR AND RUBY COLLIDE WHILE BRAINSTORMING CHOREOGRAPHY .....	128
TABLE 10 - RUBY AND STAR CELEBRATE THEIR NEW CHOREOGRAPHY.....	130
TABLE 11 - DAVID AND RUBY REALIZE THEY ARE TEACHING THE SAME CHOREOGRAPHY.....	136
TABLE 12- RUBY TRIES TO DEMONSTRATE THE CHOREOGRAPHY.....	138
TABLE 13 - RUBY READS DAVID'S PERFORMANCE .....	140
TABLE 14 - RUBY CONTINUES READING AS DAVID MARKS THE STEPS.....	142
TABLE 15 -BAKE SALE EVENTS DECEMBER 2014 - JANUARY 2015.....	214

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1 - PRINCIPLES OF CONNECTED LEARNING.....	51
FIGURE 2 - DESIGN SCHOOL ON FIRST DAY 9/8/14 .....	63
FIGURE 3 - (LEFT) SLIDE OF DENISE’S THOUGHTS (RIGHT) KEY PHRASES ABOUT STUDENT POSITIONING IN SCHOOL.....	108
FIGURE 4 - THE FINAL VERSION OF THE BREAKING BOUNDARIES RECRUITMENT FLYER DESIGNED BY DENISE AND MS. V USING GOOGLE DRAWINGS.....	110
FIGURE 5- RUBY AND DAVID WORKING WITH DANCER 1 AND DANCER 2 RESPECTIVELY .....	135
FIGURE 6 - THE JOURNEY OF THE 'DEATH DROP' FROM JACKSON MISSISSIPPI (TOP LEFT) TO SPRING TALENT SHOW (BOTTOM RIGHT).....	164
FIGURE 7 - SNAPSHOT OF NATHANIEL'S INSTAGRAM DECEMBER 2016 .....	171
FIGURE 8 - SCREENSHOT OF AZIZ'S BLOG DECEMBER 2016.....	177
FIGURE 9 - AZIZ INSTAGRAM INCLUDES HIS PHOTOGRAPHS OF STREET FASHION (INCLUDING FRIENDS POSING AS MODELS) .....	178
FIGURE 10- DENISE'S INSTAGRAM WHERE SHE POSTS HER REMIXES.....	181
FIGURE 11 - IMAGE OF ACTRESS DREW SIDORA PLAYING LUCY IN STEP UP! .....	183
FIGURE 12- DANCING DOLLS DEMONSTRATE DEATH DROP IN YOUTUBE CLIP .....	188
FIGURE 13- (LEFT) THE FIRST PART OF THE DEATH DROP WHERE HANDS ARE ON THE FLOOR AND LEGS ARE IN THE AIR, FEET POINTED TOWARDS THE BODY. (RIGHT) THE END OF THE DEATH DROP WHERE THE BODY IS COMPLETELY STILL. ....	189
FIGURE 14 - THE DEATH DROP IN THE T-PAYNE REMIX AT SPRING 2016 TALENT SHOW. ....	190
FIGURE 15 - BREAKING BOUNDARIES STUDENTS GEARING UP FOR BAKE SALE.....	205

## **Chapter 1: Introduction - Interest-Driven Learning in Urban Schools**

Trying to understand how classrooms become productive places for all students, particularly those from non-dominant communities who attend urban public schools, has been at the heart of an ongoing inquiry that has spanned more than a decade of my life. In that time, I have worked with young people in a range of learning contexts including after school arts programs, academic tutoring, informal workshops, and classrooms. In each of these contexts, I have observed how young people light up when they are making something interesting to them – whether it is sharing a music video they just composed, shrieking with glee after mastering a difficult piece of choreography, or excitedly telling you about the latest scene they wrote for a film script. This kind of learning that emanates from youth’s passions, curiosities, and wonderment is interest-driven learning. Observing these interest-driven learning moments when time stops and youth are rapt with excitement or joy because they are making something that matters to them led to me to wonder what might happen if we were to reimagine classrooms to position students’ interests as the central lever for learning. My dissertation research, a two-year ethnographic study, explores what happens when young people from non-dominant communities are given the time and space to engage in interest-driven learning within the boundaries of an urban public high school. This dissertation aims to elevate students’ voices by focusing on the relationships between interest-driven learning, identity, and school.

In the Spring of 2014, I heard about a new high school that would implement a curriculum that emanated from students’ interests and questions about the world. The school was planning to implement a competency-based curriculum and three

interdisciplinary labs that put primacy on embodied learning through making things (or making to learn). The school would start with roughly one hundred first-year students and was open-admit, which meant that there were no entrance exams or other academic requirements that served as barriers to matriculation. I was intrigued by the school because it was offering a pedagogical vision that put students at the center and was also focused on youth development.

Serendipitously, I learned that one of my professors was working closely with the principal and was establishing a research site at the school to examine the shifting nature of students' literacy practices within the interdisciplinary labs. After one meeting with the principal I was convinced that I had found the right place to think about what happens when students are given opportunities to engage in interest-driven learning. My initial plan was to find a group of focal students with whom I would work with closely and observe them across contexts –in their classrooms, in the lunchroom, and in other activities they engaged in outside of school. By doing so, I wanted to understand how the school's pedagogical approach would impact individual students and how (if at all) their identities – particularly their attitudes toward school – shifted through their experiences in making-oriented pedagogical spaces.

During the school's inaugural year, I was there nearly full-time, arriving when the teachers did and staying late into the evening. I learned about students' interests, goals they wanted to accomplish, and things they were curious about or excited for as they began their high school journeys. Over time, these relationships led to the inception of three youth-led affinity spaces: a youth-activism group, a dance team and a film club. I use the term affinity space to indicate that these are spaces where students came together

because of a common endeavor or shared interest. I use the term youth-led to suggest that these spaces were motivated and led by students' interests and that students took ownership for most of the activities. The youth-led spaces were therefore co-created by students and myself but could come to fruition because of the conditions available in the school including flexibility on part of the staff and encouragement from the school principal. Youth-led does not suggest the absence of an adult; instead, we (the students and I) worked as collaborators – they made the final decisions but sought my counsel when needed. As an adult, I also helped legitimize their activities since students are not allowed to gather without an adult present in school<sup>1</sup>.

As these spaces began to emerge and become a regular part of the school day, I observed that many students became increasingly dedicated to bringing their goals to fruition. They were willing to meet during their lunch period and sometimes came in early or stay after school to work together. Students were putting substantive effort into interest-driven activities within the institutional boundaries of school. I decided to shift my ethnographic inquiry to these youth-led spaces and the students who worked hard to cultivate and maintain these spaces. These youth-led affinity spaces demonstrate what happens when young people are given time, space and support to pursue things that matter to them. They also reveal insights about how schools might invite students' interests into classrooms.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a school district policy that suggests one adult must be present when students gather in any school space.

## **In Pursuit of Educational Equity through Connected Learning**

The persistent inequities within urban education are visible in how students are treated and in the pedagogical limitations students' experience. Across America, urban districts are resource-starved and students in these communities are more likely to attend schools that are overcrowded, have higher numbers of inexperienced teachers, and lack significant human (e.g. librarians, nurses) and material resources (Kozol, 1991; Gadsden et al. 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Students who attend these schools, particularly students of color, are more likely to experience disciplinary action like suspensions and detentions. Moreover, students of color are conscious of the ways their bodies are actively policed (Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2003). As one young man recounted as we sat together working on an assignment, "*Miss, you don't understand my last school was like jail, they didn't let you do anything unless they said you could*" (Field Note, January 5, 2016). His previous school had not been a site of possibility for this young man. Instead, it was a place where he was told what to do from the moment he set foot on campus. To succeed students have to silence their voices, control their bodies, and produce school expectations for 'good' students (Fine, 1991). Race, in particular, continues to be a defining factor in students' school experiences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) particularly for those students who live in urban communities.

Recently, there has been increased visibility into the poor learning conditions for young people in urban schools. Countless news stories have documented the verbal abuse, physical violence, and psychological warfare that young people experience in simply being in classroom spaces. Outside of schools, *Black Lives Matter* has shined a light on how Black and Brown people continue to be vulnerable to institutional racism,

police violence, and inequitable treatment. The social inequities that are visible in the world outside of school are also often reproduced within school walls.

Inequity is also reproduced within students' pedagogical experiences. First, as standardized tests have gained more prominence in education, classroom pedagogies in urban settings have become increasingly stagnant with teachers forced to devote significant time to test preparation over meaningful learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Standardization also reinforces the notion that there are correct ways to read, write, and communicate or convey knowledge, thus creating distance between students and schools because of differences in language and literacy practices (Street & Street, 1991; Hull & Schultz, 2001). Traditional classrooms don't build on or recognize students' funds of knowledge and lived experiences as important parts of the educational experience and as such don't make space for students' interests or passions as part of formal academic work. Urban schools fail to meet students' needs by not creating the conditions for them to succeed and feel connected in school settings, which leads to ambivalence about their own education (Nieto, 1999).

Taken together the conditions for learning like school facilities, disciplinary procedures, and available resources coupled with the emphasis on standardization, exposure to less-experienced educators, and fewer opportunities to be creative in the classroom reproduce the systemic racism that exists outside of school walls. In the world we live in today, these conditions and lived experiences of young people in urban contexts are much more visible, fueling conversations about educational equity and the substantive achievement gaps that have been previously rationalized as issues with youth and families versus with the systems (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009).



Recently, interest-driven learning has become a more significant part of the educational discourse to offer more equitable learning experiences for students. The proliferation of mobile technologies and new media tools reveal the creativity and technical prowess of young people outside of formal educational spaces like school classrooms. Young people in urban communities have embraced mobile technologies in particular for creative, political and personal pursuits but their practices are often not welcomed into classrooms. The disconnects between young people's lives inside and outside of school have fueled substantive research, pedagogical examination, and conversation about the ways interest-driven learning could help to change how young people, particularly those from non-dominant communities, experience school.

It was this recognition that schools are out of step and out of touch with young people and the broader social-cultural worlds that shape their lives that spurred the 2013 report: *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research Design*. The report argued for substantive shifts in the nature of teaching and learning to incorporate youth's interests into their education. The authors argue for a connected learning approach which "is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement" (Ito, Gutierrez, Schor, Sefton-Green, & Watkins, 2013, p. 6). In contrast to the ways that young people are often identified as being "disconnected" in their in-school learning experiences, the goal of "connected learning" is to more effectively leverage young people's existing knowledge, passions, and curiosities. To do so, they favor learning that is production-centered, openly-networked and has a shared purpose. These three tenets acknowledge that youth

are cultural producers (Levinson & Holland, 1996) living and creating (or making) in a participatory world. By acknowledging youth's contributions, they are also positioning youth as agentive and capable.

Central to this framework is the authors' concern with the increasing equity gaps in education particularly for those young people from non-dominant communities and a recognition that expanding the ways young people can express knowledge and understanding, creating contexts to value different kinds of knowledge, linguistic practices and literacies could meaningfully address some of the persistent inequities in school classrooms today. Examples of connected learners include youth who moderate their own fan fiction sites (e.g. HarryPotter.net) to those who have their own YouTube television shows, to those who engage in role playing games that require extensive writing and communication. Such engagements are interest-driven (or affinity driven) and offer opportunities for youth to compose, communicate, and create across time, space, and modalities. *Connected Learning* also embraces youth's new media and technology practices and acknowledges the participatory, media-saturated worlds that they inhabit.

I have met many students that are actively engaged in participatory cultures: they are making, creating, and communicating around interests. One of those students was Denise<sup>2</sup>, a young woman full of passion and ideas. She was a prolific writer and collaborator in online spaces but shied away from academic writing because they felt far removed from what she cared about. In the below vignette, I have shared a little bit of Denise's experiences writing in and out of school.

---

<sup>2</sup> All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities.

*One afternoon, Denise and I were seated in the hallway chatting about a number of things when she turned to me excitedly, talking a mile a minute to ask me if I'd ever heard of Wattpad, a social media site devoted to writing. Her eyes were bright with excitement as she opened up the app on her phone and flipped through her profile then showed me all of the different book covers she had designed for other writers who had liked her designs. She talked about how she stayed up reading- becoming obsessed with story after story. Over time I would learn that her favorite genres were teen fiction including those that focused on romance, werewolves and drama. She also told me how she had written her own novel and was working with a collaborator on another idea. She was collaborative, social and prolific in her writing in this online space that she had discovered via Kik (an online messaging app and quasi internet homepage for youth). The same young woman, within the first couple months of school, was falling behind on her academic writing. She did not understand the point of the essays and tasks that were stacking up in her Google assignments tab – often questioning the reason she had to do any of the work at all. As we sat together during the spring of her freshman year just weeks from the last day of school, I was saddened by the genuine struggle on her face as she tried to push through a handful of essays that felt onerous and far outside her realm of interest. All the class time she had spent scanning YouTube music videos, watching films, or stealing away to read a few chapters of a Wattpad book had caught up with her.*

For Denise in her first couple of years in high school, academic writing felt laborious because she could not find a way to connect to the content and sometimes to her teachers. There were also other factors including issues within her home life that affected her attendance, ability to focus, and motivation from day to day. The challenge schools have before them is to nurture the Denises of the world by connecting on a personal level, by taking her passions and interests into consideration and inviting her out of school literacies and knowledge into the classroom. In her case, perhaps the school would find a way for Denise to use Wattpad in school instead of having it blocked by the district firewall. Maybe she could work with her humanities teachers on applying the standards to her writing, design work, and leadership within Wattpad. Perhaps the movies she watched could be a source of critique for a persuasive essay.

The Connected Learning Framework (Ito et al. 2013) acknowledges the creative and agentic work that young people like Denise are doing every day in out of school spaces that go unnoticed or devalued by schools especially for students from non-dominant communities. Thus, the authors espouse an educational philosophy that suggests schools must shift what learning looks like. By orienting learning around students' interests and taking into account youth's funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and positioning students as capable and knowing, educational equity is much more likely to be achieved.

This framework has been instructive to my research because it looks at the dimensionality of youth's lives and acknowledges that interest-driven learning is an important context for research. It allows us to see the creative and agentic work youth are engaged in within and beyond school. Moreover, it allows for a substantive focus on youth's lives something that educational research often claims to do – but does not always deliver.

### **Maker Movement: Creating Spaces for Youth to Tinker and Fail Through Authentic Experiences**

Another source of tension between youth and school is the lack of authenticity in their academic work. As Denise's story above suggests, and the *Connected Learning* framework also articulates, young people are already engaged in the kinds of experiences that give them access to authentic materials, audiences, and feedback. Authenticity in this case is both about ensuring students aren't simply learning things to pass exams but also, they aren't doing 'school' versions of things but rather activities in the world that have real impact and implications. Young people solving authentic problems is a theme that is

central to a resonant educational movement to *Connected Learning* that is known as the *Maker Movement*.

The *Maker Movement* is relevant to my research because it illustrates how technologies can be leveraged for learning experiences and the ways students across the age spectrum can be engaged in meaningful and authentic inquiries of their own design. Innovations in technology and shifts in communications technologies provided fertile ground for the *Maker Movement* to thrive (Dougherty, 2012). The ethos of the movement is one that encourages learners to tinker and fail, to ask questions, and to make things that matter to them. What began as a grassroots movement that paralleled the technology (or hacker) culture of building, sharing and failing (Thomas, 2002) has transformed into a sophisticated economic movement that is fueling the do-it-yourself (DIY) economy (Anderson, 2012; Hatch, 2013). Increasingly within educational contexts, the Maker Movement is being embraced by policymakers, educators and researchers to provide youth with learning experiences that encourage them to be excited and open to the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines (Blikstein, 2013; Honey & Kanter, 2013; Kalil, 2013).

The embrace of maker culture is visible in the growing numbers of makerspaces in public libraries, after school programs, and museums as well as other informal learning contexts (Honey & Kanter, 2013; Halverson & Sheridan, 2014; Vossoughi & Bevan, 2014). Makerspaces are places where anyone can make and create. They are equipped with different tools and resources designed to encourage an ethos of tinkering and questioning and they are also designed to be inherently collaborative. Maker projects particularly celebrate the production of physical artifacts (Anderson, 2012) but also

promote the importance of giving youth experiences to produce things using authentic materials and tools as well as opportunities to learn from experts and make authentic artifacts that are meaningful to makers (Brahms & Weiner, 2013; Petrich et al., 2013). Schools are increasingly making forays into adopting makerspaces or incorporating maker projects into existing academic courses (Blikstein, 2013; Vossoughi & Bevan, 2014). Examples of maker projects range extensively but include electronic and computational projects like building robots, workshopping projects like 3D printed objects, and crafting projects, to name a few.

While they are focused on different facets of youth making, both *Connected Learning* and the Maker Movement suggest a growing popular sentiment that schools are not fostering playful, creative participation connected to young people's interests. In addition, these movements illustrate how leveraging the vast and proliferating technologies and media – that link young people to a network of passionate learners and experts – can be transformative for learners. They both acknowledge that learning cannot simply be limited to a classroom space but instead must invite the networks and spheres of influence that shape youth's lives. Both movements also espouse learning that is embodied, experiential, and interest-driven, and position youth's inquiries and questions as valid and worth examining. Valuing students' inquiries, questions, and interests is implicitly valuing various aspects of students' identities. As I shared above, I came to this dissertation research inspired by the possibilities of young people being engaged in making because I could see how they were able to instantiate aspects of themselves into their work.

What drew me to the *Connected Learning* framework was that it explicitly made space for youth's out of school literacies, interests, and ways of knowing and participating. The *Maker Movement* offered a learning ethos that encouraged mistakes and framed failures as learning opportunities – making it clear that there are multiple ways to solve problems or develop solutions. These frameworks offer evidence that there needs to be a substantive paradigm shift from the traditional frameworks and pedagogies that exist in most schools which often promote answer getting and knowledge acquisition in place of real learning and do not see the value in classrooms being spaces for youth to make, tinker, and play.

Second, and equally important, is that the adoption of the ideas that proliferate in these two making-oriented movements reflect the growing cognizance that there is a disconnect between teaching and learning in schools and the changing world outside of schools that can no longer be ignored. Public education in America is increasingly seen as falling short of preparing youth for the shifting economic realities that require new ways of communicating, comfort using technology to solve problems, and an understanding of the expansive service and information economy (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ito et al., 2013). With growing economic inequality and political instability in the global system and here at home, schools must be places of possibility that support youth.

## **Study Overview**

### **Establishing A Site**

During my last semester of coursework I was deeply immersed in a scholarly inquiry guided by the question – *what catalyzes youth to be makers?* As I began to

examine the available research on the larger educational movements like *Connected Learning* and the *Maker Movement*, I felt that many of the ideas that emanated from these movements had transformative potential for school classrooms. I did, however, observe that educational equity was not being explicitly addressed in the rhetoric and research around the *Maker Movement*. While the *Connected Learning* framework was explicitly built around the idea of educational equity, there was no substantive research on how this framework could be realized within a school, particularly schools that are situated in resource-starved districts with long histories of educational inequity. I was interested in trying to find a school site where I could examine making-oriented pedagogies through students' eyes. I wondered how this shift in pedagogical frameworks – putting students at the center of their own learning through authentic work – might resonate with young people whose schooling experiences have been limited due to resource and pedagogical constraints.

At this time the School District of Philadelphia was going through a chaotic period – the district had announced a slate of school closures and other cuts that had rattled the community. The school closures added to a long litany of concerns related to the district's public schools that go back many years: poor facilities, regularly occurring violence, large class sizes and general overcrowding, and the lack of financial and human resources. During the 2014 – 2015 school year, district officials had warned that there would also be significant decreases in school nurses, guidance counselors, and librarians (Denvir, 2014). The continued cuts and lack of attention to the needs of students and families in Philadelphia placed the school district employees and the governing body, the School Reform Commission (SRC), under increasing public scrutiny as parents,



educators, and concerned citizens spoke out about the poor conditions and lack of resources that made the district's academic goals of college and career readiness by graduation seemingly unachievable.

Amidst this chaos, the school district also announced they would be opening a handful of new high schools that would adopt innovative educational approaches. These three schools were controversial because they were being opened in communities where other neighborhood schools were closing. The school district explained they were opening these new high schools because neighborhood schools were failing their students. The district argued that the three new high schools gave students, whose academic or behavior records made them ineligible for the magnet schools in the district, an opportunity to receive a high-quality education that was steeped in innovative pedagogies.<sup>3</sup> One of these high schools was the Design School<sup>4</sup>.

The principal, Mr. Greene, that was recruited to lead the Design School was a charismatic educator who had taught in Philadelphia for just under a decade. He was dissatisfied with how schools functioned for young people and was energized by the chance to do something different for students who wanted to attend a college and career preparatory program but missed out on opportunities at the other specialized high schools. Mr. Greene's plan was to usurp the traditional school format by shifting pedagogies to be student-centered, which included innovations like playing with time by implementing asynchronous learning (students learn at their own pace), emphasizing youth development over discipline, and immersing young people in authentic and real world experiences through community-based partnerships.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://crossroads.newsworks.org/index.php/local/keystone-crossroads/84850-overall-pa-graduation-rates-respectable-but-some-urban-districts-lagging>

<sup>4</sup> This is a pseudonym. All institution, student, and educator names have been changed.

The Design School would offer core academic classes (science, mathematics, language arts and social studies) as well as three interdisciplinary lab spaces in lieu of traditional electives. These three labs would leverage design thinking, which is an approach to learning where students are engaged in solving real world problems salient to students' lives. In the school's first year the three labs were focused on digital media, civic engagement, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) respectively, and most distinctly reflected the growing influence of maker culture in educational settings. The three interdisciplinary lab spaces were imagined as contexts that valued new ways of knowing and participation that are often unavailable to students in urban districts. All the courses were required to maintain a competency-based model but would have creative liberty over the content and structure of the curricula.

My initial plan was to study how young people made sense of making-oriented pedagogies and what impact it had on their identities. I wanted to understand students' perceptions of school, their hobbies and passions, their out of school media literacies, and what impact making oriented pedagogies had on their identities, if any. I started my fieldwork as a member of my advisor's research team. Her larger ethnographic project was examining the shifting literacy practices embedded in the innovative labs that attempted to emulate maker culture. As a member of this design research team I would support teachers, spend time in the labs and document my general observations. Then, after being immersed in the school for a few months, I would identify a group of focal students who I would work with more closely – learning about their interests and attitudes toward school and academics and observe over time how those interests and attitudes did (or did not) shift as a result of engaging in a making-oriented curriculum.

Through my fieldwork, three youth-led spaces began to take shape, and I began to see different instantiations of making and interest-driven learning that seemed worth closer examination. Thus, I moved my focus from looking at youth and identity with regards to their experiences related to the making-oriented curricula to thinking about youth and identity in relationship to their work in the youth-led spaces. I maintained my interest in understanding young people across contexts – but using the youth-led spaces as one of the primary ways I would examine their making practices versus the academic classroom.

### **Finding My Footing**

In the early months of the 2014 school year I spent significant time speaking with students and asking them about their interests and their impressions of school. One of the things that students were immediately frustrated by was the absence of activities available. They had anticipated that there would be sports teams, clubs, a gym for activities, and other opportunities. These conversations eventually led to my support of the students as they tried to get various projects off the ground. This approach reflected my commitment to and understanding of ethnography as a practice that is immersive and responsive to the participants and the site that ultimately rests on the question, *what is going on here?* (Malinowski, 1950).

One afternoon I happened to be in the English teacher's room during the student advisory when they held hasty elections to elect two class representatives that would be part of a team to write the school's first constitution. There were 12 representatives in all – two from each of the six student advisories. That morning the elected representatives

plodded down to a large sprawling classroom to draft the constitution with the help of the science teacher who scribed as students brainstormed ideas.

Curious about how this process would unfold and interested in the idea of student leadership, I decided to observe what was happening. In the beginning students were arguing and talking over each other still unsure what the purpose of their work together was. However, as the day wore and students started to get to know each other, the dynamic in the room began to change. They started to unpack the challenges of being a student and their hopes for high school. They shared stories about family members, personal struggles and academic challenges. Some students cried while others offered condolences and support. This created a new energy in the room and the group that had spent the morning arguing then dreamt up possibilities for being student leaders and for improving the school. They got excited about what else they might be able to do together and made a commitment to remain a group and asked for my help in doing so. For a few weeks into the school year, this group met during lunches and a few times after school.

Their first big goal was to do a presentation for Back to School Night to welcome parents and spread the word about their organization, which sought to improve the lives of students at the Design School. That night they impressed the small gathering of parents and teachers in the room by engaging in a short semi-scripted performance where they each shared a challenge they had faced in life and a word that defined some aspect of their lived experiences. Denise, whom I mentioned above introduced herself by saying, *“my name is Denise, I’ve been through bullying and a word that describes me is, invincible”* (Field note, September 30, 2014). Denise and two other students who were part of the presentation would go onto become leaders within the youth-led spaces.

After each student had introduced themselves and shared something they had overcome, a young Latinx woman who had been an outspoken leader from the very first day synthesized the presentation by explaining that it was important to persist no matter what life handed you. It was an inspiring night and the first substantive contribution that youth had made in culture building at the school. It was the school's first foray into youth-led work. Unfortunately, a week or so later the group mostly disbanded as a result of social conflicts that created a rift amongst students.

Through this experience I got to know many students and worked with them to build community in their fledgling high school. I believe the time I spent with students cemented my role as a supportive adult within the school. Students became comfortable around me and saw that I was there to help them. I also inhabited spaces where there weren't other adults, like the lunch room, the hallways, and the back row of classes. Taken together, these early weeks and my work with the first youth leaders of the school I believe made me visible to students as an adult friend whom they could trust and work with.

### **Youth Led Spaces**

The phrase 'youth-led affinity spaces' has become personal to me but is not a phrase that is widely used in educational scholarship especially when it comes to schools. I build on Gee's (2005) theorizing of affinity spaces that he described as places where people come together around a shared interest or common endeavor. Gee (2005) argued that affinity spaces inherently nurtured learning because they were built around what people were passionate about and allowed for them to become experts, but affinity spaces do not suggest hierarchies around who holds knowledge and how they can engage in

spaces. In our context, the youth-led spaces also created opportunities for young people to take ownership and leadership over activities within the spaces – especially those students who had a vision for what the work could or should be. As I said before, youth-led does not imply that youth do not need support from adults or outsiders, but rather they are valued as partners in co-creating the space, vision, and activities of the respective groups. Given that students’ primary responsibility was towards their academics, I did several things to help them with their schoolwork.

In the conceptual framing chapter, I will further elaborate on youth-led affinity spaces as well as the theories that have been instructive in helping me think about them. For now, I want to share briefly how each of the three youth-led affinity spaces emerged. In later chapters I will also offer more substantive analysis about the relationships, making activities, and identity shifts that occurred within the spaces.

**Breaking Boundaries.** One of the young women who was in the Constitution Kids group (see page 16 this chapter) was a young woman named Denise. After the original group disbanded, Denise was still passionate about working with other students to improve the school community. In November 2014, Denise asked if we could meet to talk about an idea she had for a new group. Gaining permission from her student advisory teacher, we sat in the hallway as she articulated a vision for a group that would encourage young people to ‘break boundaries’ and be confident in who they were. As someone who had experienced bullying and other challenges, she wanted to bring a group together to mentor and support others in the Design School community and possibly at other schools. Over the course of a week we worked together to design a flyer, recruit participants and secure permission from the principal to gather during lunchtime. A couple weeks later, in

the same sprawling room that had launched the constitution kids, ten students and I sat in a circle and listened to a speech Denise had written to inspire the group and provide context for its activities. I jotted notes and worked with other students to film snippets of the meeting and Denise mentioned I would help be their documentarian. We agreed to meet at lunch each week, which we did for several months, making time for students to share their stories and over time also tried to figure out how to mentor other students and plan activities to benefit others and the school community.

**Dance Team.** I had met a student named Paul on the first day of school, one of the first kids to arrive. I would see Paul a great deal because I spent significant time in both his media literacy and Language Arts classes. During one of our conversations Paul had expressed his interest in creative pursuits of all kinds – from drawing to dancing. During a celebration in early October he showed off his dancing skills and spoke about a performance he had done the year prior to a Michael Jackson song. In early November, inspired by Denise’s announcement about Breaking Boundaries, he tried to recruit students to join him to be part of a dance team. Paul was particularly enthusiastic about the opportunity to gather and dance together. Soon, several others including a young woman named Ruby and another one named Andrea approached me about also being involved with the dance team. Paul, Ruby, Andrea, two other students and I met at lunch one day and discussed how we could coordinate our first practice – we talked through possible songs, genres and artists and agreed to bring 32 counts to practice. The following Monday, in the same large classroom we gathered for our first dance practice –joined by another student named David who was insistent that he must be part of the school’s inaugural dance team. We began to meet regularly, twice a week at first, to choreograph a

piece we would use for school wide auditions. Then, once we had assembled a full team, we met twice a week to prepare for our talent show. We held two in the Spring and Summer of 2015.

**Film Club.** In the Spring of 2015, several months into the school year, many students had expressed interest in film production. The principal had also updated the schedule to include two hour-long periods a week for choice activities – which were elective periods where students could participate in interest-driven activities like music, art, and chess. I decided to offer a documentary film elective. On the first day of the elective, I had a group of students – some of who had been randomly assigned and others who had chosen to be there – gathered together. As I tried to offer some context on documentary filmmaking one young woman who had chosen to be in the class grew irritated that what I offered was not interesting. Unprepared for a mutiny, I ultimately started a new conversation, asking students to share what they thought filmmaking was about which soon transformed into a discussion where the group was excitedly talking about making their own film. So, we put documentary aside and decided to write and produce our own film as a group. Unlike the other two spaces, film club was more of a hybrid youth-led affinity space. The reason I call it a hybrid space is because there was time built into the schedule to have film club but the content of our work together emanated from students’ interests related to film and photography. Our meetings, twice a week from the last weeks of March until school ended, were filled with writing, filming, and other creative activities, with the ultimate goal of making a film together.



## **Ethnography as A Window Into Understanding**

As I mentioned above, the three youth-led spaces came to fruition during my immersion into the ethnographic context at the Design School. As my conversations and work with students became more focused on their interest-driven efforts I asked the fundamental ethnographic question of these new developments: *what is going on here?* (Malinowski, 1950). I chose ethnography because I wanted to bring dimensionality to my understanding of youth's lives and I also wanted to be able to look holistically at factors that shaped their schooling experiences. Doing research that was immersive and saw students' lives as multidimensional was essential to my ethnographic project. I didn't just want to know what youth were making – I wanted to know who they were in class, outside of class, and in the world beyond school and how those factors impacted students' making practices. This also allowed me to move past the traditional tropes or institutional identities (Gee, 2000) that get ascribed to students like, “good,” “gifted,” “disabled,” “trouble-maker,” among others. My work also sought to expand the categories for youth's participation in school beyond success and failure (Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

However, when I began my dissertation research, scholarship on the *Maker Movement* and *Connected Learning* did not yet offer a deep examination of students' lives that was possible through immersive ethnographic practice, nor did it exclusively focus on the connections between schooling, identity, and making. By choosing ethnography, I was able to consider all aspects of students' humanity. Moreover, while the research on making rapidly proliferates, much of it remains focused on the products of youth's making or the learning contexts that nurture this kind of learning. In addition

to thinking about youth across contexts, my research also considers how youth change over time, and, how their environment, personal challenges, school expectations, and other factors shape their lives.

In this dissertation research, I examine how and why the three youth-led affinity spaces emerged, how students participated in these spaces, and what identities they adopted or performed in these spaces. This study uses youth-led spaces as a lens through which we can learn something about youth's communicative and making practices within an interest-driven context. In doing so, I use the spaces as a site to more closely examine students' social and communicative practices, their making within these spaces, and the identity work that they engaged in within the spaces. The youth-led spaces are where we could gather, helping students and me to cultivate relationships with each other and with their peers. It is also where we engaged in collaborative and independent but related making projects.

The overarching questions that are driving this inquiry into the lives of young people within these youth-led spaces are:

1. How and why did the youth-led affinity spaces emerge at the Design School?
2. What is the nature of making within the youth-led affinity spaces?
3. What identities do youth adopt or develop in these youth-led affinity spaces?

Learning what matters to young people is serious work and it should be work that schools spend more time doing. If young people are to benefit from their formal educative experiences, then schools need to be sites of possibility, not sites of limitation. One way this can be done is to welcome youth's interests into the school building – like the music they listen to, the writing they do online, and the poetry that inspires them –

because these can all be important levers for learning. The youth-led spaces could provide insights into how to make sense of connected learning opportunities within the institutional boundaries of school.

## **Chapters Overview**

In the remainder of this dissertation, I try to offer a careful examination of youth's lived experiences – using the youth-led affinity-spaces as a lens onto their lives. In chapter 2, I will look at the theoretical and conceptual frames that inform my research. My literature review will reflect on sociocultural theories of learning and literacy and help to situate my research within the intersecting contexts of adolescent literacies, making to learn, and urban education. In chapter 3, I offer a more in-depth look at the dynamics of the school where I conducted my research and I will also draw connections to research on urban education more broadly and lay out my methodology.

The next three chapters (4-6) present findings which build on each other and illuminate how the youth-led affinity spaces created opportunities for youth to reveal aspects of their identities in school, make and compose collaboratively, and engage in new learning experiences. In chapter 4, I examine self, peer-to-peer, and student and adult relationships within the youth-led spaces to illustrate how these spaces created opportunities for youth to be positioned differently while engaged in making activities. In chapter 5, I look at how students' mediascapes, the tapestry of the social, technological, and cultural influences, are constructed and how they influence students' making practices. In chapter 6, I look at how the youth-led spaces created opportunities for performing new identities, including 'leader,' and how some of these performances were

forays into school citizenship. Finally, in chapter 7 I explore the implications of my research for implementing Connected Learning more broadly and the ways in which we must disaggregate interest-driven and identity connections from technocratic approaches to education that often get subsumed into the increasingly meaningless category of ‘personalized learning.’

## **Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework**

In this chapter I explicate my conceptual framework which reflects my scholarly journey to better understand the lives of young people. I approached this conceptual framework as a living artifact that knits together theories that have shaped my thinking and understanding, key research that has further illuminated these theories, and field theories that come from my experiences. My conceptual framework is rooted in sociocultural theories of identities, literacies, and learning with a specific focus on examining youth's experiences in and in relation to schools. The theories, research, and ideas that I share below have guided me in establishing this ethnographic project, in designing the research study, and guiding my analyses.

In the next several sections I offer specific theoretical framing on identities, literacies, and learning. Within each section I will explicate how these theories were instructive to my research and briefly review salient literature. I will begin identity, then turn to learning and teaching, and finally, literacies.

### **Social Construction of Identities**

Identity is who we understand ourselves to be. However, sociocultural theories of identity suggest that we construct who we are in relation to other people, external discourses (e.g. power dynamics, positionality within a space), activities, and tools (Gee, 2000; Holland et al., 1998). In addition, identities are also ascribed to us through institutional affiliations (e.g. school, doctor's office, home). In this research, I wanted to understand how youth constructed their identities within and in relation to school and

how making activities, people, tools, and the larger sociohistoric contexts, shaped youth's identities in practice. I turned to Gee's (2000) heuristic for examining identities within the context of education to organize this section of my conceptual framework.

Gee's (2000) heuristic offered four identity categories: nature-identity, institutional-identity, discursive-identity, and affinity-identity. Nature-identity relates to features of the natural self like eye color, being a twin, or having curly hair. Institutional identities are produced by institutions including schools that assign identities like 'honor roll student', 'student with disabilities', or 'troublemaker'. These identities are often outside of youth's control and have the tendency to 'follow' a young person throughout their educational journey. Discursive-identity describes how identity is constructed through discourse or how language can socially position people within a context. Affinity-identity are those that are developed around something a person is passionate about like a hobby, a television show, or a sport, that ultimately connects them to others who share that affinity or affiliation (e.g Star Trek fans or Trekkies). These four identity categories (nature, institutional, discursive, affinity) work in tandem in the social world.

In fact, Gee (2000) argues that these discourses in tandem construct certain kinds of people (p. 110). He offers one such illustration when he describes the way a young African American girl is reprimanded for going too fast through a literacy activity, because she is quick to recognize a pattern. Her teacher tells her they can only go one at a time. In a gifted and talented classroom comprised of mostly white students, the children are given time and latitude to practice their literacy skills. These two groups of literacy learners are caught up in larger discourses about students' capacities to learn and how they should be treated, with the young African American girl being treated poorly, as Gee

suggests, because she is a young person of color in an institution that does not view her as capable of more sophisticated literacies, despite her enthusiasm and capabilities. Thus, Discourses, even though at times macro to the social context, are still very salient in identity constructions.

In the next two sections I examine two of the larger Discourses that are salient in framing youth of color's school experiences: the cultural construction of youth and the ways race mediates school experiences. Then, I will turn to specifically examining how schools as institutions shape youth identities, building on these larger Discourses. Next, I will examine affinity identities and their relationship to affinity spaces. Finally, I will turn to Holland et al.'s (1999) notion of figured worlds to consider these various identity categories in making sense of youth's participation in school and within the youth-led spaces. Finally, I return to the idea of identities in practice and how each of these facets of identity contributes to the construction of identity.

### **Cultural Constructions of Youth**

This dissertation rests on a fundamental belief that young people are agentive, creative, and resourceful. Such an orientation towards youth suggests that they are actively producing culture and finding ways to creatively participate in educational contexts and their broader social worlds (Levinson & Holland, 1996). Such an orientation towards youth implies trust and confidence in who they are and what they can do. It also suggests youth bring with them rich cultural practices, knowledge, and perspectives that should be valued (Moll et al., 1992).

Youth in America have been historically painted as deviant, problematic, and the root of societal ills (Lesko, 2011). Definitions of youth stem from pre-teen all the way

through students who are graduating college, although the category is most often used to address adolescents and young adults. Youth are often characterized as being in a perpetual state of progress or becoming; they are not children and not quite adults (Bucholtz, 2002; Maira & Soep, 2005; Lesko, 2011; Maira, 2014). Discourses about the dangerous and deviant nature of youth have implications for economic and social policies and institutional rules.

Negative conceptions of youth have been visible in the mainstream since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when sociologist, Stanley Hall, known as the father of adolescence argued that young people, adolescents have not yet achieved full humanity and that children were savages (Lesko, 2011; Maira, 2014). In other words, youth were not fully human. Therefore, “adolescence became the dividing line between rational, autonomous, and moral white bourgeois men, those civilized men who would continue the evolution of the race, and emotional, conforming, sentimental or mythical others, namely, primitives, women, and children” (Lesko, 2011, p. 46). Boys, or young men, then became the canvas upon which the nation would pin their hopes and dreams and imprint their idealistic views of the ultimate American who were ideally god-fearing, physically strong, and nationalistic. The fear of savage lifestyles, lack of masculinity and fear of the supposed hyper sexuality of non-whites contributed to this idealistic male archetype. Thus, Stanley Hall argued that women, people of color, and people who were not heterosexual posed risks to society and could never achieve full humanity (Lesko, 2011).

Groenke et al. (2015) specifically considered how race impacts our understanding of adolescence. Using Nancy Lesko’s historical account of the construction of adolescence – acknowledging that young people of color have been historically painted



as sub-human in comparison to their White counterparts. The authors pose this question about adolescence: “But who gets to be an adolescent and who doesn’t? Whose adolescence matters in school and in life?” (Groenke, et al., pg. 35). The argue that when youth of color embody the characteristics of adolescence – risk taking, rebelling, and asserting themselves, they are framed as criminals and public enemies.

Stanley Hall’s devastating but influential ideas should also be contextualized within the larger American epoch- the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of significant immigration and global change. Thus, these discourses around youth have historic heft. They illustrate the deeply negative orientation toward youth that have found ways into institutional policymaking. Youth were as Lesko (2011) revealed, were bodies that posed a threat to society and therefore needed fixing or improvement.

In educational contexts, youth are positioned as at-risk and risky all at once (Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). There is a great deal of educational rhetoric that argues youth need fixing and attention because they either lack the maturity or knowledge required to navigate the world. To that end, Vasudevan and Campano (2009) write, “at the level of public news and conversation, youth are often the scapegoats of accusatory discourses that invert causality. Rather than understanding how students are placed at risk through forms of structural violence (e.g. poverty, school tracking, and severely underresourced and over-crowded schools) as well as direct violence (e.g. racial profiling and hate crimes), they are blamed for the very conditions that oppress them” (p. 314). Such characterizations prompt policies and pedagogies that attempt to resolve the problems that are implied to be located within students rather than within the systems and structures that shape their school experiences (Vasudevan &

Campano, 2009). Moreover, youth in schools are deemed ‘at-risk’ when they do not score on official standardized measures of learning or they do not possess school literacies that are falsely linked to notions of intelligence and intellect (Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). I will explore the latter issue in the section on literacies.

These discourses on youth were critical in my sensemaking about how youth are understood, treated, and positioned in American society and the implications for school experiences. Moreover, as positioning within school and in relation to school was so essential to my analyses, understanding some of the historical roots of the construction of youth in contemporary American history offered a critical lens onto youth’s experiences at the Design School. In the next section I look specifically at discourses concerning race and schooling, which build and further complicate perceptions of youth.

### **Critical Race Theory of Education Reveals Persistent Educational Inequities**

A second Discourse that was critical to my understanding of youth’s school identities is the intersection of race and schooling. This section brings together the natural-identity and institutional-identity. All the young people in my study are people of color, as are, most of the students who attend urban public high schools. Personally, I became aware of the selective treatment students received in schools when I was in high school. I have vivid memories of outright discrimination and micro-aggressions that youth of color experienced at the hands of counselors, educators, and administrators who likely thought they were well-meaning. Until I began this scholarly journey I was not aware of the theoretical work that had been done to make sense of the impact race had on school experiences. Below, I begin by sharing some of the salient features of critical race

theory that have shaped my understanding of racialized school experiences, then I also review some relevant literature, and close by thinking about the implications for youth's identities.

Critical race theory argues that race substantively mediates youth's educational experiences, in that, race and racial differences are reinforced and maintained through the institution of school. Ladson Billings and Tate (1995) argued that within schools, race has been a way to limit educational opportunity for people of color. Youth of color attend academic courses that are limited in their depth and breadth, have fewer extracurricular choices, and do not have access to robust educational resources. Ladson Billings & Tate (1995) argued that the 'property' of schools is intellectual property but that is bolstered by 'real' property that is visible in schools like science labs, computers, and other state-of-the-art technologies (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 54). Thus, wealthier communities can amass more resources of higher quality and lower-income communities, even with their best efforts could not replicate these schooled experiences for their children.

Ladson Billings and Tate (1995) argued that schools continued to have uneven outcomes because of the distinct relationship between race and property in America stating that "more pernicious and long lasting than the victimization of people of color is the construction of whiteness as the ultimate property" (p. 58). They argued that whiteness has the following property functions: it possessed rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property; and the absolute right to exclude (Ladson Billings and Tate, 1995, p. 59). Therefore whiteness, or the lack thereof for students of color shapes school their school experiences by limiting their academic participation. This is visible in policies that impact students of color specifically like

being tracked into lower level classes and in the exclusion from gifted or honors programs. Even when students of color have access to higher quality schools, there are ways for schools to continue to exclude them and limit their educational opportunities.

Limiting the quality and breadth of schools for people of color has historic precedent in America, where education has long reinforced social and economic hierarchies. Both African Americans and Mexican Americans have been relegated to second class citizenship, tracked into technical and task-oriented careers that would benefit large scale employers but not allow for the social mobility and change that school promised (Anderson, 1988; Sanchez, 1993). Thus, bringing full circle, the notion of the racial project and the ways in which schooling has been used to reinforce difference in service of the political economy (Holt, 1999; Omi & Winant, 1999).

Valenzuela's (1999) research illustrated how the diverse language and cultural practices of immigrant students (both new and established) created visible divisions between themselves and other non-immigrant students (Valenzuela, 1999). Conforming to dominant linguistic, social, and cultural norms required immigrant students to erase or oppress parts of who they were to fit in and achieve academic success, what Valenzuela (1999) characterized as uncaring practices. Alternatively, when teachers did care about students and embraced their culture and community students in Valenzuela's research felt more connected to the school community.

Finally, one of the most devastating legacies of urban public education is the poor treatment of young people of color through the enforcement of disciplinary codes and behavior management systems. As I shared in the introduction, youth of color are much more likely to experience disciplinary action in school. When they engage in acts of

resistance or agency those acts are more likely to be codified in schools as being defiant, disruptive, or bad. As I stated in the previous section on the construction of youth, Groenke et al. (2015) also argued that youth of color are not afforded the leeway to be children or adolescents. Their acts of resistance or rebellion are instead considered criminal and treated as such with harsh disciplinary policies that have the potential to shape youth's experiences for their entire school journey.

In her work on understanding high schools, which she referred to with the apt moniker, 'dropout factories', Fine (1991) revealed the ways that schools attended by youth of color demanded compliance. To succeed in school, youth of color suppressed their voices and followed the rules (Fine, 1991). Independence, voice, and assertiveness were considered threatening to school's expectations for good students. Students who were compliant and didn't draw attention to themselves, Fine (1991) argued, were able to get through and graduate. The school in her study strictly used and enforced the rules so that they weren't perceived as offering unfair treatment to vulnerable students. They did not focus on nurturing young people's needs, they instead expected students to adhere to the implicit norms and values, resulting in many students dropping out of school. In other research on dropouts, former students explained that they dropped out of school because they did not find supportive or caring adults, were unhappy with the curriculum, and didn't agree with disciplinary policies or feel safe in the school climate (Pushout, 2011).

A critical race theory of education puts the experiences of youth of color in perspective, illustrating how their school experiences are inherently shaped by larger hegemonic forces that are steeped in contentious historical debates and policies. Moreover, youth of color do not attend schools that have access to the capital that

wealthier schools possess. Even when students of color attend those schools there are ways for schools to maintain social stratification by limiting their educational opportunities (Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995). At the Design School, the students I worked with often articulated that they felt devalued by the school district pointing to the lack of educational resources and conditions of their school building. Students became increasingly cognizant of the differences in their educational opportunities after meeting students from other high schools throughout the region and exchanging information about academics and extra-curricular activities. Students sometimes felt this in very real ways, like when the cafeteria ran out of food at lunch time or when we had to put on a talent show with dim lighting because we couldn't get the district to help us fix all the lights on the stage. Students also had misgivings about their ability to get into college or other post-graduate experiences, unsure they were adequately prepared for life beyond high school. I offer these stories to illustrate how the larger discourses and realities related to race, class, and education had tangible impacts on youth's identities.

In the next section I specifically address some of the literature on the role schools have played in shaping youth identity. The discourses that I have presented on cultural constructions of youth and the critical race theory of education remain relevant in the next section that examines some ways that school as an institution shapes or informs youth's identity construction.

### **Institutional Identities: The Role Schools Play in Shaping Youth Identities**

Institutional identities are those that are given to individuals. In schools, institutional identities include students, teachers, administrators, staff, and more. Within

those kinds of identity categories there are additional categories ascribed to students that are shaped by adults in those institutions and reinforced through dialogue and discourse. For example, students might be labeled as gifted, learning disabled, high-test scorer, or is known as someone with behavioral issues. Schools are contested sites where youth's literacy practices, previous academic achievement, gender, race or ethnicity all can impact how they experience school (Moll et al., 1992; Nieto, 1999; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). These categories have the potential to completely reshape a youth's experiences, regardless of how they try to participate and engage in school.

Often youth of color's life experience, cultural knowledge, and literacies are devalued creating distance between them and the institution (Moll et al., 1992; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Students and teachers are also navigating an existing social structure that assumes that there are certain ways to act, certain ways to speak and that there are only certain aspects of one's literate identities that are welcome in schools (Moll et al., 1992; Moje, 2000). Gee (2005) described these as discursive identities that are shaped by the larger discourses or hegemonic forces that are outside of students' control like systemic or historic racism, tropes about good students, adherence to white middle class values as the 'norm.' In schools, institutional and discursive identities come together in powerful ways to create institutional identities that can have devastating impacts on youth. Below, I share two illustrations on how discourse within school can create new (and often unwanted) identities for youth starting with the McDermott & Varenne's (1999) examination of the cultural construction of a learning disability and then moving onto Stanton Wortham's account of a young woman who, through discourse, gets labeled 'disruptive.'

McDermott & Varenne (1999) told us about young Adam, a student who was given the label learning disabled when he was in elementary school. Adam's status as learning disabled is culturally constructed through a series of discursive experiences. In his classroom, he takes more time to answer or needs help with tasks that other students don't. Knowing he is learning disabled changes the way the students treat Adam, there are subtle markers of their mistreatment of him. Adults write reports and make decisions about Adam's life selecting the data points that fit their description of learning disabled. Before Adam knows it, he has been apprenticed into a culture of failure, and claimed by the term "disability" (McDermott & Varenne, 1999). Here, the discourse and dialogue within the institution reinforced an institutional identity for Adam.

In another example of how discourse and identity can work in tandem, Wortham's (2004) research illustrated how a young woman, Tyisha, went from being a good student to a disruptive student over the course of a school year. Wortham (2004) argued that, "students sometimes become recognizable types of people. Such local identities emerge as teachers and students draw on institutional resources, habitual classroom roles, the curriculum, and other resources to position students in recognizable ways" (p. 165). In Tyisha's case, early in the year when other students were more likely to try and please their teacher, Tyisha confidently shared her opinions. However, as other students continued to develop their comfort with academic discussions, her comments began to be seen as opinions and her contributions were less valued. Wortham (2004) illustrated how time and repeated interactions could lead to a kind of thickening of identities within social contexts, so that a young woman who started the year off as a 'regular' kid could end the year as 'disruptive.' In school settings discourses related to students' race, how a



‘good’ student acts, and how other students internalize these various positioning can impact students’ identities.

Finally, there is an indelible link between school and literacy. Schools are often characterized as sites for literacy teaching and learning. Students who are well versed in school literacies are often treated as more intelligent or intellectual, whereas youth who are not as comfortable or as fluid with school literacies are treated as less intelligent. Moreover, schools limit how youth express themselves by valuing schooled literacies over other literate practices (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street & Street, 1991). A continued emphasis on the pedagogization of literacies (Street & Street, 1991; Hull & Schultz, 2001) has also perpetuated the devaluing of youth’s media practices that are pathologized as problematic where youth are framed as passive consumers versus savvy curators of media (boyd, 2014; Collins & Halverson, 2009; Garcia & Morrell, 2013; Ito et al., 2013). This of course is in stark opposition to the rich and agentic literacies that youth employ every day. Moreover, only valuing certain literacies and learning practices can lead to the alienation of young people who have fraught relationships with school as an institution and therefore opt to remain aloof or removed from their own academic achievement (Nieto, 1999). In the section on literacies in this chapter (see page 52), I will explore these issues in more detail.

### **Nurturing Affinity Identities Led to In-School Affinity Spaces**

A final identity category is affinity-identity. These identities are related to affinities or affiliations that matter to individuals. In my dissertation study youth claimed affinity identities like dancer, reader, and writer. They also claimed affinity identities like

“biggest Twenty One Pilots fan,” or “obsessed with Divergent Series<sup>5</sup>,” or “future fashion designer.” While some students shared these identities in conversations and interactions there were also visible traces of their identities in their social media profiles, in their sartorial choices, and in their academic work.

Within school youth find ways to seek out likeminded peers to nerd out on a favorite television shows, sing lyrics out loud together, or meet outside of school to attend a scary movie. What was different about the Design School was that youth were given opportunities to cultivate affinity spaces within school. In other words, the school was implicitly valuing aspects of the youth’s identities by encouraging them to star their own groups. These affinities then became public to other members of the school community.

Affinity spaces as I shared in the introductory chapter, are spaces that are built around a common endeavor or interest. Gee (2005) argued that affinity spaces were a better structure to nurture student learning and could be a more apt approach for schools to adopt. It should also be noted here that these spaces are what Gee (2000) would have characterized as affinity identities that were institutionally sanctioned. In other words, these affinity spaces were nurtured or approved by the institution.

In terms of the structure of affinity spaces, Gee (2005) argued that schools’ emphasis on foregrounding students’ race, class, gender, and disability to sort them into developmentally appropriate academic contexts reduced opportunities for genuine engagement and participation. Whereas, in affinity spaces, the endeavor is what is primary and the human relations are secondary. In addition, knowledge is distributed,

---

<sup>5</sup> A popular fiction series.

newbies and more experienced participants can co-exist in the same space, and there are many ways to participate.

Within the youth-led affinity spaces at Design School, students came to them (or created them collaboratively) because they wanted to cultivate one or more affinities. In dance, each one of the students identified as a dancer, students came together because they had an affinity towards one another (or were friends or friendly). In *Breaking Boundaries*, students were friends but came together because of their common interest in supporting and nurturing younger students to be comfortable in their own skin. Film club was a mix of students who were assigned to the class with others who were aspiring filmmakers or creative types. In each of the three youth-led spaces knowledge was diffuse and students had the opportunity to take up different roles. However, leadership was not porous. Instead, students preferred that there were clear roles and responsibilities and for the most part craved structure.

While Gee's (2005) affinity spaces framework offered a structure to reimagine how affinities could drive participation, facilitate discourse, and create space for knowledge production in learning contexts, it did not help me make sense of how identities developed or changed within youth-led spaces. In my analyses, I found that the youth-led spaces evolved in ways that operated outside of the affinity spaces framework's explanatory power. Thus, I utilized Holland et al.'s culturally figured worlds to facilitate my analyses of identities in practice, which I will explain in further detail below.

### **Figured Worlds as a Framework to Explore Identities in Practice**

As I shared at the beginning of the section on identity, an underlying goal of this

work was to understand how youth constructed their identities in relation to schools. I wanted to attend to how identities get constructed in worlds or spaces of youth's own making. Thus, I deployed Holland et al.'s (1998) figured worlds as a central organizing framework. They define *culturally figured worlds* to "take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 51). The youth-led affinity spaces were built around making activities, discourses (that included students' knowledge and experiences), performances (which was the human work of being in the space), and artifacts, which included a range of things that youth created in the spaces both individually and collaboratively.

Regarding the construction of identity within figured worlds, Holland et al. (1998) argued that "figured worlds provide the contexts of meaning and action in which social positions and social relationships are named and conducted. They also provide the loci in which people fashion senses of self—that is, develop identities" (p. 60). In other words, *culturally figured worlds* offered youth the opportunity to take up social positions in relation to others present and based on who they were and how they wanted to participate. They also argued how "significant to our concept is the situatedness of identity in collectively formed activities. The 'identities' that concern us are ones that trace our participation, especially our agency, in socially produced, culturally constructed activities—what we call figured worlds" (p. Holland et al., 1998, p. 41). So identities are constructed in relation to others but are dependent on all the factors that are at play. The same group of students assembling on two consecutive days could have vastly different energy and dynamics. Sometimes arguments or conflicts created opportunities for youth to act differently than they would, offering insights into how youth shift and change.

In my dissertation research, I considered each youth-led affinity space as its own *culturally figured world*. The youth-led spaces were co-constructed over time through discourse, activities, and the use of tools. Figured worlds offered a way to make sense of identities in practice; namely that identities are fluid, always evolving, and shift based on the context. For example, in the dance team, the affinity that brought students together was dance. The tools we had at our disposal included computers, phones, speakers, and other resources that facilitated dance. In addition, the students own sociohistoric contexts informed not only how they engaged in the space but also what they brought to the space (e.g. knowledge of music, genres, global influences, niche interests). As Holland et al. (1998) argued figured worlds “become embodied over time, through continual participation” (p. 53). I interpreted this to mean that the figured worlds became more substantively a part of students’ lives or that they became more real. I observed in each of the three youth-led spaces how students worked together, talked or argued with each other, and learned and made things together. The affinities that brought them together were the foil for these different kinds of human relations. It also continued to perpetuate the spaces and give them life to sustain their work.

### **Identities in Practice**

I am conceptualizing identity as actively constructed and shaped by the discourses, contexts, tools, artifacts, and people that inhabit spaces. In my research, I used culturally figured worlds as a heuristic for examining youth-led spaces and the ways in which identities were constructed and enacted. Students in this research were situated in other figured worlds like, the figured world of an innovative new high school, the

figured world of being a young person navigating adolescence, or the figured worlds they inhabited beyond these contexts. In understanding how young people navigate these worlds and how they interact with their peers, adults, and actors beyond their school can start to unravel who young people can be in school. Moreover, a close examination of the youth-led spaces which were spaces that youth created for themselves, can reveal aspects of who they are.

### **Learning as a Social Process**

In this section I describe theories of learning that have shaped my thinking about teacher, learner, and peer relationships within schools and conceptions about what meaningful learning looks like. Sociocultural theories of learning acknowledge that learning is active, embodied, and dialogic and is shaped by sociohistoric and political contexts (Freire, 1969; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). However, learning is often reduced to content acquisition and skills development. In the introductory chapter I briefly described interest-driven learning as the kind of learning that emanates from youth's passions, curiosities, and wonderment. At times this passion is connected to a love for a topic, practice, discipline, that drives learners to spend hours focused on one thing. These kinds of learning experiences are often not associated with schools because they are concerned with moving students on and meeting requirements, which means more time is spent on content acquisition and standardized ways of testing knowledge and understanding. In the next part of this section, I articulate theories of learning that position teachers and learners in dialogic and nurturing relationships that are less concerned with content acquisition and more concerned with cultivating personally

meaningful educative experiences. I turn to John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Seymour Papert who were influential in my thinking and whose theories suggest that learning is a process that should be driven by interest, steeped in questioning and inquiry (or criticality), and nurtured by dialogic relationships, and apt resources. They also all emphasize the value in different kinds of adult-student relationships. I close this section by making links to the *Connected Learning* framework.

### **Embodied, Dialogic, and Personally Meaningful Learning**

In the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, Dewey (1938) began theorizing an experiential approach to education that is still relevant today. He argued that learners' interests, inquiries, prior knowledge and other aspects of their identity should be utilized to design educational experiences in schools. In this paradigm, educators are responsible for meaningfully sequencing experiences for learners so they don't become mis-educative. Dewey (1938) also argued that learners must be full participants in their own learning versus simply being pulled along (p. 67). Dewey did not diminish the need for educators or simply put his faith in experiential activities but rather argued it was educators' intentional sequencing of experiences that built on learners' identities that would lead to meaningful learning. If experiences were not thoughtfully framed or sequenced Dewey argued that learning could become miseducative and not lead youth to fulfill their own educational goals. At the center of youth's learning experiences, Dewey argued, should be youth's identities and interests. Things that mattered to youth – or things they loved- should drive their learning experiences.

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that Freire (1993) argued that in traditional schools, students were oppressed by their teachers, positioning them as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge what he described as the banking model of education. This model resonates with the standardized curricula of this current era and the rote memorization model of previous eras suggesting youth are not knowers but instead have to be given knowledge. Freire (1998) argued for a problem-posing model to replace traditional pedagogies, where traditional roles are shed in teacher-learner contexts. Unlike the banking model that sees individuals as empty vessels, the problem posing model ensures that the classroom is not dehumanizing but dialectical; “no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects, which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher” (Freire, 1998, p. 80). In other words, we all navigate the world and bring rich and meaningful experiences, informed by our own socio-historical contexts, and those experiences inform our learning. Therefore, the role of teachers, Freire (1998) argued, was to foster a dialogic relationship between students and the world around them. Moreover, he argued that it was important for people to develop criticality as a stance towards learning, so that learning was not simply absorbing information but instead pulling things apart, asking questions, offering critique; this was the process of meaning making.

This notion of criticality and learners was also taken up by Seymour Papert, who espoused the theory of learning known as Constructionism. Papert (1993) builds on Piaget’s Constructivism by arguing that individuals construct meaning through the process of personally meaningful making. Papert (1993) argued that when someone is in the process of making, they must articulate and enact their thinking. In addition, when



learners are making things that are important to them or the world around them, they are more willing to take time to refine, iterate and build. Making something requires learners to articulate and envision what they want to make. Then, it requires them to traverse the making process which includes design, research, some trial and error (or tinkering).

Along the way learners encounter conceptual or skills-based knowledge and interact with the materials of learning. Finally, in making something, learners produce an artifact that they can share with one or more audiences.

This kind of learning, Papert (1993) argued, was only possible in a classroom context that encouraged authentic investigation and inquiry and was a place where learners felt okay to make mistakes. A place where there aren't simply right or wrong answers. It should be noted that Papert was initially concerned with how computers could specifically help young people articulate or mediate their thinking and problem solving. In other words, the computer and the digital technologies available via the computer could facilitate problem solving and inquiries. While these theories were developed well before new media and technology became as sophisticated and accessible as it is today, like Dewey, Papert predicted the long-term shifts in learning and the importance that learning and making with computers would hold in the future.

Papert did not believe personally meaningful learning would and should happen in isolation. The learning contexts he felt best nurtured learning were those where learners could tinker, try, and fail without repercussions. He used the example of Brazilian samba schools as an apt example for the kind of learning context he felt would best nurture learners. These samba schools were open to anyone interested in learning to dance and did not separate people based on experience levels. Instead novices and

professionals learned together united by a shared love for and commitment to learning samba (Papert, 1980; Zagal & Bruckman, 2005). A place where learning something was celebrated and enjoyed. Papert (1980) lamented strongly the pedagogization of mathematics and the limiting nature of the identities schools imposed like “good at math” or “can’t do math” (p. 43) and more generally the orientation towards ‘school’ learning because it removed the authenticity and humanness in learning. Making to learn was an apt response to what Papert deemed an unfortunate reduction of what school and more broadly sites of learning could offer.

**Making to Learn.** In the youth-led spaces that I studied, youth were engaged in a panoply of interest-driven making activities that included the production of multimodal artifacts, making spaces for safe and creative play, sharing and hanging out, and making performances and events happen. While Papert was concerned primarily with making with computers, I built on his theory and the aforementioned sociocultural theories of learning to broadly conceive making as a creative process. When I think about making, I am thinking that individuals are engaged in personally meaningful, iterative and creative process that involves imagining, designing, composing, remixing, building, refining, and tweaking to produce an artifact (Peppler & Kafai 2007; Ito et al. 2010; Kafai & Peppler 2011). This includes intangible or ephemeral artifacts like performances and events. Even though they were not primarily sites of learning each of the three youth-led spaces positioned students as makers. When we gathered even if we didn’t have lots of time, our time was devoted to pursuing things that mattered to youth. Through a range of making activities like: organizing a bake sale, launching a social media campaign, composing a dance performance, or filming a practice scene, youth were engaged in lots of iterative

and creative processes. They were learning through these experiences.

**Finding Time, Space, and Support to Make, Learn, and Fail.** Having time to sit with a project or a question for several days or weeks is often not an option in schools where class periods are short and the school calendar is structured. However, research indicates that when youth are given time, space and adequate supports, they are more likely to be invested and interested in participating in meaning making and learning (Rusk et al. 2009; Resnick & Rosenbaum 2013). However, simply giving youth some resources and encouraging them to make something doesn't result in learning and could potentially lead to frustration, confusion and eventually lack of interest. Instead, youth need time to test out assumptions, fiddle with different things and gather some basics: they need some time to tinker. Resnick & Rosenbaum (2013) argued that tinkering as a meaningful way to enter a making culture because it encourages youth to try out new ideas, tweak and refine, and experiment with new ideas (Resnick& Rosenbaum, 2013, p. 164).

In addition, making space for kids to try things out also does something else – it allows those who might not have experience to try and learn by doing small tasks or activities. These can eventually lead to more complex projects, but through tinkering youth can gain comfort with the tools and context. Through tinkering, learners have access to tools and resources within a space intended for learning and access to experts who can guide their inquiries when necessary (Vygotsky 1978).

There has also been ethnographic research that has examined how constructing spaces where youth can tinker and fail has created opportunities for students to feel more confident and comfortable. Katz's (2008) in her work with young adolescent dancers

pondered the value of being in a space where mistakes were encouraged, where kids could feel safe, and take real risks. She asked, “rather than interpreting mistakes as measures of a student’s inadequacies, why not approach them as road maps for teaching and learning?” (Katz, 2008, p. 20). Wissman et al. (2015) found that across a range of informal learning contexts, the practice of honoring students’ literacies, inquiries, and technology practices offered multiple entry points and ways for youth to partake in their own learning. Others have also thought about the constructions of success and failure in learning contexts and the ways in which school, as an institution, creates many ways to limit how youth can succeed or to put it more simply, creates many ways for youth to fail (Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

**Connected Learning.** The Connected Learning framework is invested in valuing learner’s interests, inquiries, and ways of knowing. Moreover, the framework encourages multiple entry points into academic participation and opposes simplifications of learning as knowledge acquisition and instead is oriented towards meaningful production oriented learning experiences. They also have built their model on sociocultural theories of learning that resonate with the learning theories I shared above. This framework also recognizes that youth are learning to communicate in an increasingly participatory world (Jenkins, 2006) and argues school should embrace youth’s technology and media practices instead of seeing them as liabilities or distractions.

At its heart, *Connected Learning* is most concerned with finding ways to genuinely cultivate connections between young people and school, or to find ways to incorporate interest-driven learning into schools. The framework recognizes that students of color are not being served well by public education. The ideas that undergird

*Connected Learning* suggest that youth's interests can be levers for deeper learning and participation. The framework also argues that the technology and media that are part of youth's worlds are assets not distractions or liabilities. Instead, *Connected Learning* rightfully argues that youth are already part of complex learning networks that are managed through the media, technology, and people that situate them. While I also discussed the *Maker Movement* as an important context for this research, I drew on the *Connected Learning* framework because it was specifically developed to address the challenges that schools are experiencing today. The framework offers three "crucial contexts for learning" which are that learning should be: interest-powered, academically oriented, and peer-supported and learning experiences should have a shared purpose, be production-centered, and openly networked (see figure 1 below). The contexts for learning, namely being interest-powered and peer-supported echoes my own orientation towards learning as embodied and dialogic. Moreover, production-centered and openly networked resonate with my orientation towards learning that is authentic and builds on youth's knowledge, experiences, and personal networks.

While the framework is rather robust, it does not explicitly attend to the tensions or challenges that students encounter in trying to feel comfortable or safe in schools. While they argue that relationships are integral to the success of the framework, there is less discussion about how to make students feel safer. A related issue is that the framework does not offer insights into the pedagogical aspects of connected learning in classrooms. However, this framework generally resonated with my own conceptual orientation towards learning and participation in schools which is why it remains an important lever for my research.



Figure 1 - Principles of Connected Learning<sup>6</sup>

### Youth-Led Spaces as Learning Contexts

In the youth-led affinity spaces, learning was not the primary stated goal, but learning was always happening. Students were positioned as teachers or leaders, or they were positioned as students and learners. They were trying things out, tinkering with ideas, and developing relationships. The making activities provided the context for students’ interactions. They were also using new technologies, building on their own media savvy, and external networks. The ideas that I presented above offered analytic lenses to ‘see’ these contexts as learning spaces that could eventually reveal insights about more traditional learning contexts.

<sup>6</sup> <https://clalliance.org/why-connected-learning/>

### **Multimodal Making and Composing: Expanding Modes of Expression**

Literacy and school are inextricably linked, with schools often being thought of as sites for literacy learning and teaching. Thus, broadening the ways in which youth can produce meaning and explicate knowledge and understanding is important in an era of standardization and limited modes of expression. In this section I explicate theories of literacies and multimodality that have substantively shaped my research.

### **Expanding What Counts as Literacies: New Literacy Studies**

The New Literacy Studies (NLS), are a set of cross-disciplinary theories that illustrate the socially situated or ideological nature of literacy practices (Gee, 2009; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1984). This ideological model of literacy “suggests that in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions” (Street, 2003, p. 1). This view opposes the autonomous model of literacy, which suggests literacy is a set of neutral skills that will have positive social impacts on communities belying the social and economic conditions (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1984; Street, 2003). Street’s (1984) research helped to reveal the distinction between literacy events and practices, arguing that practices are wrapped up in a social context. To understand literacy practices, researchers had to understand the broader sociohistoric or ethnographic context. Like the situated theories of identity and learning presented above, the socially situated turn in literacy studies offered a critical stance set of skills that could be transferred and lead to positive economic and personal benefits. This is still a sentiment that persists in educational contexts and permeates governmental policies that are built on

the autonomous model of literacy where it is a discrete set of skills not imbued with all the ideological heft that words carry.

Street's (2003) research on revealing the socially situated nature of literacies also illuminated the false dichotomy that persists in education that suggests people who are literate in the school sense are more intelligent than people who are not comfortable with 'school' literacies. Instead, New Literacy Studies recognized that literacies are multiple and that while schools valorized one kind of literacy, that there were always multiple literacies in practice (Street & Street, 1991). Youth of color are sometimes at odds with school because their linguistic styles and modes of expression are not valued. When literacies become a proxy for intelligence and academic achievement, young people who are not comfortable with school literacies become outsiders. They are deemed less intelligent, less literate, and not as academically inclined. Being steeped in this theoretical stance has provided important grounding for my research; I was able to value a range of youth's communicative practices. Moreover, understanding the ideological nature of literacies created an understanding about the potential discomfort youth had with reading and writing within school spaces. I remember distinctly in the Spring of 2015 talking to a student (not in my study) about a final research project he had done for a civics class. I gave him feedback and he told me he wasn't really a 'writer.' I then looked back at him and asked him if he sent or received text messages and he smiled and said he did. So, I smiled back at him and said, "So I guess you are a reader and a writer after all?" Unfortunately, so many students that I have met characterize themselves this way, their identities get constructed in relation to their ability to 'do' school (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Street, 2003).



## **Expanding Modes of Expression through Multimodal Composing**

While literacies for a long time were only concerned with print, the ability to compose using multiple modes has expanded how meaning can be made and thus nurtured a new set of theories. Bezemer & Kress (2008) introduced a social semiotic theory of multimodality that articulated that meaning is made through multiple modes in addition to text, like images, sounds, and gestures, and media. They were concerned with how meaning was imbued through the designs that brought together modes and media. Recognizing that there was complementarity between New Literacy Studies and a Social Semiotic Theory of Multimodality theories, Kress & Street (2006) related how “a social semiotic theory (of multimodality) is interested in sign-makers, sign-making and signs; in being interested in signs it is interested precisely in what signs ‘are made of’, the affordances, the materiality and the provenance of modes and sign in that mode. In being interested in sign-makers and in sign-making necessarily it is interested in the social place, the history and formation of the sign-makers, and in the social environments in which they make their signs” (p.viii). Framing multimodality in this way offers important intersections and overlaps with New Literacy Studies. If we think of students as sign-makers and sign-making as writing or composing (or making), and the signs as the artifacts that are being composed, then, like the NLS, multimodality was concerned with how modes are employed, who uses them and for what purposes, and the writers are further contextualized within this historical context.

In her review of literature, Jewitt (2008) illuminated how modes are imbued with culture, power and ideology, which have implications for how designs (or genres) are introduced and critiqued in classroom contexts (Jewitt, 2008, p. 252). Moreover, using

multimodal representations, like inviting youth to bring images to help decorate a school classroom, have significant implications for how youth feel about their literate identities in and outside of school (Jewitt, 2008, p. 254). Jewitt (2008) also argued that “multimodal texts and artifacts that students make can be viewed as one kind of sign of learning, a material trace of semiosis. These texts can be understood as material instantiations of students’ interests, their perception of audience, and their use of modal resources mediated by overlapping social contexts” (p. 259). In other words, when we examine multimodal texts, aspects of students’ identities are visible in their compositions as well as an understanding of the intentions behind their composition (e.g. who will ‘read’ this?, what modes help me communicate my ideas best?, etc.).

These theories of literacy and multimodality offered an explanatory lens that helped me to see a range of youth-composed artifacts like cast lists, storyboards, task lists, as multimodal compositions. In dance team specifically, broadly conceptualize dance as an embodied literacy where choreography is not simply steps strung together but instead a coherent composition that drew on youth’s grammar and vocabulary created new ways to understand youth’s making and composing within the youth-led spaces. I could ‘see’ traces of youth’s literacies and identities in their compositions.

In literacies more broadly, others have theorized how identities are expressed through the production of written compositions, or more simply put, writing is an act of identity construction (Ivanic, 1998). Hull and Katz (2006) theorized that multimodal composing can “provide a powerful means and motivation for forming and representing the agentive self” (p. 48), provided young people have support and are invited to participate. In other words, the opportunity to represent their narratives, ideas, and

identities in multimodal work opens the possibility that youth will see themselves as agentive actors. Like Hull and Katz (2006) conceive of identity as “multiple and dialogical” (p. 47) and that we “enact the selves we want to become in relation to others – sometimes in concert with them, sometimes in opposition to them; but always in relation to them.” Like Holland et al. (1998), Hull and Katz (2006) argue that we enact the ‘selves’ we want to be in relation to other people – with regards to compositions – this includes the space of authoring that includes the audience, potential collaborators, and other social or contextual factors that situate the writing. Students in the youth-led spaces were actively engaged in making a range of artifacts that included multimodal compositions ranging from posters, to speeches, to dance performances. Students also were engaged in a range of out of school production like writing novels online, making short films, and learning and using every social media app available.

**Multimodal Compositions Create New Ways of Participating.** Multimodal compositions have the potential to broaden the audience and make meaning with many modes. Valuing youth’s out of school or non-academic literate identities have the potential to transform their classroom participation (Alvermann 2008; Vasudevan et al. 2010; Vasudevan & Wissman, 2011). Multimodal composition, particularly the emphasis on images, sounds and other ways of conveying meaning has received critiques for being less academic or rigorous (Hull & Katz, 2006; Bezemer & Kress, 2008) and textual compositions are still more heavily valued in Western academic settings (Hull & Katz, 2006; Alvermann, 2008). However, the rich artifacts or compositions that are generated through multimodal composing are no less academic or rigorous than a composition that only employs one semiotic mode, like print. Instead, they simply provide youth ways to

convey meaning and connect with the world around them and` push the boundaries of expression, but in doing so, help youth to be more thoughtful about their compositions.

Research over the last two decades, particularly in out of school contexts, has shown the limitless possibilities of youth's composition and making practices that are nurtured by available new media and technologies and spaces (both virtual and physical) to make. Through activities like fan fiction writing, video game design, digital story making, and television show production, young people are developing genre expertise, cultivating their voice and composing using different modes like image, sound and text to produce thicker and more nuanced meanings (Hull & Nelson 2005; Ito et al. 2010; Ito et al., 2013; Kafai & Peppler 2011). Multimodal composing also helps youth gain comfort with professional standards (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). Making and composing in these ways also give youth opportunities to express their literate identities (Alvermann, 2008; Vasudevan & Wissman, 2011) and show aspects of themselves in their work (Hull & Nelson, 2005). Being engaged in creative production provides youth opportunities to create in service of intended audiences, develop their own voice and, develop a more critical lens on media and technology (Peppler & Kafai 2007; Peppler & Kafai 2011; Lange & Ito 2010).

Youth media making is also being studied as instantiations of self within a larger participatory landscape (Jenkins, 2006). For example, Chavez & Soep (2005) explored the ways in which *Youth Radio*, a non-profit media production company that supports youth in telling their own stories, provided youth opportunities to adopt roles like writer and producer and in doing so gave them opportunities to pursue stories that were central to who they were and share them with an authentic audience. Lange & Ito (2010)

illustrated how parents and children worked together around a common affinity, a favorite television show, to produce a YouTube television talk back. The show blended content expertise with production and required adults and children to collaborate and make together. Others have examined how online spaces like fan fiction sites comprised of peers who share an affinity comprise a different kind of authentic audience that still gives rise to opportunities for youth to cultivate roles like editor of a Harry Potter fan fiction site (Jenkins, 2006).

In addition to the multimodal nature of these compositions they also illustrate how making activities can be embodied, dialogic, and personally meaningful. In fact, each of these multimodal compositions are also evidence of complex learning processes that emanated from youth's interests and proclivities towards new media and technology.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I articulated how sociocultural theories of identity, learning, and literacy have shaped my research. By definition, sociocultural theories of learning locate human activity in broader social worlds that include other people, discourses, tools, and activities. These theories illustrate how identities are constructed and shaped in relation to other people and is context specific. Identities are not singular or solid states, instead they are fluid and ever changing based on the context where one is located. For young people of color in urban schools, negative conceptions of youth and racialized schooling experiences can have substantive impact on how they participate in school. This chapter also examined how valuing youth's interests, inquiries can lead to learning and growth. Learning is then an experiential process not an exercise in work completion. Schools can be sites of possibility but they must attend to all the rich and agentic practices that youth

bring including their multimodal, digitally connected, participatory literacies. These conceptual roots will be used as analytic lenses in the subsequent findings chapters.

### **Chapter 3: Site Context and Methodology**

As I shared in my introductory chapter, to understand students' experiences and examine their expressions of identity within school contexts, pursuing an ethnographic project felt the most appropriate way to approach my dissertation research. In this chapter I explicate my methodological choices and offer more context about the school site where I conducted my research and my participants. First, I describe the ethnographic context that offers detail about the research site including how the Design School was developed, the core values that informed the school's culture, participant information, and salient demographic data for both years of the study. Then, in the second part of the chapter I relate my multimodal ethnographic methodology and the choices I made in terms of data collection and analyses.

#### **Filling a Need for High-Quality Education: The Design School Starts Up**

The Design School was one of three new schools opened in the fall of 2014 as part of the School District of Philadelphia's new innovation schools initiative. The district leadership communicated to the public that they opened the schools to offer high school students access to personalized and innovative pedagogies that were traditionally only available at a handful of magnet and specialized high schools within the district which are also all designated as college preparatory programs. These specialized high schools in the city used state test scores and other entrance criteria to drive student selection to the exclusion of students who could not meet those criteria, leaving the latter students with fewer high quality options for high school selection. Charter schools in the

district, both virtual and brick and mortar, also have a strong presence<sup>7</sup> but like specialized high schools can be more selective about which students they accept and often are criticized for not taking students with disabilities or disciplinary records. Neighborhood schools which vary in size, educational quality, and school safety, were then required to absorb all other students who do not qualify for specialized high school or who cannot (or do not) apply to public charters. These schools are often a last choice or resort for college-hopeful students who are weary of the violence, large class sizes, and poorly maintained facilities at many of these high schools. Thus, for students with aspirations of attending a college preparatory school who could not meet the selection criteria, the district offered few good options. While widely panned by local activist organizations frustrated by the willingness to start new schools versus attend to existing neighborhood schools, parents and students welcomed the new options.

To launch these three innovative high schools, the district solicited seasoned educators who had been previously successful in the district in other roles. The principal of the Design School spent nine years as a history teacher at an area high school before leaving the district. He was then recruited by the district to lead one of the schools given his track record for implementing small learning communities that focused on students' needs at a large neighborhood school earlier in his career. He spent the better part of a year doing research and design to come up with a structure and vision for the school by interviewing students, educators, and parents, collaborating with external partners, and collecting research on design thinking, personalized learning, and youth development. In addition, as I had briefly mentioned in the introduction chapter he also collaborated with a professor at Penn who eventually become his collaborator as part of a university-

---

<sup>7</sup> 21,333 high school student as of December 2016, or 38% of high school students in the district



community research partnership, which is how this dissertation project was able to come to fruition.

**Community Context.** The Design School was situated in the northern part of the city near a large and influential university that was slowly but steadily gentrifying the local community as it continued to expand. The gentrification was visible in the new stylized apartments with brightly colored panels on blocks leading up to the school, in the steady flow of local college students walking east and west along the streets, and in the constant presence of various construction and maintenance vehicles parked along a road that led to the Design School. There is a regional rail station a few blocks east of the school and a two city bus lines that run nearby.

The school building itself sits on the corner at the intersection of two relatively quiet neighborhood street. Just opposite sat a parking lot where a local neighbor ran an informal car wash and maintenance operation. Small row homes line the streets around the school and there is one poppy store<sup>8</sup> owned by an older Latinx couple that was frequented by students as they wait for the city bus. The building itself, which is nearly one hundred years old was formerly an elementary school that was closed by the district and then re-opened in 2014 to house two of the three new innovative high schools.

The Design School was co-located with another high school splitting the floors in half with the other school occupying the basement and first floor, the Design School occupying the second and later the third floors of the school. Each of the schools had students enter on opposite sides and coordinated dismissals at different times to avoid any fighting or conflicts. The schools shared the cafeteria and the auditorium making it difficult to host our own practices or gatherings without the consent of the co-located

---

<sup>8</sup> A bodega or small shop for food, sandwiches, and snacks.

high school's principal (which was a source of consternation for students who wanted their 'own' school).



**Figure 2 - Design School on first day 9/8/14**

**The Design School Model: Competency-Based, Design Focused, Personalized for Youth.** As I shared in the introduction the Design School principal and founding teachers wanted to change the way students experienced school. To do so they focused on a handful of key levers: competency-based curricular model, maintaining a design focus, an emphasis on personalized learning, and a commitment to youth development. I will explain each of the facets briefly below.

A *competency-based curricular model* supplanted the more traditional school approach that focused on acquisition of skills and knowledge. In a competency-based model the learning goals students worked towards were articulated through the knowledge and skills they had to apply. Thus, instead of having to engage in these subjects through the traditional assessments like quizzes, tests, or the much-lamented *ditto sheet*, the new model was meant to create more contextualized learning experiences that were built around projects that encompassed various skills and conceptual

knowledge. This curriculum also removed the need to address students using traditional age-based labels e.g. freshman, sophomore. Students instead were required to fulfill a certain number of competencies so that they have enough when they complete high school. For simplicity in this research I refer to students using the traditional labels (e.g. freshman, sophomore, junior, etc.) and will note where relevant if students have not actually moved onto the next grade level.

A *design focus* was foregrounded to immerse students in authentic learning experiences where learning would be situated around real-world problems. The original vision was that in lieu of traditional high school electives, the school would have interdisciplinary labs where students would work on real-world problems for which they would devise solutions. Design thinking was intended to prepare for work beyond school, where they would have to work in interdisciplinary contexts and solve problems leveraging a range of skills. Moreover, these classrooms were also meant to be the primary site of the ‘making’ or production oriented activities in the school.

*Personalized learning* (or user-centered, as I mentioned in Chapter 1) represented an approach to supporting each learner by honing students’ interests, educational needs, and future aspirations. Within the actual competency-based curricular model, personalization was visible in the choices students could make. For example, students had a range of texts to choose from, they could choose which projects they wanted to develop within the interdisciplinary lab spaces, and it was also visible students’ ability to work at their own pace (or asynchronously). Over the course of three years the classes have become increasingly personalized particularly humanities and the humanities related labs with students exercising personal choice in the topics or focus of their studies. For

example, in the 2015-2016 school year, students in humanities had a common unit on ‘revolutions’ but were given latitude to focus on any type of revolution as long as they produced well-researched pieces while embracing the underlying themes or meanings of the unit. One student, Aziz, chose to focus on the rise of FUBU, a popular brand of clothing, founded by Daymon John, that launched a revolution in hop-hop fashion. This aligned with Aziz’s aspirations of becoming a fashion designer. Another student, Nathaniel, chose to focus on the Cambodian Revolution, delving into the reign of the Khmer Rouge and its aftermath. The intention behind allowing students to personalize their research topics was for them to be invested in their learning while covering the same competencies that addressed specific disciplinary knowledge and skills. Personalization at the Design School has been realized to a lesser degree in mathematics and science.

One last facet of personalized learning was the school’s one laptop per student strategy. Each student after completing freshman orientation was assigned a laptop, a Google Chromebook, for the school year. Students’ assignments and related curricular resources were accessible in Google Classroom, which was maintained by educators. Students used the Google Suite to complete assignments including Google Docs (similar to Microsoft Word), Google Drawing (an application for design-oriented projects), Google Slides (similar to PowerPoint for making presentations) and others. There was a steep learning curve for many of the students who were comfortable with mobile devices but were unfamiliar with the conventions of browser windows, traditional e-mail platforms, and in general the use of computers and software to complete and submit assignments. Over time and with practice the students in my research study became much more comfortable using the computers. They also recognized when Google’s tools were

agile or limiting and often lamented the clunky nature of these computers. However, having laptops offered students independence. Moreover, as will become more apparent in the findings chapters, students used their Chromebooks and Google applications to support their work in youth-led spaces from designing posters, to sending emails, to researching information, to googling music and videos.

Finally, a fourth pillar of the Design School's model was *youth development*, which addressed the school's firm commitment to ensuring the socioemotional health of students so they felt safe and welcome in the school. This was done in two ways, first by creating a student advisory that youth participated in for all of their years in high school, thus creating an automatic support group that focused on personal goal setting, socioemotional health, and college and career readiness. The relationships between students and their advisory teachers, particularly for those students who have been at the school since it started in 2014 tend to be strong. In addition, the school employs a restorative justice model, trying to use peer or adult mediation to resolve conflicts instead of moving straight to traditional disciplinary measures like detentions, suspensions, or forcibly transferring students to leave, which are often employed in other urban high schools (Ferguson, 2001; Fine, 1991).

**Youth Development Focus Embodied in School Motto: Love, Dream, Do.** The Design School's premise, as originally conceived by the principal was that it was a user-centered school, signifying the personalized nature of the school. The school's motto was *Love, Dream, Do*. Love was what students loved, were inspired by, and cared about in the world. Dream was what how students approached problems they were passionate about (or issues they loved) and dreamt up solutions, ways to engage, or imagine. Finally, Do

represented how students would design solutions, or go about making an impact on something they were passionate about (or love).

This motto was central to the school's identity. Students internalized this motto and often referenced it when they had major achievements in school. Another similar phrase said often in the school is, "Team Works Makes the Dream Work" was often also taken up as part of the school colloquialisms that tie back to this motto. The school staff including the teachers, to support staff, to the principal all lived this motto in their work with students. Embracing this mindset created opportunities for students and teachers to work as partners and for students to feel like they were becoming part of a school community. As a young school, students were called on to help with everything from preparing for the high school fair, to taking prospective students on tours, to interviewing new teachers. These practices endured over the years. Moreover, the staff also encouraged students to start new initiatives, voice their concerns, and find things that they cared about. As I shared in the introductory chapter and will elaborate more fully in chapter 4, the youth-led spaces emerged from this climate. As a result of these experiences many students began to embrace the idea that their school was a site of possibility. It should be noted however that not all students necessarily bought into this ethos or were vocal enough to be 'seen' or 'heard' by the staff to get help for things that mattered to them. Moreover, students also mentioned that their first year of school had a particularly strong sense of community and possibility given the 'all hands on deck' feeling in that first building year. The students who were in the first class also became integral to helping new students realize and internalize the school's values and ethos.

I will say one last word regarding the school's values and motto. Within the *love, dream, do* model the principal and staff had also identified key values that comprised each of these words. In the first couple of years, the school principal highlighted the following key values responsibility, empathy, persistence, creativity, risk-taking, and collaboration. These values implicitly embodied the ideal Design School student.

In addition to seeing students as contributors to the school community the adults in the building also understood that long-term support of students required more than tools and resources. The principal, Mr. Greene, was the ultimate advocate for youth and encouraged all students to take charge and pursue things that mattered to them. He said this about love, "I think that like teaching and learning is about love, like to get to this place where like you understand kids; you have to have just a different relationship with them and you can't be in that place if you like you don't love [them]" (Interview, 8.17.16). The principal embodied this spirit by continuing to encourage students to pursue things that mattered to them. He was aware of when students were having good days and bad days and was emotionally available for students.

Similarly, the special education and art teacher at the Design School, Ms. Morrison, explained that her first priority was getting to know students and understand who they were saying, "I can't do anything until I know who these people are." Ms. Morrison's top priority was learning about students and giving them the room to be themselves. Over the course of nearly three years, her classroom was an oasis for students in her advisory as well as others who gravitated towards her. Some students came into her room to draw, others to hang out and do work, some came to share stories or air grievances. With her support students also undertook challenging projects that they found

inspiring. For instance, during the Fall 2016 her student advisory organized a school wide Thanksgiving dinner which was the brainchild of one of Ms. Morrison's students. As we reflected on the schools' motto, love, dream, do, Ms. Morrison shared this: "I feel like every kid could have a dream and we could make it happen for them." She believed that any student who walked through the Design School's doors could really fulfill their dreams in a school that was oriented towards supporting youth.

Like Ms. Morrison, the humanities educator, Mr. Roberts, also a founding member of the Design School nurtured students' interests and tried to create a space for them to flourish. He mined students' humanities projects to get a better understanding about their passions and interests and made his student advisory a site of possibility for students. Over the three years that I have known him, Mr. Roberts has found internships for students who have a passion for the arts, recruited several students into becoming poets with the local city poetry association, and gotten a several students – mainly young men – hooked on chess. In his classroom creating a space for writing and sharing work has given students who might not always step out of their comfort zones, moments to shine. Mr. Morrison worked hard to leverage his connections and networks to help students pursue their own dreams.

In addition, the third founding teacher, a science educator, the school secretary, and the guidance counselor have also been on staff since 2014. Each of them has cultivated close relationships with students and embraced the ethos of *love, dream, do*. For students, particularly in the 2014- 2015 school year, the staff's caring and supportive attitude was important. Not every adult and student got along or cultivated close



relationships. However, for many students they found at least one adult with whom they felt comfortable or safe and these relationships have continued to endure for many.

**School Demographic Data 2014-2015.** In its first year, the school ended the year with 89 students. They started with 99 students but they experienced some attrition and some students were asked to leave the school due to infractions of school policy. The school that year was 82.8% African American, 14.1% Latino, 1% White, 1% Asian and 1% Other.<sup>9</sup> Students with disabilities make up 13.1% of the student population and 100% of the students are economically disadvantaged.

The school's staff began the year with 9 fulltime staff members (5 women, 4 men). This included a teaching staff of 5 content area teachers and 1 special education teacher, one high school principal, a full-time guidance counselor<sup>10</sup>, and the school secretary. In the Fall of 2014 (between September and December), both the English and Social Studies teacher had student-teachers from a nearby university in their classrooms. In the Spring of 2014, the English teacher had a new student-teacher from January 2015-June 2015. The school was co-located in a former district elementary school building with another one of the innovative high schools that also opened in the 2014-2015 school year. Two safety officers (1 man, 1 woman) were assigned to both high schools in the building. Two noon-time aides came to help with student traffic and keeping the hallways clear on alternating days of the week. There was also a nurse available once a week. It should be noted that on the school staff in the first year, two of the teachers were African

---

<sup>9</sup> School and student statistics were taken from the School District of Philadelphia's online profile that is available for each school. The demographic data was last updated in October 2015 but the enrollment number was provided as of 4/10/15.

<sup>10</sup> Full-time guidance counselors in this school district were increasingly scarce due to budget cuts beginning in the 2012-2013 school year. Several schools in the district were faced with itinerant guidance counselors who were only available once every few weeks.

American as was the guidance counselor. The school secretary was Latinx and was bilingual.

At the end of the school year, the teacher for the technology design lab and the social studies teacher both left the school. The mathematics teacher resigned in December 2014 and a new teacher was hired in March of 2015.

In the first year, the Design School did not have any sports programs or extra-curricular activities when the school year began. They did however have one partnership with a non-profit organization committed to nurturing students' dreams. I will refer to this organization as *Endeavors*. The representative from *Endeavors* was based part-time in the school. In fall of 2014 a college senior from a local university started a Poetry Club that met once a week after school. This club was well attended by several young women at school. Finally, the school implemented choice activities in February 2015 to incorporate more interest-driven activities. Due to the small school size, they did not have enough people for sports funding and support and therefore were partnered with a nearby school for students interested in basketball, football, or track. The youth-led spaces that students and I co-developed also contributed to interest-driven activities in the school.

**School Demographic Data 2015-2016.** In its second year, the school had 172 students enrolled. Several students who were at the school left after the first year for various reasons. However, the population still grew significantly because new students joined for their sophomore year and the school added a new freshman class. The school that year was 82.8% African American, 14.1% Latino, 1% White, 1% Asian and 1%

Other.<sup>11</sup> Students with disabilities made up 13.1% of the student population and 100% of the students were documented as economically disadvantaged.

In its second year the school had 6 content area teachers and 1 special education teacher, one high school principal, one school climate manager, part-time dean, full-time guidance counselor, and one school secretary. Three educators who were founding teachers of the school returned for the 2015- 2016 school year; the humanities educator, the science teacher, and the special education teacher. On staff was also a Peace Corps VISTA in her senior year of college, who helped coordinate special events for students like school spirit day and an inaugural career day. There were also three new school safety officers (one white woman, and an African American man and woman) and one maintenance staff person assigned to the Design School.

It should also be noted that the math teacher that had been hired in March of 2015 took a long leave of absence in the fall of 2015. A second math teacher who had been hired due to the increasing class size took a leave of absence in early 2016. Therefore, the students in both their first and second years were left without a full-time mathematics educator for most of the 2015-2016 school year. The school had to rely on long-term substitutes who were not effective with students – struggling with basic classroom management and communications. This caused much consternation amongst students – especially the focal students of this study– many of whom had set their sights on four year colleges and knew that a strong mathematics foundation was integral to their entry and success in higher educational institutions.

---

<sup>11</sup> School and student statistics were taken from the School District of Philadelphia’s online profile that is available for each school. The demographic data was last updated in October 2015 but the enrollment number was provided as of 4/10/15.

In the second year of school the principal and some of the staff worked to establish more local partnerships to nurture students' interests. In addition, some of the teachers also found ways for students to be engaged in interest-driven activities outside of the school day. In its second year, the non-profit I mentioned above, *Endeavors*, had a much more significant presence within the school: the program manager was located in the school for several days of the week. Sports teams were still not large enough to be self-sustaining so students continued to partner with larger high schools nearby for football, basketball, and softball.

**A New Kind of Learning Drew Students to Design School.** I want to add a final note about the young people who attended the Design School during the two years of the study. The first cohort of students who entered in September 2014 had heard of the school through open houses, through word of mouth, and through school selection materials. Several students opted to come to the Design School because they were intrigued by the principal's message about a new approach to learning. Several were also compelled by the opportunity to have access to new technology. There were several other students whose parents chose the Design School because they wanted something different than a neighborhood school to ensure students' long-term success beyond high school. They were also concerned about oversized classrooms, unsafe spaces, and inadequate resources at neighborhood schools. Several students on their first visit to the renovated elementary building in the summer of 2014 were surprised that it wasn't more 'high tech' because of the images they had conjured in their mind given how the school had been framed. Still, they persisted because they were compelled by the opportunity to engage in school differently.

## **Writing and Picturing Culture to Understand Youth's Worlds**

Ethnography is a “way of seeing” the world and attempts to answer the question, *what is going on here?* While the notion of a bounded culture is something ethnographers now acknowledge is limiting and somewhat false, what is still central to the construction of an ethnographic account, as Malinowski (1950) described, is systematic data collection including observational field notes, relationship mapping, the identification of institutional influences and other ways of answering the question, *what is going on here?*. Through thick description and other methods informed by this immersive practice ethnographers attempt to make “the familiar strange” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), the “extraordinary the ordinary” or “make visible the invisible patterns of ordinary life within a group” (Green & Bloome, 1996, p. 9). This fundamental ethnographic question is answered with a series of intentional and systematic data collection practices that require ethnographers to be reflexive and conscious of their own positionality as well as being thoughtful about what research and theory exists that can offer new meaning and context to ethnographic data. To that end, Heath and Street (2007) argued that ethnography is “a theory building and theory-dependent enterprise” (p. 38) requiring the researcher to provide a holistic illustration of the topic being researched, bringing into conversation existing theory, empirical research and other epistemologies.

## **Visual and Multimodal Ethnographic Methods to Enrich Data Collection**

In this work, I both wrote and pictured culture (Ruby, 2000). I brought visual ethnographic methods together with multimodality (Bezemer & Kress, 2008) to provide a theoretical space to compose an ethnographic account that draws on a series of modes and media to produce meaning. An attempt to blend modes has the potential, as Pink

(2001) argued, to “communicate different types of knowledge using different ‘registers’, thus allowing different versions of reality and different types of knowledge to challenge the ‘truth claims’ of others” (p. 292). Visual methods also help us to construct non-linear accounts that can more closely mirror the ethnographic context (Pink, 2013). Such an approach helped me to value all modes available including text, image, and moving image (or video), as equally valuable and valid in the sense-making process.

My rationale for making audiovisual and multimodal data collection central to my ethnographic project is motivated by central role that media plays in our everyday lives. First, students were constantly engaged in everyday media productions like selfies, short films, and other ways of documenting their own lives so visual practices are resonant with the way they made sense of the world. Visual data collection was also more transparent to the youth participants because they could see what I was *picturing*. Similarly, the final artifacts I might produce are meant to explicate our work together and given our ongoing dialogue about the project and the work, so producing something students could watch and give feedback on is an important part of my own reflexive process. Additionally, given that I want my work to have import with policymakers and educators, such methods provide a sensory experience that might help them to differently interpret or consider educational issues.

Second, I argue that the audiovisual has the potential to provide a texture, weight and dimensionality to the dynamic nature of youth-led spaces. It is in fact hard to know where to *look*. Ruby (2000) reflects on how historically, “the complexity of bodies moving through space and time is such that the unaided eye cannot take in all that is happening” (p. 47) which has been one of the reasons that anthropologists have turned to

film. Seeing bodies move through time and space is something that isn't easily replicated by textual productions and in some cases even photographs or audio. At my site, the youth-led spaces I described above are frenetic: where youth, sit, stand, their body language in relation to each other, the rising and falling of voices, all inform the making and remaking of the space and are all constantly in motion. Film helps to capture what otherwise would lose dimension. Thus, multimodal data collection, particularly through film at least provides a perspective, albeit incomplete (Ruby, 2000), that has the potential to create a connection that isn't otherwise readily communicated through only textual production.

Third, I was also always in motion during my ethnographic data collection. As a fully immersed participant observer, I was most often on my feet and working alongside students in all three youth-led spaces. While in the first year of data collection I had a general sense of the activities going on in the room it was not possible for me to sit down removed from the activity and simply jot notes or collect data. It is difficult to describe dance using words only. It is possible to describe one or two moves in full detail but to understand the movement not only of individual bodies but of bodies within a space, it is difficult to document that even in the most. Dance is ineffable: therefore, watching a dance clip or seeing it performed live are the only ways to truly appreciate this artistic expression (cf Carter & O'Shea, 2011).

Film also has the potential to communicate affect and emotion through the words, gestures and expressions of actual participants. Ruby (2000) discusses how the body is viewed "as a means of cultural expression... or the moving body embodies culture" (p. 47). This echoes Csordas' (1994) phenomenological view of the human body "as the

subject of culture or in other words as the existential ground for culture” (p. 58). Thus we can use film to understand the human experience because we can document the body moving across time and space in relation to other objects. Culture is conveyed through the differences in interaction, dress, language and other visible cues. Thus, the visual connects us to culture in a visceral way. We can ‘feel’ certain things when we see and hear people.

However, I don’t want to overstate the capacity of film. Any ethnography is only ever partial, or a kind of fiction, because it is filtered through the ethnographer (Geertz, 1973; Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Jackson (2013) implores researchers to reconsider the notion of thickness and perhaps the hubris ethnographers have historically had in suggesting that one could achieve, what he frames as “full social knowing” (p. 11) through thick description. Film is perhaps more misleading because it suggests a kind of realism by virtue of being able to recreate images and sound that have the potential to make us feel like we are there and yet, like writing it is only ever partial. There is a very physically limiting quality to film because we can only see what is inside the frame and of course in the editing process we are able to compress time and space and piece together narratives that render a version of reality.

Beyond film however Jackson (2013) also offered an important critique on the limits of ethnographic work in an era where our interlocutors are engaged in complex media production. By reporting on participant’s lives that they are already reporting on – it’s possible we are just regurgitating versus ‘collecting’ and analyzing data. This is particularly true for young people who actively document their lives as a social practice are somehow implicated in their own ethnographic documentation.



**Ethics of Representation.** Representation of young people in any form, textual or multimodal, is perhaps the most important factor in my methodological thinking. Clifford (1986) wrote, “anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves” (p. 10). This reflexive turn in ethnography was an important shift because for so long ethnographers operated under the assumption that they could be flies on the wall that did not mediate or shape the interactions of their participants and more importantly that they could document the lives of others without significant consequence. The students I work with are of the most vulnerable within a national and local context in terms of their socioeconomic and racial positionality and, most importantly, they are children.

The students in my study are mostly African American and Latinx and mostly young women. There is a long and unfortunate history (that continues) of the misrepresentation of young people of color in film and photographs. Young have been hypersexualized and young men of color have been contextualized as deviant and threatening. Media images today have persistence (boyd, 2008) that did not exist before the world wide web. Therefore, there were several practices particularly during dance team practices where I consciously did not film students because I did not want to portray them in ways that could have reinforced these unfortunate media stereotypes that have been reified over time. The ethnographic rendering of peer to peer relationships that I recount in chapter 4 uses multimodal analysis instead of being a completely filmic product. While it draws heavily on the short films that were recorded, keeping this analysis within text is a much less visceral experience. However, it ensured that students’ performances were not available for viewing in perpetuity. In chapter 6, the third and

final findings chapter, my analysis focuses on a discussion that I transcribed from a series of short video clips filmed by a student during a *Breaking Boundaries* meeting. I transcribed the discourse because the main part of my analysis involves an argument where some students are imploring their peers to get serious. Again, even though hearing and seeing students actively engaged in this planning meeting would have offered texture a more spatial understanding of the context, I opted to use only the audio recording. I do incorporate the gestures as part of the transcript but this is a different rendering. However, leaving the image of students arguing to persist long beyond the moment on the web gave me pause. Ultimately the issue of persistence combined with my interest in honing in on the rapid back and forth of conversation led me to choose to represent the data in chapter 6, textually.

Given the range of images, audio, and video that undergird the range of analyses I have done in this research, I wrote and pictured youths' lived experiences and therefore I have to be cognizant of the palpable tensions that exist in embarking on such a journey. First, it is important to acknowledge the deep historical tensions that are embedded in the ethnographic project, namely that for a long period of history, ethnography and ethnographic film attempted to capture the voiceless subaltern *other* (Clifford, 1986; Grimshaw, 2001; Jackson, 2004; Rony, 1996). Rony (1996) argued that this history included a perspective that the people holding the camera or doing the research were from historifiable cultures versus those who were only ethnographiable. In other words, some cultures were only worthy of documentation because they did not possess rich cultural histories. This is ever present in early ethnographic photography, of remote villagers being positioned to stand still and straight for the purposes of categorization

(Grimshaw, 2001) which is the ultimate objectification of the human body and existence. Thus, it became all the more important that any documentation that I did was done in conversation with young people and with their full, active, and ongoing consent. Be it a text or a short filmlet, I have tried to be utterly conscious about not ethnographizing the students and protect them from scrutiny or unfair characterizations.

**Researcher Role and Reflexivity.** The reflexive turn in ethnography encouraged researchers to consider how their personal biases, identities, and life experiences could shape the research process from data collection to the production of ethnographic accounts (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Agar, 1990; Peshkin, 1998; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). In other words, how we are ‘located’ in a community or context has implications for what and how we produce ethnography. In the remainder of this section I try to locate myself and articulate my positionality in this study.

In this research, I have adopted (or perhaps more appropriately the role has adopted me) of participant as observer (Creswell, 2013). Before the Design School opened its doors in 2014, I attended events like the open house, new student orientation, and summer teacher training for the new staff. In those early moments, I tried to blend in, do more listening than talking, and was carefully navigating the researcher and participant dynamic. In the fall of 2014 my role rapidly shifted to participant as observer. On the first day of school as teachers, student-teachers, the principal, and his staff were busy readying classrooms and other spaces, no one was available to greet new students. When I asked how I could help, the principal sent me downstairs with a sheaf of nametags. I spent the first hour of the school day greeting nervous new students and asking them to make a nametag. I was in many cases the first adult in the building

students met as they started their journeys as high school students. This was the boon I had when I began my fieldwork: everything about the school was forming and I pitched in where I could which both legitimized my existence in the school and gave me opportunities to get to know students.

Moreover, I had the advantage of not having a classroom to be concerned about so I could spend any free time, when I wasn't helping in a classroom, with students. I spent the early weeks in the lunchroom, sitting with kids, chatting and listening to their perceptions about school, their social lives, and larger aspirations. I also got to know what kids were interested in doing, their expectations for high school, and a little about their lives outside of school. I was therefore privy to their questions, frustrations, and, aspirations: *why don't we have clubs?, where are the lockers?, what do they want me to do for this assignment?, can we start something?*

I think part of why students were so open and comfortable in speaking with me was that I had a youthful and friendly mien. Moreover, I dressed like a student – usually wearing jeans, t-shirts and sneakers – and was on average their same height, which made me approachable. Months into school year when students learned that I was in my early thirties they expressed shock and disbelief because they had assumed I was a college student, “*Naww! You are like 20*”, one young man told me. I also, as Denise explained to me in the Spring of 2016, did not treat students as ‘kids’, I was, in her opinion not quite an adult but not quite a kid and that worked for us. In addition to simply chatting and getting to know students, I also worked with them on school assignments mostly in the digital humanities and English classrooms. We read poems aloud or I helped them select

images for a digital story. So, we forged relationships through working and *making* together.

I do however want to recognize that however comfortable students and I have gotten with one another over the course of three years, there were also differences that I believe mediated my relationships with them and create distances that I could not necessarily close. I am a South Asian woman and a first generation American – my parents immigrated to the United States in 1979. I grew up middle class and have managed to maintain this socioeconomic status through my adult life. The students at the Design School are predominantly African American and Latino, most grew up exclusively in Philadelphia, and are working class and several students have shared with me their experiences with economic insecurity. In addition to my class, I also speak with an average east coast accent but it was not until Mary, a student who I got to know through *Breaking Boundaries*, said to me one day, “*Miss V, you act white, you sound corny,*” did I realize that even as a woman of color my linguistic practices marked me as different and most definitely not from Philly. At other time I have mentioned trips to other countries and life experiences that elicited responses like, “*oh you got money,*” which I found difficult to navigate. Although I’ve come to realize that these uncomfortable moments were also part of the process of learning about one another as identity markers like race or class became more visible or palpable.

On occasion these differences meant that students would say things to each other under their breath or in whispers because they assumed I wouldn’t understand, appreciate, or approve. Other times they have remarked that I’m innocent and green in terms of having really ‘lived’ given our different upbringings. So even though I have

always been keenly aware of my positionality as a brown woman in American society and had been navigating my own identity as a person of color for my entire life, at the Design School, when students read me and saw me as closer to White it was an eye-opening experience. Students also used White as a shorthand for wealthy or upper class, suggesting rather astutely that White people had vastly different experiences in life.

Despite our marked differences that are a result of life experience, cultural backgrounds, and class, I was committed to treating students with kindness and dignity. I tried in earnest to focus on cultivating relationships with students. As I said above, I started as not quite a teacher and not quite a friend. Over time, the students and I developed trust and comfort with each another. I believe this was due to the time and space we had to share our experiences, make things together, and cultivate our common interests like dance, activism, and film. It also helped that I showed up nearly everyday for two years. When I didn't show up, I e-mailed or texted. Students, as I said above, came to rely on me and confide in me and vice versa. So even though there are differences, the students and I learned to care for and love each other.

### **Research Design**

In this study, I looked ethnographically at three youth-led affinity groups – examining their practices, the making or composing that youth engaged in, the challenges they encountered in achieving their goals and how participants interacted with one another. While the spaces were foreground as the sites for investigation, I have also identified 6 focal students that inhabit one or more of these groups. The rationale for identifying a subset of students was to look more closely at youth's participation across

contexts including academic classes, interdisciplinary lab spaces, youth led spaces, and any relevant out-of-school spaces. The following research questions drove my ethnographic inquiry at my school site:

1. What is the nature of youth led spaces that emerge at the Design School?
2. What is the nature of making in youth led spaces?
3. What identities do youth adopt or develop in these youth-led spaces?

### **Participants**

Within the youth-led affinity spaces, I identified six focal participants, with whom I worked with throughout the study. Each of these participants was a high school freshman and fourteen or fifteen years old when the study began. All the students joined the Design School in the Fall of 2014, when it opened. Five of the focal students are girls: three were African American and three were Latinx. A sixth focal student was an African American boy. I selected these students as focal participants because each of the students was acknowledged as a leader in one of the three youth-led spaces. A youth leader was someone who organized activities, took responsibility for the group's progress, and coordinated with adults on logistics. Two of the girls, Denise and Anya, were leaders of *Breaking Boundaries* and eventually joined film club, two girls Ruby and Star were captain and co-captain of the dance team respectively. David was the choreographer on the dance team. Mira was the lead writer in film club and would go onto assume a directing role. Below, I have included a table that offers short bios of each leader.

The rationale for selecting these students was that we worked to co-create the youth-led spaces and I established productive relationships (Creswell, 2002, 2013;

Maxwell, 2013) with these participants. I dialogued with them about my research questions and about my research interests and in many ways these students helped me to understand the implicit social dynamics within the Design School that I would not have been able to see without their perspectives. (See tables below on pages 85 and 86 for student profiles). I do acknowledge that by selecting this group of student leaders that there was potential for others' perspectives to be excluded (Maxwell, 2013; Creswell, 2013). However, I tried to account for this by interviewing formally and informally students who participated in the youth-led spaces that were not leaders.

Throughout the dissertation, I included voices from both my focal participants as well as many of the other students with whom I cultivated close relationships throughout the period of data collection. In addition to closely analyzing specific moments of interaction, making, and participation, I also wove into my analysis, insights, and perspectives from this larger group of youth who participated in various ways across the three main contexts of my study. These insights are particularly woven into the last two findings chapters (5-6) where other students' voices contribute significantly to the findings and the ethnographic context.

To offer a little more detail about the focal students in my study I have included very brief bios synthesizing some salient aspects of their identities culled over three years (see pages 88 - 91). Four of the photos are selfies students took of themselves either using my iPhone camera or their own over the course of data collection, the other two were photographs I took during my fieldwork.





**Denise November,  
2015**

Denise was a self-described feminist and owned the phrase ‘awkward’ as a badge of courage. She identified as Puerto Rican and Irish and was trying to make sense of her identities as she became increasingly aware of larger discourses related to race, class, and gender in American society. She was deeply invested in cultivating safe spaces for teens based on her life experiences. Denise was a passionate reader and writer whose favorite genres included teen fiction. She also deftly navigated social media and began to cultivate a knack for digital compositions. Denise’s relationship with academic work at the Design School vacillated over the two years between periods of high and low participation. Denise, as you will read about in chapters 4 and 6, was the founder of *Breaking Boundaries*, the youth-led affinity space committed to youth empowerment.

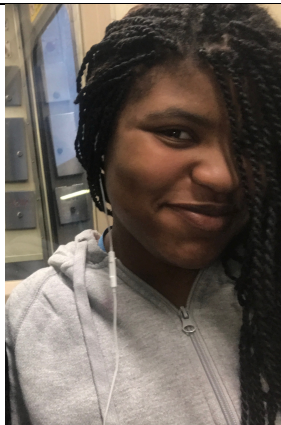
---



**Anya – June, 2015**

Anya was an ambitious student who wanted to excel in high school and go onto success in college. Being a good student in high school became core to her identity. Anya identified as Dominican American. She was one of five siblings. She has a large extended family and her home life was full of family events and gatherings. She was fluent in Spanish and often stepped into help her mother who did not speak English. Her favorite television shows included intricate plots including crime (e.g. CSI) or medical (e.g. Grey’s Anatomy) dramas. Anya would go onto be the second co-founder of *Breaking Boundaries*. In addition to this group, her affiliation with the Dream Project (which I described above), positioned her as a visible student leader in the school. We will learn more about her stories in chapters 4 and 6.

---



**Mira – March, 2017**

Mira was a writer and a romantic. She laughed easily and was a loyal friend. Mira identified as African American and was the middle sibling in a family that included her older sister, younger brother, and two baby twin sisters. Mira was an old soul who enjoyed campy films like *Crybaby* to classic romances like *An Affair to Remember*. In high school, her identity as a writer flourished. She was one of the two captains of the poetry club. She took every opportunity she had to improve her writing and started sharing it online. In school, she worked hard. When she came across challenges, she found ways to spend time with her teachers to get the support she needed. Mira was the writer and director of the film club and more about her stories will be visible in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

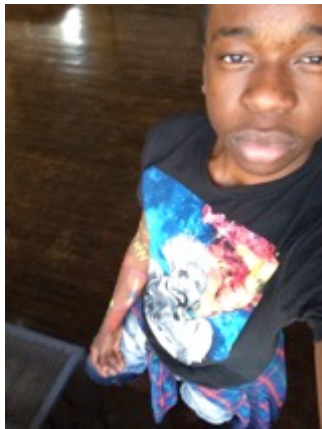
---

**Table 1 - Student Leader Profiles: Denise, Anya, Mira**



**Ruby – May, 2017**

Ruby was a natural born storyteller, she could regale you with tales about her life for hours. She identifies as African American. Ruby had been a voracious reader since she could remember: she loved how books could transport her into other worlds. In her sophomore year, she began writing and sharing fictional stories online. She was the oldest of five siblings and the only girl. She is close to her mom. Ruby vacillated from being very studious with her academics to occasionally losing steam. Even though she was outwardly extremely confident, at times, her inner voice held her back. Ruby along with Mira were the two student heads of the poetry club. She too performed at several poetry slams. Ruby was a co-founder of the dance team and went onto be the captain. Some of her stories will be shared in chapters 4 and 5.



**David – May, 2015**

David was a performer through and through. He identified as African American. David loved to make people laugh, had a flair for the dramatic, and was an extremely talented dancer. In his academic life, he was not always consistent. He often got distracted by the social aspects of school, something he readily recognized. When he was dancing, nothing could shake his concentration. David's mom and sister are two of the most important people in his life. His father passed away just as David started high school. He spends time socializing, reading about Black culture, and absorbing new music and dance performances. David became the choreographer of the dance team and more of his stories will be told in chapters 4 and 5.



**Star – June, 2015**

Star was kind, loyal, and compassionate. She had a smile that you could see across the room. Star identified as African American. She was a passionate dancer and a loyal friend. She loved being on the dance team because dance made her happy. When it came to school dances and social events, she was unafraid to show up and throw down. Star took school seriously and expected her peers to do the same. She was much more studious in her first year than in her second year of school. Star was always curious about human behavior and has thought about exploring psychology or sociology after high school. Star was the co-captain of the dance team. Some of her stories will be shared in chapter 4.

---

**Table 2 - Student Leader Profiles: Ruby, David, Star**

## **Youth-Led Spaces**

I have briefly described the youth-led spaces in the introductory chapter. In chapter 4, I will more closely examine some of the early months of the youth-led spaces. For reference however I have created tables to synthesize key details of the youth-led spaces. The key details include the names of leaders, participants, and key events over the course of time the groups were engaged. First is a synthesis of the two years of *Breaking Boundaries* detailed in table 3.

---

---

**Breaking Boundaries 2014 - 2016**

---

<b>Leaders</b>	Denise and Anya
<b>Purpose</b>	To support younger students going through adolescence to feel comfortable in their own skin and to push back on ‘societal standards’ for what constitutes normal.

---

**2014 – 2015**

In their freshman year, *Breaking Boundaries* was comprised of 16 students (including Denise and Anya) that were regular participants. We met three times a week, on Monday, Tuesday, and Fridays, during lunchtime. Usually students would bring their food with them to meetings. The key events that the group participated in their first year included:

- Sharing circles – November 2014- June 2015
- Bake Sale – January 2015
- Preparing for youth student assembly – March - April 2015
- I am Campaign – April 2015
- Presentation at local conference – May 2015

Core members: Ally, Mira, Nathaniel, Sheila, Daymon, Sara, Amber, Mary, Sharon, Kayvon, Greg, Tony, Gerard

---

**2015- 2016**

In the second year Denise and Anya taught a choice activity for the incoming freshman class of the school between September and June. This meant that instead of continuing to partner and work with the original members of *Breaking Boundaries*, they were instead responsible for working closely with incoming freshman to achieve their goals. It was the principal’s idea to position Denise and Anya as ‘teachers’ with my support. In each marking (grading) period there were up to 12 students. A handful of students stayed in the ‘class’ for the entire school year while others stayed for one or two marking periods.<sup>12</sup> *Breaking Boundaries* most significant accomplishment in the second year was hosting an outreach assembly with 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students at a local K-8 school. The plan they had developed in their first year (2014-2015) was put into action with the new group of students. We met twice a week. The following were the key events:

- I am Campaign – Fall 2015
  - Starting a *Breaking Boundaries* art installation – Fall 2015
  - Hosting two back to back assemblies for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> students at local K-8 school – February 2016
- 
- 

**Table 3 – Breaking Boundaries 2014-2016**

---

<sup>12</sup> In the second year, I did not consent the freshman who Denise and Anya worked with in *Breaking Boundaries* because. Instead, I focused on the interactional dynamics between Denise and Anya and their journey as leaders and teachers.

Next is a synthesis of the key details related to the dance team, *Caution*, Over the course of two years. (See table 4). It should be noted that Caution continued to function as a dance team in 2016 – 2017 school year. I have not included that information here because it is out of scope for this study. It is the only group that carried through for a third year.

---

---

**Caution, Dance Team 2014 - 2016**

---

**Leaders:** Ruby (captain), Star (co-captain), David (choreographer)

---

**Purpose:** To create choreography and perform for a wide range of audiences.

---

**2014- 2015**

The dance team came together fully after the students held auditions in January 2015. They were able to recruit four new students. However, before the first talent show one of the students, Riri quit feeling like she could not keep up. After the first talent show Imani quit, no longer interested to continue performing. We usually practiced Mondays and Fridays after school. When we had shows, we practiced multiple times after school.

**Key Events:**

- Spring Talent Show – March 20, 2015
- Performance at Bryn Mawr College – April 23, 2015
- Summer Talent Show – June 17, 2015

**Core Members:** Ruby, Star, David, Aria, Yara, Imani\*

\*Imani quit the team after the first talent show

---

**2015- 2016**

In their second year together the dance team got a slow start, only coming together in late December to hold auditions. However, they focused on recruiting students from the incoming freshman class and were successful. They recruited four first year students and a new sophomore, bringing the team at it's height to nine students. One of the freshman eventually transferred schools, which meant that the team had eight core members. We usually practiced Wednesdays and Thursdays after school.

**Key Events:**

- Performance at Design School Pep Rally – March 2016
- Spring Fling Talent Show – April 14, 2016

**Core members:** Ruby, Star, David, Aria, Shawn, Tanya, Nelle, and Tiarra

---

---

**Table 4 – Caution Dance Team 2014- 2016**

Finally, I have included the information on the Film Club (see Table 5). This club was only functional for the first year of data collection. However, many of the relationships that were forged in this space continued to persist between myself and students and amongst students themselves.

---

---

**Film Club 2015**

---

**Leaders:** Mira

---

**2015**

The film club as I mentioned in the introductory chapter was a hybrid space because it was a choice activity and therefore a part of the school schedule. We met twice a week on Mondays and Tuesdays for an hour and ten minutes.

**Key Accomplishments:**

- Composed a script - March – May 2015
- Produced a teacher appreciation video – April 2015
- Held auditions for film – May 2015
- Learned to use professional equipment and film sample scenes for movie – April – June 2015
- Produced a *Welcome to the Design School* video – April 2015

**Student Participants:** Aziz, Kendrick, Mira, Nathaniel, Tony, Laura, Louis, Ally, Sherea, Riri, Sharon were all students assigned to this choice activity

Denise, Anya, and Kayvon joined because they were interested in what we were doing versus the choice activity to which they had been assigned.

Occasionally Dillon, Tali, and Teena joined us during filming.

---

---

**Table 5- Film Club 2015**

As each of the three summary tables above illustrate, students in all three spaces were engaged in various making activities. These activities included the production of artifacts or compositions (e.g. choreography, posters, films, and scripts) as well as planning and management activities (e.g. holding auditions, preparing curriculum, organizing a talent show). In the next section I will relate the details of data collection and analysis for this study.

### **Data Collection**

My data collection was conducted between August 2015 until June 2016. In the first year of data collection, August 2014 through January 2014 was the initial phase of my research, which included my interactions leading up to the school's opening through to the emergence of two of the youth-led groups. During this time, I established relationships with participants, began participating in the school community and documenting general observations. The next phase, between January 2015 and June 2015, I continued to increase my involvement and turned my attention to more focused participant observation of the three youth-led spaces. In the next phase of research between September 2015 and June 2016, I continued to conduct participant observation and conducted interviews with focal students as well as other key participants that I worked with within the youth-led groups. I also conducted teacher and staff interviews during this same period. In the last phase of data collection, I largely used the participant observation to inform the portraits of my focal participants and evaluated the changes they experienced as they moved across contexts in their second school year. Between August 2016 and March 2017, I conducted several member checks with participants and



completed outstanding data analysis. I will offer more details about member checks in the section on reliability and validity.

**Participant Observation.** The primary form of data collection in my dissertation study was participant observation which was done through written ethnographic field notes (Emerson et al. 2011) as well as film, photographs and audio recordings of youth led spaces and related activities. In addition, I conducted participant observation, when appropriate, in academic courses, at school events, and spaces outside of school that intersected with my focal students' interests. I choose participant observation as my primary data collection method because my goal was to understand participants' perspectives and lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). I employed thick description (Geertz, 1973) to write the culture of the three youth-led spaces. My field notes were thick in two ways, through thick descriptive writing and through the capacity of my electronic field notes to embed a range of media. When I jotted notes electronically, I would often also embed images or short audio clips. At other times, I would take short video clips when jotting wasn't an option.

Together these textual and audiovisual forms of participant observation helped to compose a rich portrait of the activities, the discourse practices, and relationships among participants within the youth-led spaces. Finally, in terms of filming, the camera operator varied based on the context. Often, students in the youth-led spaces filmed using my iPhone camera or a borrowed camcorder. At other times, I filmed. Similarly, during events, students used my phone and camera to take photographs and at other times I took photographs. In addition, in certain contexts like film club, when we did not have access to other reliable equipment, my iPhone was the go-to professional equipment because I

had data storage, wifi, and a good quality camera. When students filmed or took photographs, I would often come across perspectives, angles, and funny moments that I would not have been privy to had I been holding the camera. This allowed me to incorporate other perspectives and make the data collection process more participatory. The video clips that I collected were anywhere between ten seconds and twelve minutes long. I also used my iPhone to record audio files that were anywhere between thirty seconds to thirty minutes long.

In the first year (2014-2015), I collected data (e.g. field note, audio, image, videos) on 126 days of the 180 scheduled days of the school year. In the second year (2015-2016), I collected data (e.g. field note, audio, image, videos) on 126 days of the school year. There were also 180 scheduled days of school in 2015-2016. Below I've included a table tallying these data.

	<b>Field Notes</b>	<b>Jottings</b>	<b>Photographs</b>	<b>Video Clips</b>	<b>Audio Clips</b>
<b>2014 – 2015</b>	90	13	1,972	116	95
<b>2015 – 2016</b>	34	13	953	103	38

**Table 6 - Participant Data Collection 2014 - 2016**

**Participant Interviews.** I conducted semi-structured interviews with students and educators. The interview protocols that I developed included a mix of descriptive, structural and contrast questions (Spradley, 1982) to facilitate a richer conversation. With the consent of participants, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by an external transcriber. I created semi-structured interview protocols for the following groups of participants: (1) students (2) educators. The core interview questions asked participants to (a) explicate their expectations and understanding of school (b) about what good teaching and learning looks like (c) how participants made sense of out-of-school practices being embraced in formal school settings (d) what is required to support making centered

pedagogical practices that are impactful on youth (e) their experiences in the youth-led affinity spaces and interest driven learning more largely. (Please see Appendix, page 247 for interview protocols).

Between 2015 and 2016, I conducted formal interviews with all the focal participants in my study and several of the students with whom I worked with in the youth-led spaces, for a total of 16 student interviews that lasted anywhere between thirty minutes to an hour and a half. I also conducted formal interviews with 4 teachers, the guidance counselor, and the school principal, for a total of six interviews with adults. Two of the teachers interviewed had been at the school since it opened in 2014 and two had joined the staff in 2015. Each of these interviews lasted around an hour.

I also conducted several informal interviews with students without a protocol. What I found in my research was that the formality of interviews with students with whom I was so familiar created a context of performativity, where they felt they had to answer questions ‘correctly’ or ‘appropriately.’ Whereas the informal interviews where I would pull out my recorder or cell phone (with permission) would allow students to offer their perspectives on a range of topics that were salient to my research study like literacy practices, social media use, day-to-day experiences in academic classrooms, without the pressure of a formal interview setting. Over the course of two years I conducted several informal interviews that were audio recorded. I used both the formal and informal interview data in my analyses.

**Student Artifacts and Compositions.** The primary source of artifacts that I have collected is those that were produced or composed by students in the youth-led groups. Those artifacts included student writing (e.g. letters, scripts, e-mails, text messages),

films (e.g. short clips), photographs and other materials (e.g. storyboards, signage). Students' compositions like dance performances were captured via film clips. I also collected images or screenshots of relevant social media posts. This includes images or screenshots of students' social media posts (e.g. Instagram photos, Snapchats, social media profiles) and relevant correspondence (e.g. e-mails, text messages, in-app messages). I also collected a selection of students' academic writing or compositions (e.g. academic or personal poems, essays, stories).

**General Ethnographic Data.** I collected student achievement information, district achievement information, and general information on the policy decisions being made in the district to better situate my work within the larger ethnographic context.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is an iterative process of sense making that allows ethnographers to 'see' data in new ways. Given the range of data that I collected my first step was to clean up my data and organize it for analysis. I listened to and transcribed audio recordings, watched the video recordings, and read through my field notes. I used the audio and video data to enhance field notes and jottings when appropriate. Then, I tried to read across my data as a story (Emerson et al., 2011).

For the ethnographic field notes and interviews I employed an open coding approach treating the ethnographic field notes as a data set and reading them through and coding line by line. This approach is informed by a more contemporary interpretation of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) that recognizes that coding is part of a larger theory development process that is ongoing (Emerson et al., 2011). For example, some of the

codes that contributed to the larger findings in chapter 4 – which is focused on relationships – included codes like: *sharing personal stories*, *making connections*, and *creating safe spaces*. Some of the codes that became salient in the development of chapter 5 – which is focused on youth’s mediascapes – included codes like *mediascapes*, *dance as play*, and *collaboration*. Finally, some of the codes that were salient in chapter 6 – on performing identities – included codes like *taking on leader as an identity* and *taking responsibility*. I used ATLAS TI, a qualitative analysis software, to facilitate my coding. I developed codes and then also grouped them into larger thematic categories using the software. I also looked for synergies across codes and used the software to determine which sub-codes were most commonly visible within larger thematic groupings.

From open coding I moved to coding memos to help synthesize the initial codes and more analytically think about how the codes are related. Then finally, I looked across codes and memos to develop larger themes and field theories that emerged from the data. In addition to thematic memos, I wrote short integrative memos (Emerson et al., 2011) using various topical lenses (e.g. focal participants, commonly occurring themes, field theory) to analyze and identify the themes that cut across data analysis. I also used visual memoing to find relationships between disparate ideas. I wrote fifteen memos during my first year of data collection and fifteen during the second year.

**Discourse Analysis.** I have used discourse analysis to help me analyze student interactions in the youth-led spaces. I drew on linguistic anthropology particularly the work of Blommaert (2005) and Wortham (2001) to inform my analysis because both scholars theorize how the ethnographic context informs the meaning of utterances and

how utterances can also shape the context. A great deal can be learned about a speaker through their utterances and the contexts within which they are uttered. Words don't simply have their representational meaning but they also suggest something about a speaker's interactional positioning in relation to the people they are speaking to but also larger contextual events (Wortham, 2001). Linguistic anthropology can also provide a lens for looking at how a speaker's words are received or 'heard'. The subtle yet important differences in how people speak, the words that they use, including the indexical nature of discourse, and even the structure of their utterances or the poetics, have implications for what is understood in an interaction (Wortham, 2001).

The youth-led spaces were sites of simultaneous activity and dialogue. Focusing on discourse made it possible to do a more fine-grained analysis of social interactions that allowed me to 'see' things that I had not observed in real-time. I was concerned about who was being heard, whose voices were quieted, and whose voices were not present. Or another way I thought about this was trying to determine whose voices were leading and whose voices were following particularly as it related to identity performances. For example, in chapter 6, where I examine identity performances, I analyzed several bits of dialogue that occurred in a series of *Breaking Boundaries* meetings. Through discourse analysis I discerned the shift that some students made from asking for permission to do things to taking agency and ownership over activities. Similar analysis is also visible in chapter 4, on connected relationships, where I analyzed dialogue that occurred during both *Breaking Boundaries* and film club. Here I paid attention to how students were working together, who was being listened to, who did more of the speaking, and even

who asserted themselves. Understanding interactional positioning helped me to better understand the identities being performed in the youth-led spaces.

For these analyses, I engaged in a multi-step process. First, I transcribed audio or video file focusing on the speech events. Then, I went through and used transcription conventions to code the speech events to consider things like speed, tone of voice, latching, and overlapping speech. I also included any salient details related to gesture (when I was transcribing video clips). The next step was an analysis of the actual speech events paying attention to deictics, expressions, poetics (when relevant) as well as things like number of turns (or times a person spoke) and when there was simultaneous speech, whose utterances carried the conversation forward and whose got lost. Finally, I located these analyses within the larger ethnographic context to make sense of the scenes. I have included the transcription conventions in the appendix.

**Multimodal Data Analysis.** Multimodal analysis starts with the basic premise that all communication requires multiple modes, is shaped through sociohistoric and cultural contexts, and meanings are shaped by the context (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010). I primarily analyzed video data by addressing individual modes and the ways they combined to create meaning. Referencing the ways others have been attentive to movement, gaze, gesture, facial expression, speech, I used these to inform detailed analysis of certain interactional moments within the youth-led spaces (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010; Hull & Nelson, 2005). In addition, I also used my own understanding of the ethnographic context that was cultivated through my analyses of field notes, recordings, and artifacts to help me better analyze what was being communicated in those particular

moments. Referencing Geertz (1978) notion of “webs of meaning”, I drew on what I understood about the contexts to inform my analysis.

As I mentioned above, I started analysis by reading my data and developing thematic codes. Then, I wrote drafts of the chapter focusing on ethnographic description. Then, in cases where I had video data, I opted to use multimodal analysis to more clearly explicate the findings within a section. To do so, I transcribed short clips, focusing on speech, movement, gaze, and facial expressions. I used multimodal analysis primarily when I examined interactions in dance team practice between Ruby and Star and later Ruby and David (see chapter 4, pages 132 - 144) because of the embodied and flowing nature of dance. For example, as I will share in chapter 4, Star and Ruby were still getting to know each other when we started gathering as a team. So, in a few frames where they are trying out new moves, I examined where they were in the space (positioning), where they were looking (gaze), what they were doing (movements), and if they were saying anything. Together these modes tell a fuller picture of what was going on in the dance space. In field notes this might have been reduced or ‘flattened’ because text without the images of dancers and positioning could make it difficult to interpret that anything substantive was happening. These analyses when contextualized by the wider ethnographic context offered insights into the relationships and interactions amongst students.



## **Validity and Reliability**

In this study, I collected a range of data over the course of 22 months, from August 2014 to June 2016. I also conducted member checks between August 2016 and March 2017. As I said above, I collected a range of data including ethnographic field notes, video clips, audio clips, student artifacts, ethnographic interviews, and demographic data. I utilized four strategies for ensuring reliability and validity in my data as articulated by Creswell & Miller (2000). First, triangulated my findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by identifying common themes that emerged across the data. Second, in addition to triangulation I spent significant time with my participants conducting member checks. In some cases I communicated some of the field theories or themes that emerged from the analyses and at other times I asked participants to directly give feedback on specific findings I had developed. Given that validity in qualitative research is the accurate representation of participants' realities my goal in member checking was to ensure that my participants could see their experiences appropriately reflected in the research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Third, I received feedback on data analyses from other colleagues and mentors to ensure that there were also outside perspectives to help me see things that may not have been visible to me given my own existing biases. Finally, I included a reflexivity section in my methodology because I felt it was of utmost importance to clearly articulate my own biases and my positionality within the context of this study.

#### **Chapter 4: Youth-Led Spaces as Figured Worlds: Cultivating Connected Relationships With Self, Peers, And Adults Through Making Together**

*I see Denise in the hallway as I return with a few students from lunch. Denise asks if I can help her with the project we had been talking about for a few days. With her teacher's permission, we step out into the hallway during student advisory. Denise offers me the roly chair. She starts to rattle off ideas for the student group that has been percolating in her mind and I scribe them hastily into a powerpoint slide. As we brainstorm out loud, she starts to say that she wants this group to encourage people to be who they are – to, and her voice grows excited, “to break the boundaries of who people say they are.” She wants young people to go beyond how school and society define them. In the days that follow, we work together on a flyer: scanning for images, negotiating the text, and thinking about the information on the flyer. We make a plan to put the flyers up to advertise the group and Denise solicits Ally's help in writing a speech to lay out the vision.*

*In a first meeting, ten students and myself sat in a cold classroom on the second floor of school. We had dragged our chairs into a lumpy circle. Denise's friend agrees to read the speech she has written but is too nervous to read out loud. She sits by and mouths the words, her legs dangle and she has a faint smile on her face. After the speech is read, Denise gauges the room – the response is enthusiastic – several students agree to tell their stories to support younger students. Denise calls after them as everyone gets up to head back to class, “we'll meet at lunch on Wednesday!”*

*A week later, we assemble after students eat lunch. Denise and a second student Anya, who has since been asked to be a co-leader of the group, sit up on a counter trying to corral the chatter. “Respect each other!,” they implore. Then, they ask the students gathered to go around and respond to the question, what's your story?. Over the course of an hour students take up this question: they voice sadness because they don't feel that they fit into their families, anxiety and frustration about navigating the challenging world of having undocumented parents, or anger because they have been bullied at school, and pride in persisting and overcoming these challenges. We are jolted back to reality when one of the teachers bursts through the door and mentions that students are quite late to the next class period. (Vignette based on field notes from November 2014)*

This is a much-condensed emergence story for the youth empowerment group that would come to be known as *Breaking Boundaries*. Our impromptu hallway chat was the

catalyst for many more conversations and work sessions—between Denise and her new school, between Denise and Ally and the other students who joined *Breaking Boundaries*, and Denise and I. Even though it was Denise who conceived of the idea and whose initial passion for making a difference in the world brought us all together, it was the relationships she cultivated with peers and supportive adults that helped her bring this idea to fruition.

In this chapter I examine the relationships that were integral to the making of and making within the youth-led affinity spaces in my study. I characterize these relationships along three dimensions—relationships with the self, peers, and adults—to illustrate the significance of connection to the making activities. As these different relationships developed over time, I emphasize the way making things together required students and adults to be vulnerable, collaborative, and trusting of one another which were all part of the process of learning about oneself in relationship to others.

In the first section below, I examine how the youth-led spaces created opportunities for self-making within school. In the vignette above, Denise, encouraged by the youth-oriented environment in the school, articulated through a flyer, a speech, and her remarks at the first meeting of the group, that she is a young person who has thought deeply about being othered or made to feel inadequate in some way. In forming an affinity-space, she is engaged in an act of self-making, acknowledging her past struggles, her ability to overcome them, and her new position as someone who wants to inspire others to feel confident about themselves.

In the second section, I examine the peer-to-peer relationships that were enacted and cultivated through the making activities within the youth-led affinity spaces. In each

of the three youth-led affinity spaces, students were engaged in a range of making activities that created opportunities for students and their peers to make together. The peer to peer relationships included students asking each other for help, collaborating on tasks, teaching each other new things (e.g. dance moves, how to make a poster), sharing information, negotiating conflict, and continuing to reinforce the goals of the group through their words and practices.

In the youth-led affinity spaces, these relationships were contextualized by a shared affinity or goal that was facilitated by the making activities each group did. This shared goal created a context and subsequent opportunities for students to work closely in service of making something together. In the vignette above, students relate to each other differently by telling each other their stories. Being vulnerable and honest amongst peers in school is difficult, so for the students partaking in *Breaking Boundaries*, to open up and express themselves, they took up the group's goal of creating a context of acceptance by sharing their stories.

In the third section of this chapter, I examine the relationships between adults and students within the youth-led spaces. The principal and educators at Design School encouraged youth to embrace and exercise their agency and pursue things that mattered to them. The *love, dream, do*, ethos of the school encouraged students to take chances. It also positioned their youth-led efforts as contributions to school culture. One illustration of this is how Denise's teacher gave her permission to work on her own project instead of having to fulfill her reading quota for her advisory period. A second illustration in the vignette above is evident in the collaborating that Denise and I did on co-creating artifacts and I acted as a sounding board as she brainstormed her ideas for the group.

These interactions that positioned Denise as agentive and valued, shifted traditional student-adult paradigms within school where adults tend to have outsized power and authority to direct student activities.

Cultivating strong relationships is essential for learning and growth and lays the groundwork for students to feel that they are (as well as their ideas, literacies, talents, etc.) welcome in school. When students feel emboldened to reveal aspects of their identities and share and work together this shifts how they experience school. This chapter examines how students make sense of themselves within school, how they navigate the possibilities and challenges of collaboratively creating something with their peers and supportive adults, and what they understand as a result of these experiences.

### **Youth Development Orientation Nurtured Student Self-Making in School**

One of the key relationships that I analyzed in this chapter is the relationship with the self. The self is constructed through discourse and practice so individuals are actively negotiating who they are, depending on the contexts they inhabit (Holland et al., 1998). Others have particularly thought about the ways in which individuals are engaged in self-making through authoring or composing, so that composing practices lead to artifacts that also contextualize the self (Ivanic, 1995; Hull & Katz, 2006). In other words, one is always constructing the self in relation to others, be it an audience of readers for a text or a classroom of our peers. For students of color in urban schools these relationships are fraught with the history of systemic oppression and uneven power dynamics, where students are often constructing selves in opposition to oppressive frameworks or teachers and staff who might seek to control versus nurture them. Thus, self-making is an active and agentive negotiation of all these factors.

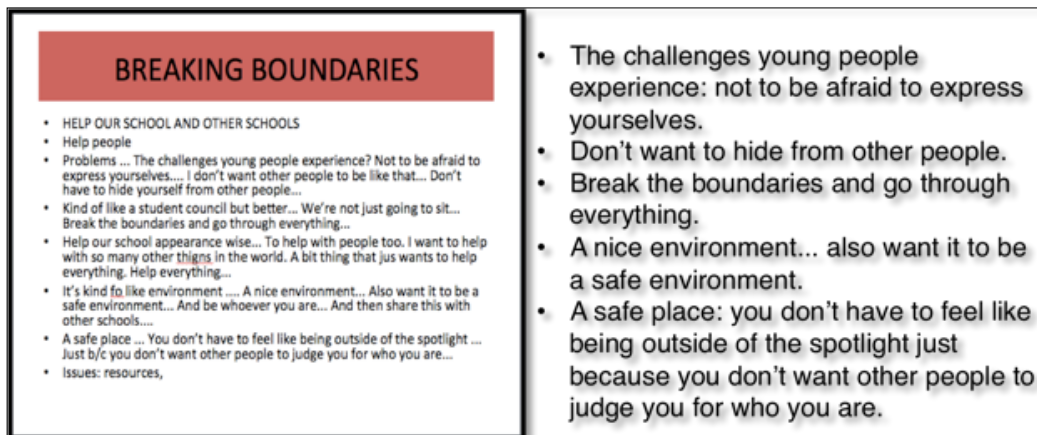
Self-making was visible in the origin story of *Breaking Boundaries*. In the next few sub-sections I examine how Denise engaged in acts of self-making as part of her effort to start *Breaking Boundaries* through the analysis of three related compositions (or artifacts). In doing so, I explore the ways Denise drew on personal experiences of marginalization and othering as well as her knowledge of her peers' life experiences to convey a message of optimism and hope that she hoped would ultimately lead to social change. My analysis also illustrates how Denise's acts of self-making created a shared context amongst students that undergirded the group's work.

### **Authoring Artifacts: How Composing Multimodal Artifacts Communicate the 'Self'**

In her freshman year, Denise wanted to start *Breaking Boundaries* because she had directly experienced bullying in middle school and felt strongly that there were many other students who had been in similar situations. Emboldened by her participation in the *Constitution Kids*, during which Denise and her peers were part of the Design School's first foray into youth leadership (see chapter 1), Denise was excited to start her own initiative.

Her first step was to sit down with me and articulate her overall vision for the group. As I described in the opening vignette of this chapter (page 102), we received permission to sit in the hallway during student advisory to chat about her idea. As we brainstormed she shared her perspective on the challenges experienced by adolescents and pre-teens and felt strongly that someone needed to counsel kids and help them to feel good about themselves. She argued that people should not feel afraid to be themselves and that schools should be safe places where young people could express themselves. I scribed her ideas into a powerpoint slide while she spoke. In figure 3 below, I have

included an image of the original powerpoint slide where I jotted notes and on the right hand side, I have excerpted some of the key ideas Denise shared that afternoon. In that initial conversation (see figure 3 below) Denise expressed strong convictions about what school should be like for students like herself. She argued that students should not have to hide who they are in school or in society more broadly. She also explained that school should be a safe place where students feel nurtured and supported and not judged or evaluated for who they are (or not).



**Figure 3 - (left) Slide of Denise's thoughts (right) Key phrases about student positioning in school**

These statements also reflected Denise's thoughts about how students are socially positioned in schools and society more broadly. Denise believed that youth were positioned in opposition to societal expectations. She had observed how students felt isolated or lonely because they did not seem to fit a mold for a perfect person or student and often expressed her concern that so many young people went through life trying to keep their head above water. Thus, she wanted her organization to help students “break the boundaries and go through everything” she was suggesting that students needed to engage in resistance and activism to spur social change which she believed was necessary

because the status quo was not adequate. Through her statements, Denise positioned herself as an activist and as someone who was ready to be in the fray.

One more notable thing happened the afternoon we spoke. After we had jotted ideas and had moved onto some other topics, Denise's principal, Mr. Greene happened to walk by us in the hallway. With some prompting she shared her idea for the group she wanted to start. He affirmed her idea to start *Breaking Boundaries* which was important validation for her to move forward and start organizing.

### **Denise Engaged in Self-Making Through Multimodal Composition**

After our initial hallway conversation that I shared above, Denise solicited my help in designing a flyer to recruit peers to the group. When we next found free time, we sat together to make the flyer, both of our laptops open so we could collaborate in the cloud. Denise scoured Google images and ultimately settled on a picture of a young woman with a bandana over her mouth and a spray can in her hand, with the quote, "IF YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE GREATNESS, STOP ASKING FOR PERMISSION." (See figure 4 below). She loved the image and the empowering message. The quote clinched her selection of this photograph. We then opened Google Draw, a web application for artistic compositions, and imported the image. Then, Denise and I spent time pondering fonts, determining what text should be on the flyer, and how things should be arranged.





**Figure 4 - The final version of the Breaking Boundaries recruitment flyer designed by Denise and Ms. V using Google Drawings**

The flyer, and the process of creating it, represented an important step in Denise’s thinking about the group and its goals. In searching for images Denise worked to make tangible – and visible – her thinking. For Denise, the image of a young woman taking charge of her fate represented a stance she wanted to cultivate. As someone who had experienced bullying and felt marginalized in some spaces, the message of empowerment offered a concrete way of representing what “boundaries” this group might break. The image on the flyer also represented Denise’s interest in taking things into her own hands. She felt strongly that as an adolescent she understood the challenges that were present in youth’s lives and she wanted to convey the message that young people should not feel afraid to fight back against the kinds of societal conditions that led students to feel small, unwelcome, or unsafe in school and society more broadly. Denise’s identification as a

feminist and someone who believed that women are subject to unnecessary scrutiny was also visible in her selection of this image.

Once the flyers were printed Denise recruited some friends to help her post them around the school on bulletin boards and doors. They stuck out in the otherwise bare hallways. In the next section I analyze a speech that Denise and a friend wrote and its impact on the group.

### **Written Artifacts Can Carry Messages and Catalyze Change**

In this section I look at the third and final artifact that illustrates how texts can reflect messages that are essential to young people self-making. The final artifact is a short speech that Denise wrote to introduce her vision to her peers at the first *Breaking Boundaries* meeting. I arrived at school one afternoon when most students had already gone home because of early dismissal. I went in search of Denise. A little while later, as I chatted with one of the teachers, Denise and Ally entered his classroom jubilantly announcing that they had written a speech that used “big words” and felt confident that the speech was “so good!” They were both proud of the way the speech had come together and excited to share it with others.

A week later, Denise had managed to recruit nine of her peers to the initial meeting of *Breaking Boundaries*, most of whom were students from her advisory. The group all got special permission to leave early and we convened in the digital humanities room. We eventually dragged our chairs into a circle in the center of the classroom where there was open space.

Denise began by welcoming everyone and then prepared to read the speech she had written, squinting down at her Chromebook, and opening her mouth. However, as

soon as she started, Denise stopped and solicited her friend Ally's help to read the speech on her behalf. She was nervous because she was putting herself out there and subjecting herself to possible scrutiny despite being amongst friends. During the study, Denise often shied away from the spotlight because her anxiety at times got the best of her. She had confidently composed the speech and articulated a clear vision for the group but writing it down proved easier for her than performing revealing a disjuncture between Denise inside (or in text) and herself situated amongst her peers.

As Ally read the speech, Denise listened intently, nodding at certain parts and making sure that her words were being accurately communicated. Below, I have transcribed the text from the video recording and included line numbers to make the analysis that follows more legible:

- 1 Hello, my name is Denise, and I'm here to introduce you to a project that I'm starting, to help out others who are like me throughout middle school.
- 2 I want to show you it's okay to be who you are and not to worry what others think of you.
- 3 I'm here to show you are an amazing and beautiful person inside and out.
- 4 And - that that you can do anything that you put your mind to.
- 5 This is the twentieth century - we are the next generation - we don't have to go by others' protocol; we can change the way society treats people who don't blend in with them.
- 6 We can show them that being different is okay.
- 7 We are individuals. We were all created different.
- 8 So why should we change the way we were created to fit in with society?
- 9 We can change this - we can create a better place for our descendants.
- 10 We can break the boundaries of society's protocol on how you should portray yourself.
- 11 People - we are not Barbies - we shouldn't be held to the standards of them.
- 12 We are human beings, we are made with flaws, and those flaws are what make us human.
- 13 We are made to be amazing people - not perfect.
- 14 We are not something you can just build to become something perfect.
- 15 Perfect, meaning having all the required or desirable elements, qualities or characteristics.
- 16 As good as it is possible to be -to free from any flaw or defect- in condition or

- quality; flawless- this is the definition of perfect.
- 17 We are not a toy - so why should we be held to the same standards as what toys are held to?
- 18 We are made with these flaws- they are the things that what distinguish us from others.
- 19 They are what make us, us.
- 20 To show people that we are all different in a good way.

**Table 7 - Denise's speech about Breaking Boundaries**

Denise's speech was a call to action. She began the speech (in lines 1-4) by laying out a message of acceptance and inclusion. Her statements also acknowledge her belief that many young people experience personal challenges. By offering that this group of young people includes "people like me," Denise was narrating herself as someone who experienced the feeling of being othered. She also conveyed that she had overcome the kinds of feelings or situations that had made her feel marginalized. The phrase, "show you it's okay," positions Denise as wise and experienced but still empathetic because she also experienced similar challenges. She wanted to set an example – by "showing" students that they could do anything.

In line 5 and beyond, she switched from the pronoun, "I" to "we." By shifting to "we" she is positioning herself as part of a group. This was also a way for her to inspire the younger students she was trying to address. She explained that together, they could make a difference. This also positioned the collective "we" against those in society who insist on unrealistic norms.

In Line 5 she used the phrase "others' protocol" to describe norms or standards that she felt limited young people from being themselves.. These sentiments are echoed elsewhere like in lines 11 and 17 when she used the word 'standards' to describe expectations that are imposed by others.

In line 11, she positioned herself in opposition to Barbies, which is indexing a perfect being, toys that have been criticized by feminists because they portray an unattainable (and anatomically incorrect) female figure. Then, she pivoted to the idea that human beings were flawed and that the flaws “make us human.” So she juxtaposed human beings with toys to illustrate that perfection is manufactured. This is evident in how she used the word Barbie in a pejorative way, looking down on society’s obsession with perfect beings, in this case perfect women. This resonates with Denise’s selection of the strong woman for her flyer – that woman did not

In line 17 she used the word “toy.” The word toy evokes an image of something that is manufactured, cookie cutter, or could easily come off an assembly line. In the cult classic film, *Mean Girls*, there were a group of young women who were referred to as “The Plastics”, because they dressed alike, made fun of people who they felt were inferior to them, and were aesthetically ‘perfect.’

One of the most impactful elements of Denise’s speech is its weaving together of different forms of address, which positions her in relation to others in complex ways. In the first three stanzas, she offers an explanation of why they are all gathered, addressing the listening audiences fairly traditionally – Denise is the “I” and the audience is the “you.” She explains that she is beginning the group, that her experiences have led her to create the group, and that the purpose of the group is to make everyone realize they are fine as they are. These efforts to tell gathered students why they are there maintain traditional relations of leader and constituents (or teacher-students). But in line 5 and beyond, there is a dramatic shift, not only in address but in tone. As Denise switches to second person plural (“we”), she includes the listeners in her efforts, positioning them as

working collaboratively to achieve a shared goal. In addition her use of indexical images like Barbies and toys, signal her positionality, as someone who is willing to stand up for what she believes within a society that pushes against people who are flawed or different.

**Self-Making Catalyzed Social Action and Group-Coherence.** In the sections above, I examined three artifacts and the ways they made visible, Denise's self-making. Through the composition of these three texts, Denise positioned herself as someone who was deeply invested in youth empowerment and social justice. In this last section I delve into the conversation that occurred immediately after the speech was read. During the speech, some students *aww'd* or touched their hands to their hearts while others nodded in agreement: the students in attendance were able to locate resonant values and experiences in her words. Upon hearing the speech students were impressed, they applauded and asked who wrote it. The conversation went like this:

Denise: Allright so=

Anya: =Who wrote that?

Denise: I did ((raising her hand and smiling)) – she helped= ((gesturing to Ally))

Ally: =I helped

Greg: I can't whistle but whistle whistle!

Denise: So this is what I kinda want the program to be about – it's about helping (.2) other (.2) people be okay with who they are (.) Cuz (.) I feel as though there are a lot of people who stay quiet in the back just cause they are afraid of how society would treat them for being different. So umm – that's what I kinda wanna do here today. Well - today's just the inform thing (1) but (.) >do you guys have any questions about what we're doing ↑ Cuz (.) I think most of y'all should get it (.) well > °the speech kinda summed it° up?< but if y'all have any questions ((gesturing with her right hand to the group))

Amber: ((raises her hand)) =Uh oh sorry

Anya: =So what (.) >we gonna talk about our feelings in circles?<

Denise: No (.) I want to go to other schools and talk to stu- other people about, how (7) ((Denise looks in direction of camera, someone is doing something that amuses her and other students))

((entire group erupts into laughter and Denise looks over amused at something behind camera))

Denise: (3) SO I wanna go to other schools to talk to other people about (.) how they should not, uh (.) oh (.) phone dropped (.) ((looking over at Anya whose phone she has thrown on the ground)) how they should not hide from people because of the way they are (.) so what I want to do is create a pro:ject about (.) I don't know how to explain it (.) but like (.) to (.) ↑show students to have pride in who they are (.)°Kind of so°= ((shrugging a little))

Ally:  
=LIKE to show students to be PROUD of who they are.

Denise: ((gesturing towards Ally in agreement with her hand)) Yes! =

Anya, who had already agreed to help Denise with the group (as a potential leader of the group) challenged her on the purpose of the group, asking her if they were just going to sit around and talk about their feelings. This would now strike Anya and the rest of the students as ironic because in fact many of their proudest memories of the work they did together in *Breaking Boundaries* was creating a space for students to share their stories and express themselves.

Denise used her remarks to clarify her intentions, she had to find her own voice since Ally was no longer speaking on her behalf. She echoed the sentiments that were audible in her speech and visible in the poster and in the brainstorm we had together. She wanted students to feel good about who they were instead of having to hide from people. In Denise's characterizations of society until this point she identifies an 'other' that is

oppressive and has unrealistic expectations for normal. So the program she wanted to start was not just about getting kids to feel comfortable but ready to face an unaccepting world that is comprised of *others* who don't share her vision. The artifacts that I examined above (the flyer and the speech), illustrated that Denise was ready to wade into the fray to fulfill her goal of changing the world.

Then, the conversation continued:

Sharon: =Like a program?

Ally: [=Yeah!]  
Denise: [Yeah!] (.) like a program (.) like a real outreach program! Where we go to different schools (.) >I think we should start with middle schools< cuz (.) umm (.) umm (.) yeah (.) they're younger=

Greg: =yeah, that's when [(they're starting to go through that)]

Sharon: [They're startin' to go through that tee:nage phase=]

Greg: =°I went through that when I was younger too but now I just say I'm awesome°

((Inaudible simultaneous chatter)) (5)

Greg: You heard Denise? I used to do the same thing (.) I used to be quiet all the time=

Denise: =MA POINT!

Greg: now I just don't care, I just think I'm awesome

Denise: Cuz you are! awesome (.) cuz you are who you are!

Denise first clarified the intent of *Breaking Boundaries*. Then, Greg and Sharon



pick up her thread about the challenges that younger students experiencing, mentioning that ‘awkward teenage phase.’ Greg went on to share his own personal experiences explaining that as a younger kid, he had experienced self-hatred and doubt, but eventually he decided he was awesome. By sharing, Greg identified himself as a student who had felt othered or marginalized in society. Then, Denise responded “MA POINT!” affirming his experience and her own hope that younger students should experience the moment of acceptance and self-realization that Greg had described.

As students continued their conversation, Denise eventually asked them if they would be willing to tell their stories to younger students at other schools, several students volunteered. They offered up bullying, feeling lonely, and family problems, as challenges they had encountered and overcome. While students in this meeting expressed how they had overcome these challenges, over the course of the year they opened up to each other and engaged in sharing circles and revealed how some of the challenges they originally described as being in the past, were very much in their present. In those meetings, they shed tears, dispensed advice, and expressed their empathy and support for one another.

Many students were thankful to have a space where they could express themselves. Daymon for example shared that he did feel like they accomplished a great deal saying, “We did accomplish like – we did accomplish a lot of things that we wanted to do for Breaking Boundaries, like made up a whole like board game for the kids to play, we shared stuff about ourselves, and like we’ve like cried within the group, you know we shed tears, hardships stuff like that” (I followed up by asking, “Do you think that that was important, the sharing?” Daymon responded, “yeah coz that like that helps build a

connection between you and your peers, and like helps you form way stronger bond that you used to have” (Interview, June, 2016).

Ally shared that *Breaking Boundaries* was, “like a place where you could like get together with your friends and like be yourself, and not worry about people judging who you are. Like that was a place where you can be free to be yourself and not worry about people glaring at you, or calling you something, or thinking that you are weird” (Interview, June, 2016). Anya who initially questioned Denise on the group’s premise asking Denise, “we gonna talk about our feelings in circles?” had this to say about her prouder moments, “you know that circle... when we was crying and we were like- we went around and shared? Like I felt that that was what breaking boundaries was about” (Interview, November, 2015). The sentiments expressed by students suggest that *Breaking Boundaries* was successful in being a safe space where young people could share, shed tears, and be themselves. That, they felt, was one of the most significant accomplishments.

These three students were particularly vocal about the value *Breaking Boundaries* provided by creating an opportunity for them to share. Anya and Daymon particularly noted the tears that were shed in several meetings. These were the meetings when students were most vulnerable and honest with their emotions. Daymon did not share or even react noticeably during these more emotional conversations but he still found them valuable and impactful as a practice more broadly. Students’ willingness to share their personal stories during *Breaking Boundaries* meetings illustrated their embrace of the group’s ethos. Thus, they engaged in small acts of self-making that broke the boundaries of traditional school-day discourse. The stories students told (which are not part of this

data chapter mainly given the deeply personal nature of these stories) positioned them as vulnerable in front of their peers. Students' experiences included frustration and fear resulting from parents relapsing into drug and alcohol use, stressful home lives, self-harm and self-hatred, and anxieties related to undocumented status, to name a few. These conversations also revealed that students needed to process their own feelings and experiences.

While students did feel that *Breaking Boundaries* did offer a safe space within school, this did not mean that students felt that the group was ultimately successful in the goals they set out for themselves. Anya, Ally, and Daymon were particularly outspoken about the lack of progress and lamented the lack of clarity of the group's goals. They felt that more could have been accomplished in their time together. Nathaniel was ambivalent about the experience overall. Ally faulted the leaders – Denise in particular- for not necessarily offering participants the guidance necessary for the group to be more productive. Anya did not feel full ownership of the group because she felt like she was always trying to find her footing as a leader in the shadow of the group being Denise's original idea, something Denise often reminded everyone about. Despite the disappointments, the group had started something and at many times throughout a challenging school year, students did find moments of togetherness and comfort with peers in the group.

Even though the Design School was more welcoming and warm than most high schools in the city, students still did not view school as a place to bare all and let their guard down. Students were cognizant about having to put on a strong facade rather than be vulnerable in front of their peers. These contributions hinged on the larger premise

that was established in the group's initial meeting, during which it is established that all students have stories to tell that encapsulate challenges that they have had to overcome. In this context, all participants had something to offer because the content of their lives mattered. The students initially agreed to participate because they agreed with the vision that everyone's story mattered. In attempting to reach the larger goal of student outreach, the actual Design School students participating in *Breaking Boundaries* had created a space where they had felt safe and connected to each other. Thus, from Denise's acts of self-making, emerged new ways for other young people to engage in self-making and relationship building that shifted how students traditionally related in school.

### **Acts of Self-Making Shifted Students' Understanding of School Positioning**

In her sophomore year, I asked Denise to reflect on a time she felt agentive and valued in school. She described the hallway meeting where we brainstormed *Breaking Boundaries*. That afternoon, in addition to us chatting in the hallway, the school principal stopped by and I insisted she share some of the cool graphics she had designed on *Wattpad*<sup>13</sup> and she also shared her vision for the student-led organization. Her principal's support validated for Denise that her idea mattered, and shifted how she felt as a student within her school community. It also gave her the institutional support she required to implement her idea. Below I have included a short excerpt from an interview with Denise in the fall of 2015.

Denise: Okay, so from like elementary school, I was more like quiet, really, really quiet, part of middle school I was really quiet then I started like opening up more, but like I had – I was still put into my place as **just a student**<sup>14</sup>. Like, I was

---

13

14 Emphasis added for readability.

just chillin'. but when I came here like I don't know, it just gives you like that homey type feeling: Okay, this is like, I can do certain things you know like...

Ms. V: Can you point to a moment where you felt that was student possible? Can you – like if that's even student possible?

Denise: I'm thinking.

Ms. V: Take your time.

Denise: OH! I got this! So it was when we was in the hallway and we was talkin' to Mr. Burkhardt about Breakin' Boundaries, and like he let me like, he was like, "GOOD, you guys can do this." Like, he gave me that accepting thing, like where, you know, I didn't get turned down because I didn't have a teacher- cuz I had you and it wasn't an actual teacher, and stuff. Like that that moment. I remember that moment....

Interview November 14, 2015

In her previous schools she was positioned as she put it "just a student". Before coming to the Design School she had not been treated as someone whose independence and agency were celebrated and nurtured. In elementary and middle school she knew her role was to listen to her teachers and do her work. When she described the "homey type of feel" she was referring to the way the Design School had positioned students to exercise their agency and feel like they mattered. In her previous schooling experiences, Denise felt that she was 'just' a student. By engaging in these acts of self-making that were visible in the artifacts that Denise made, she boldly shrugged off previous conceptions of what students could be.

### **Cultivating Relationships with Peers: Making/Dancing as Collaboration**

In the previous section I examine the ways Denise's self-making within school ultimately laid fertile ground for *Breaking Boundaries* to begin their work together through a shared context for making. In this section I turn to the relationships cultivated

within the dance team. The shared context for the dancers was the creation and performing of choreography. The dancers agreed early on that their goal as a team would be to perform at the school and at other venues throughout the city. Unlike *Breaking Boundaries*, the dancers had a frame of reference for what a dance team was and how it should function – this came from their own personal experiences on other dance and cheerleading teams as well as observing what friends and family had done before. What the dancers did not anticipate was the effort required to get themselves organized as a team. This included coming to consensus on how to manage practices, distribution of roles and responsibilities, and improving their performances to be show ready, among others. Operationalizing the vision for a successful dance team challenged the dancers – there was much consternation, fighting, and drama at practices as they went through the growing pains of developing their team. Ultimately, it was the relationships that students built with each other within the context of a making-oriented affinity space, that helped them move towards their goals. In this section I focus on how youth’s social positioning in relation to one another shifted and changed through the collaborative making they did together.

### **Finding a Rhythm: Students Collaboratively Compose**

In this section I explore the relationship that emerged between Ruby and Star as they composed choreography in the figured world of dance. Ruby and Star’s interactions offer an illustration of how peer to peer relationships were cultivated through the process of collaborative composition in dance. The girls, as I had shared in the introduction chapter had gotten a group of students together to start the dance team and held a few practices. While other students who had attended the first practice vacillated in their

commitment the girls persevered. Ruby and Star were eager to make the dance team work.

Roughly three weeks after the team's first practice, in early December 2014 just after 4pm we met in the civics classroom. Star and Ruby were stressed when they arrived after an earlier confrontation with one of the school safety officers<sup>15</sup>. In her freshman year of school, Star had moments where she would grow so frustrated that she was unable to calm herself down often dipping into a near catatonic state. At other times she would be furious and unable to focus on anything else, quietly mumbling under her breath. Thus, it was a testament to Star's commitment to cultivating the dance team that she stayed that afternoon instead of heading home to cool down.

That afternoon, as I worked with Paul – who was still on the dance team at the time – Ruby and Star were busy brainstorming choreography for the impending auditions they wanted to hold. The audition song they agreed on was, *Yonce Electra Bodega Remix*, a Beyoncé song that had been remixed to include a loud thumping bass beat and new rhythmic sections of music. The remix was orchestrated to be played in a club or at a party. Star was proud to have found the remix online via YouTube.

They started practice by marking the choreography they had already composed during the previous practices (which included a few steps contributed by David). Marking moves is when performers dance choreography without putting their full effort forward (e.g. instead of jumping, you simply lift up your shoulders to imply a jump). Dancers (and actors) mark steps so they can come up with new choreography while

---

<sup>15</sup> There were many students who had bad experiences with this particular school safety officer. She was seen as abrasive and mean-spirited to many of the students. At other times she acted like an advocate for students. However she often treated students with an heir of contempt. Similar complaints have been shared about subsequent officers – they have changed each year for three years.

recalling what came before in the flow of steps (or dialogue). It is like how a writer re-reads the preceding paragraphs in a text they are working on before continuing to write, to make sure the subsequent sentences or paragraphs make sense and flow naturally.

As they listened to music and tried to brainstorm new choreography they decided let the song play fully. Upon playing the song fully, they discovered a section of the music they had not heard before, which had a rhythmic beat. The girls referred to this rhythmic section as the “African section” because it reminded them of an African drumbeat. They collaborated and eventually produced sixteen counts to accommodate 16 beats in the African section. The first 8 counts the girls drew both their arms back behind their heads in a sweeping motion until their hands landed back by their hips, their palms facing forward. The next eight counts they moved side to side, their hands on their thighs, their shoulders shrugging as they moved in syncopation – to the right, then left, with their knees slightly bent. They practiced it a few times and then decided to rehearse the entire song.

As I watched a few minutes of the practice videos I noticed a period of about ten seconds where Star and Ruby were riffing (or brainstorming) choreography because they had not yet come up with anything for that part of the music. It was interesting because it revealed some of the social dynamics between the girls. In the first couple of seconds of the video clip, Ruby, who wore a pink leopard print sweater danced closer to the camera and Star (dressed in black sweats) was further away. There were several feet between them and they weren't looking at one another. They were positioned within the same space but were not dancing together, instead they were dancing within the same ‘stage’ so to speak. As the music continued, Ruby sashayed towards the back of the room as Star



moved around. They were still looking in opposite directions and dancing separately, they were still not dancing together. Then, Ruby moved back to the front of the so the girls were almost parallel. At this point the girls were still dancing facing in opposite directions. Both Ruby and Star wear a look of seriousness: their brows are furrowed in thought and their moves are slight as they try to brainstorm. Below, I analyze their performance frame by frame and then afterwards discuss the implications of their physical positioning within the dance space.







<b>Time</b>	<b>Screenshot</b>	<b>Speech</b>	<b>Positioning &amp; Movement</b>
0:48		None	Ruby in the front, Star in the back. Both girls look at opposite walls.
0:51		Star: "MY HEAAAAART" (singing)	Star walks up to front of room, hand on heart, her gaze meets Ruby as they cross each other in the middle of the room.  Ruby sashays to the back using the same move, she looks at star and keeps moving.
0:54		None	Ruby has moved to the back, facing the windows. Now Star has moved up front, she is facing the wall.
0:58		None	Now they are both near one another but still not dancing 'together' but in close proximity to one another.  Ruby gazes down. Star gazes toward the wall.

Table 8 - Ruby & Star brainstorm new choreography

At one point the girls ran into each other unexpectedly when Star was moving backwards, trying to see what might work for that music. Ruby had remained stationary and they gently collide. They stop momentarily, Star, leans against Ruby playfully. Then, they keep riffing and Star moves away again from her, as they wait for the beats to continue.

<b>Time</b>	<b>Screenshot</b>	<b>Speech</b>	<b>Positioning &amp; Movement</b>
		N/A	Star backs up slowly, Ruby dancing in place, her knees bent.
		N/A	Star smiles, amused as she leans back and takes a long look at Ruby. The girls both laugh.

**Table 9 - Star and Ruby collide while brainstorming choreography**

The moment in Table 9 was funny: Star, backed up slowly as both girls seemed to be dancing in their own worlds and then suddenly they bumped into each other. Instead of squealing in disgust or laughing which were plausible ways that students would often react in such moments, they paused for a moment, Star leaned playfully against Ruby. Their physical positioning suggested comfort with one another. The amused expression on Star's face also revealed that she found the interaction funny. At the time, the girls had only been practicing for about four weeks and were still getting to know one another. That moment was telling because within the two-minute clip this was one of the few times the girls directly interacted with each other versus near each other. Their body language and gaze suggest they were letting their guard down and learning to joke and be

playful around each other, which in a dance space is how trust is expressed. If you can't dance in front of another person and risk the chance you might look foolish then you won't ever be able to really work with other performers. Moreover, if dancers can't dance with each other and be silly and vulnerable, then it is very difficult to achieve more significant goals like pulling a putting a team together. Thus, through their embodied play and dance, configuring and re-configuring the figured world of the dance team.

Early in their first year of school and even intermittently over the course of two years, Star would grow frustrated with peers in the school and often lamented to me that she wanted to leave the school. Ruby, maintained a tougher façade which was different from the more sensitive and earnest parts of her personality- facets she only revealed to people she trusted. For two girls who often presented a tougher façade in other school contexts, it was significant that they could not only collaborate but establish comfort with each other through dance.

**Collaborative Compositions Lead to Expressions of Joy.** In the final section I look at the last few seconds of the same clip. The girls had come up with sixteen counts they were excited about by finding the *African beat*, in the music. However, there was a long gap between the last steps they choreographed and the African section. In this video clip, the girls were joking around saying that they were done when suddenly they move into action. (You can see me located in the frame, because I mistakenly assumed they were really done, so I went to turn off the music and start it again when they warned me away).





<b>Time</b>	<b>Screenshot</b>	<b>Speech</b>	<b>Positioning &amp; Movement</b>
1:10		Ruby and Star: “We’re done! We’re done!” Ruby: “NOOO don’t touch that!”	Ruby and Star pretend to shrug off, exaggerated movements.  Both of them are looking toward me as they pretend to be completely done.  Ms. V moves towards and then backs away from the laptop.
1:12		Ruby: “That part’s comin’ up!”	They make one false start because they anticipated the section was coming up 16 beats sooner than it does.  Ruby laughs at herself for starting to soon but then they agree that the ‘part is comin’ up and get back in place.
1:15			This time the African Beat picks up and they spring into action, using the new sequence: their arms go wide and high above them, bringing them back to their sides, their legs are bent in a wide squat, they move right for two beats, then left, their shoulders moving up and down at the same time.
1:17		Ruby and Star: “EHHHHHHH!”	Once they have danced their newly choreographed 16 counts they are gleeful. They celebrate by high-fiving.

Table 10 - Ruby and Star celebrate their new choreography

As they cheered and gave each other a high five, they were expressing their joy, pride, and sense of accomplishment in their newly developed choreography. They had worked together to make something and when they were able to dance it all together it felt good and was worthy of a celebration. These post-dance celebrations became a standard ‘practice’ within the figured world of dance team practices. Over the two years of my study, anytime students mastered a small sequence, composed new bits of choreography, or observed that younger (or more junior) dance team members had learned a new bit of choreography, they celebrated. These celebrations gave the dancers opportunities to experience success within school. They might have been micro-milestones but to the dancers on the team, they were still moments of success. The unadulterated joy that youth expressed was also an illustration of youth agency within school: students expressed themselves and related to one another in a manner that felt valuable to them.

**Developing Trust and Comfort Takes Time and Effort.** Star and Ruby both agreed it took some time to get comfortable with each other. In fact, it was during the December 2014 practice, that I recounted above, that was a turning point for their relationship. Star had this to say about it: “when I first really felt comfortable was when we was in civics<sup>16</sup> and dancing and we fucked it up” (Interview, February, 2017). That afternoon was meaningful to her because she and Ruby had worked together, come up with new choreography, and danced everything through.

Ruby shared that the early practices were “weird but oddly satisfying... I didn’t know them [referring to the other students] so it was easy to impress each other”

---

<sup>16</sup> The civics classroom

(Interview, February, 2017). Ruby acknowledged that their early experiences as a team were “weird” because they were getting to know one another but acknowledged that collaborating was also “oddly satisfying” because they were getting things done and accomplishing goals they had set for themselves. The latter part of her statement, revealed that Ruby felt that early on she did not have to do much to garner the praise of her peers. However, over the course of two years, as the team’s choreography became increasingly complex and sophisticated it was more difficult to earn praise because the team demanded more creativity and technical prowess from one another.

Ruby joined the Design School in the third week of the school year. On Ruby’s first day at the Design School she worked with Star on a banner for the guidance counselor, Ms. Bennett, who had asked students to create something that could be used at the high school fair- an event to recruit new students. It was a way to integrate Ruby into the school’s activities and help her get to know other students. Star and Ruby reminisced about making the banner together and recalled how they had exchanged “kiks” (a popular messaging service that teens use to stay in touch) and that the next day they decided to ‘twin’ (when people choose to wear the same outfit) the following day at school. They laughed at their relative youth. Interestingly, the earliest memory they have of their relationship was built around making something together for the school. To this end, Star explained in an interview how it felt to try and work collaboratively to build a team: “it was rough. It was really rough at the beginnin’ because we really didn’t know each other. But once we got to know each other, it was – we still have arguments till today, but we always get past it because we got like all of us got a strong bond with each other” (Interview, February, 2017). Star recognized that not knowing each other made it difficult

to accomplish things. However, over time as they cultivated a bond, even when there were conflicts (of which there were many), the team stuck together because of the bonds between them. Star also expressed that while they used to “argue about simple stuff like: this dance move don’t fit, or you did it off beat, or something like that” they have been able to move past those petty arguments and focus on their larger goal to have a strong dance team. Or perhaps more aptly as time passed and their accomplishments grew, the team’s arguments could not only focus on the minutiae because they had responsibilities to each other, to the younger team members, and to themselves.

The students actively constructed their figured world of dance. The classrooms we inhabited changed from week to week or day to day, but the people, activities, and tools continued to shape the space. The tools that we had at our disposal were the computers, speakers (which we would borrow from willing classroom teachers), and of course our own imaginations. The activities in this space were the collaborative composition that students were engaging in from day to day. Early on the students were trying to produce their first piece for auditions. After that each dance they did was in service of a public performance at a talent show or over time, other school events. These activities and goals created a framework for the team.

### **Dance as a Pedagogical Space**

Another peer to peer relationship that I explore in this chapter emphasizes the pedagogical nature of dance team where students were positioned as learners and teachers. In this section I focus on the pedagogical peer to peer relationship that developed between David and Ruby, who were the choreographer and captain of the dance team respectively during the two years of the study.



The dance team had managed to recruit five new dancers to the team during the 2015- 2016 school year, four freshman and one sophomore. During January 2016, practices with the newer students were in full swing – with the senior dancers teaching the newer students how to do the technical moves that the team was incorporating into their repertoire. At one such practice, David, Ruby, and another student, Aria, were working with newer students on learning new choreography. Aria was another active member of the dance team during both years of the study. She did not have an official leadership role because of some tensions that persisted between her and Star and Ruby. However, the focus of the analyses below is on the interactions between David and Ruby.



**Identifying the Problem: David and Ruby Work to Discern the Pain Points in a Dance Sequence.** The sequence that students were trying to learn started with a high jump, then a cat jump (arms high in the air like a cat), then forward into a somersault and finally ending in a front death drop. The newer students on the team were having a hard time putting the sequence together. Some were afraid to fall forward onto the floor and others couldn't seem to push their momentum forward and get down to the floor. I analyzed a few minutes from this practice during which Ruby and David begin to assess the challenges that the newer students were having.



**Figure 5- Ruby and David working with Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 Respectively**

When the video clip begins both David and Ruby are each working with a student. In the figure above, I have labeled David (dressed in black and white pants and black t-shirt), Ruby (dressed in grey pants and grey sweatshirt), and the two students they were helping respectively, dancer 1 and dancer 2. Aria and another student are also in the background practicing (but they are not noted above). David stood at the foot of a blue practice mat with one of the new dancers (See Figure 5 above). He was teaching her the tumbling sequence that I described above. In the foreground of the video clip, Ruby was teaching another dancer the same sequence (See figure 5 above). David heard Ruby and dancer 1's conversation and realized that both of the newer students were trying to do learn the same sequence. In the following table, I offer an excerpt from the multimodal analysis of the first few seconds of this interaction or turn.

In the above turn, David acknowledges that he and Ruby are trying to teach the same sequence. As they start to confer about the newer students' challenges, they



<b>Time</b>	<b>Screenshot</b>	<b>Speech</b>	<b>Positioning &amp; Movement</b>
0:01		David: "Go like this."  Ruby: "you're like this"	Ruby brings her hands together and intentionally fumbles.  David gestures to dancer 2.
0:03		David: "That's what she doin' too"	David looks behind at Ruby and then gestures to student on the mat.

**Table 11 - David and Ruby realize they are teaching the same choreography**

position each other as knowledgeable. They treat each other like two educators conferring over common challenges encountered by children. By discussing the respective dancers' challenges, they both are working as coaches or teachers, trying to help the other students learn. David and Ruby shared the responsibility and goal of getting students to learn and feel comfortable with the choreography. As the team evolved and grew, their relationship moved from simply working in parallel and to working together in a pedagogical way: teaching other students, modeling for others, and working together to support the new students' growth.

Star, who wasn't there at practice that day also supported David and Ruby' efforts by working closely with the youngest students. She recognized that they were not fully comfortable at the dance team practices, often explaining that they were "just babies" and thus, spent substantive time coaching them when they needed extra support.

**Collaboration With Trusted Partners Reveals Humility.** In this next turn, David and Ruby compare notes and try to problem solve together. Each of them uses their bodies to 'explain' what they see is the problem. However, as David's point out below, Ruby ends up repeating the problem instead of demonstrating the 'right' way to do the move.






Time	Screenshot	Speech	Positioning & Movement
0:05-0:06		David: She jumpin' full. ((In other words she is over extending herself))  David: Don't jump full-just	David demonstrates a 'bad' jump on the foam mat, just like Ruby had done to show the difference between the right and wrong way.
:09-:13		Ruby: Cuz if they go forward, they can get down faster=  David:=right!  Ruby: You just-  David: You just jumped	Ruby gesturing her hands above her head, demonstrating the move.  Ruby jumps but doesn't fall to the floor as expected, instead she

	forward-	stumbles
	Ruby: I know	awkwardly,
	<walks	like the
	backwards>	learners.

**Table 12- Ruby tries to demonstrate the choreography**

In the above exchange, David again demonstrates what the student was doing wrong. He used his body to illustrate, to Ruby, the problem, as he also explains, “she jumpin’ full” with regard to one of the younger students. In dance, communicating was multimodal and so Ruby was interpreting his meaning through the words and his embodied demonstration. Then, in the next frame, Ruby tried to problem solve and teach at the same time, attempting to mark the move. However, she gets tripped up on the carpet and David uttered, “you jumped forward.” He said this because Ruby’s intention was to demonstrate how to do something but she messed it up and ended up demonstrating how *not* to do the move. Even though David called her out in front of other students Ruby was not bothered, she took the feedback in stride. In that moment, Ruby’s role as a captain framed her response: her goal was to ensure all the students learned the sequence. As captain Ruby felt the responsibility in practice to, “guide it a certain way, I have to be authoritative... I always have an agenda” (Interview, February 2017). In other words, Ruby’s focus was always on ensuring that the team was moving forward and accomplishing their goals. She felt the weight of that responsibility but having other student leaders helped her to shoulder the burden and distribute responsibility.

**Problem Solving Together: Close “Reading” of Dance as a Pedagogical Move.** In the next turn (see table 13 below), Ruby watched David mark the sequence again.

Time	Screenshot	Speech	Positioning & Movement
0:23		David: "ONE TWO!"	David at mat, looking at wall. Ruby glancing over at David.
		David: "THREE! FOUR!"	Ruby continues to glance at David.
0:25		David: "FIVE! SIX!" Ruby: "LOOK!"	Ruby gestures for the student she is teaching to look at David who is mid-somersault.
0:27		David: "SEVEN! EIGHT!" Ruby: "SEVEN! EIGHT!"	David at mat then looking at wall. Ruby glancing over at David.
0:27-0:30		Ruby: "Even if- You know what, David? The way you did it, you didn't go that high. Go like"	Ruby walks over to where David is on the mat. Ms. V yells from off camera.

---

<p>Ms. V:  “YEAH!  He’s stayin’  lower to the  ground,  Ruby!”</p>	<p>Ruby turns to  Miss V as she  speaks.</p>
<p>Ruby:  “Yeah.”</p>	






---

**Table 13 - Ruby reads David's performance**



In the above turn, Ruby scrutinized David’s movements as he counted out the beats and danced the sequence. As Ruby ‘read’ what David was doing she noticed something that had not occurred to her before. She realized that one of the challenges that the new dancers had encountered was the perceived height they needed to reach before dropping down into the final front death drop. However, as she watched David it occurred to her that the dancers could simply slide down instead of jumping up and then going all the way to the floor. She noted that David did a little more than was required of the other performers. This was a key moment. In watching David dance, and asking him to perform the move, Ruby reinforced his role as the choreographer. They also shifted into a different kind of pedagogical relationship where they worked together to solve a problem through dialogue, dance, and ‘close’ reading.

In the next turn, Ruby asked David to perform the entire sequence again so she could observe him one more time to be certain before she instructed the other dancers. The sequence went like this:



Time	Screenshot	Speech	Positioning & Movement
0:44		Ruby: “And - slow it down when it gets to a certain part.” (talking to David)	Ruby stands watching David.
0:49			David is in the air.  Ruby is standing adjacent to him, observing his movements.
0:51			
0:52		• Ruby: (inaudible)	David finishes his somersault.  Ruby stands observing David’s movements.
0:53		• Ruby: “Stop there. AND!”	Ruby gestures with her hand to tell David to stop because they have come to the key move.  David finishes his somersault.



0:55		<p>• Ruby: “AND!”</p> <p>Ruby claps to signal the “and” in the beat.</p> <p>David jumps up with his right hand raised.</p>
0:56 – 1:02		<p>• Ruby: “You can just slide.”</p> <p>David hits the ground.</p> <p>Other student: “But he’s all the way over there.”</p> <p>Ruby looks to the student trying to learn the sequence.</p> <p>Ruby: “David jumps up, you can just slide.”</p> <p>David: “I’m breakin’ it down.”</p> <p>Ruby: “He breakin’ it down for you all.”</p>

**Table 14 - Ruby continues reading as David marks the steps**

This time Ruby directed David, asking him to slow down the counts so that she could point things out to the other dancers. As Ruby scrutinized the sequence again it occurred to her that David was not jumping as high as had been previously understood. This was the root cause of confusion and some angst on the part of the other dancers learning this particular sequence. To problem solve, Ruby engaged in a “close reading,” of his performance, trying to understand exactly what he was doing. As she watched closely she came to a realization and then tried to use this to coach the other students; operationalizing the insights she gained from her “close reading.” The exchange between

Ruby and David illustrated the pedagogical nature of dancing.

Dancing is pedagogical in that when one person does something and you want to learn the move, the originator of the move must dance to communicate their vision. Meaning is made through movement or lack of movement (stillness), but it is all embodied. Often when something is danced over again at a slower pace, things that are not noticeable at first glance become more visible to the dancer as well as those observing. This level of self-reflection and sometimes self-correction was a substantive part of the work that Ruby and David did together as a team as well as with the other co-captain, Star, as well as other senior dancers like Aria.

David explained that the reason he did not mind when Ruby or Star critiqued or directed him in dance is because they were both his friends and moreover, they had earned his respect as dancers. To work together effectively and focus on the tasks at hand, in this case, teaching the dances to less experienced students, required trust and belief in one another. It also, as was true in the previous section that explored the relationship between Ruby and Star, required students to be willing to be vulnerable open to critique. Often at the Design School students grew frustrated if their teachers tried to, “tell them too much.” In other words, if the teachers seemed to be lecturing on for longer than they liked, they would tire of it quickly and complain later. Therefore, it is a marked difference when the dancers were willing to receive feedback and direction from one another and work collaboratively, it illustrated the ways in which the space created opportunities for the student leaders to relate differently to one another.

Ruby and David’s dance composing relationship began in their freshman year when they were first trying to build the dance team. One afternoon in January 2015, Star

went home early but David and Ruby both stayed for practice committed to working on finishing the audition dance. Ruby caught David up on the choreography that she and Star had worked on over a couple of weeks. Then, once David had learned the choreography, they spent the afternoon listening to the music and working collaboratively on the steps. This was the first of many practices where the two of them would compose, reflect, and give each other feedback. Often in the first year, they would have ‘pop ups,’ where the two of them and sometimes other dancers would hold an extra impromptu practice. While in their first year they were not friends outside of practice, when it came to dance team, they cultivated respect for each other because of their mutual commitment to the success of the team which was illustrated in their willingness to put in extra time and energy, be innovative, and push their standards to improve the quality of their performances. They also fulfilled different roles that reinforced one another. Ruby felt responsible for keeping the team on track, making sure dances were being learned, shows were being coordinated, and the team wasn’t having social conflicts. David on the other hand did not want the responsibility of leading the team but instead took more responsibility for shepherding the choreography, coming up with new songs, and often editing the music the team used.

In sharing the moments from their second year as collaborative composing partners, this section illustrated the ways in which the making activities forged or strengthened relationships. The team experienced ups and downs of trying to come up with choreography, teach each other, and ultimately perform for an audience. The students would experience periods of productivity and comfort where everyone was getting along and at other times practices would be slow, stressful or the worst,

argumentative. However, the making relationships that took root in the team's earliest days were ones that would see them through the ups and downs because they always returned to the shared context, dance. Those relationships as I illustrated above were forged through collaborative composing, pedagogical support of each other and younger dancers, and in performing together, which is one of the ultimate expressions of their work together.

### **Students' and Adults Work Collaboratively To Make Things That Matter**

In this last data section of the chapter, I introduce a third relationship that helped to make and maintain the youth-led spaces, which was the relationship between students and adults. I examine how the youth-led spaces created opportunities for adult and students to work as collaborators, usurping traditional student-adult dynamics in school where adults are knowers and students are positioned as empty vessels waiting to be filled (Freire, 1969) or young people in need of discipline. I focus on the relationships between myself and students because I was the adult most actively involved in the co-creation of the youth-led spaces. However, as I shared in the introduction to this chapter and in Chapter 3, the youth-oriented ethos of the school meant that there were many other adults from the principal, to some of the classroom teachers, to the school staff, who embraced this ethos and dialogic way of working with students.

### **Youth Voices Spur Change**

In the Spring of 2015, the Design School changed their schedule to accommodate 'choice' classes. These courses were built around topics like chess, music, and dance, and

any others that adults in the building were passionate about. When the schedule change took place, I had already been teaching a course on digital design, which stemmed from an informal gathering of students interested in learning Scratch, a programming language for youth. As the ‘digital design’ course ended, I was asked to teach another ‘choice’ class. I decided to focus on ethnographic filmmaking because many students had expressed interest in ‘film’ and it was something I was excited to share with students.

In the second to last week of March 2015, I arrived at school to hear that the schedule had changed a week earlier than expected, so I had to be ready to teach film that afternoon. I knew generally how I might start a class but didn’t have anything prepared. Students trickled into the classroom and looked at me expectantly. At the time the room did not have a projector screen and on that afternoon, there was no working projector either, so we couldn’t watch any films. I started by trying to ask students about what they knew about films asking questions like, “*What do we need to produce a film? What are people interested in doing?*” Some students indulged my questions while others looked at me. One young woman rolled her eyes and declared, “*I’m bored.*” I remember feeling overwhelmed.

The students assembled were a mix of students who had been assigned to the course – because they never completed their choice activity preference online<sup>17</sup>—and others who had simply come to hang out because they knew me. Mira, who had been campaigning for a film class for a few months, along with other students grew increasingly frustrated and disinterested in what I had to offer that afternoon. Before I knew it, Mira was walking away, telling me that she was going to share with whomever

---

<sup>17</sup> The principal used Google forms to send out surveys to students but in their first-year students rarely checked e-mail on a regular basis, so many students never got to choose a choice activity.

would listen that I was not a good teacher and that her vision for the class was not being realized. At this point I was ready to quit and go home, I was discouraged, tired, and frankly not in the state of mind to argue with several willful students.

I included this part of the story about film club because the film club was born out of students exercising their agency. That afternoon, Mira, among other students was frustrated, bored, or unsure of what I was trying to do. It was almost the end of the year and students weren't as earnest or willing to just go along with things without questioning them. Mira was the most vocal. She felt strongly that the time we spent together should resonate with her needs and felt empowered to advocate for herself.

Throughout this chapter I have illustrated ways in which young people have exercised their agency. In the previous contexts, young people were exercising agency within or in service of building something that mattered to them. In this context, Mira spoke out in a class, that was officially a space where adults (or in this case me) were in charge. It was not a youth-led space, but, it was a space to nurture something youth cared about. By speaking up she shifted the power dynamics in the room. At first I ceded control, insisting students do whatever they want and sat down to eat. The students were surprised by my reaction but they stuck around, I think hopeful that they could get to do something interesting.

A little later, after complaining to the school secretary about my poor teaching, Mira returned to the room and then something shifted. Below I've included a longer excerpt from my field note.

*Within a few minutes of Mira's return from complaining about my poor teaching, we begin discussing films. Mira starts listing films that she loves like Overboard and Troop Beverly Hills and other campy selections that I*

*did not think teenagers would know. I express my amazement at her encyclopedic knowledge of films – particularly the cheesy films that I have watched a million times. In the mean time other students start to share films they enjoy. Aziz shows me a film he really likes and pulls up the trailer for a gangster-esque flick. Frank offers that he enjoys the Hunger Game series. As the conversation continues, the energy in the room builds. Even students who often would not participate in a dialogue offer opinions.*

*We come back to the idea of making a film together. There is enthusiasm for the group to make a horror film. “Okay! what do we need?”, I ask the group, trying to get us to start thinking about process. Students call out, “Scripts! lighting! cameras!” I begin scribbling these ideas on construction paper as they talk since the dry erase board has no markers. Daria jokes she’ll be one of those, “white girls who dies first.” Sara and Kayvon (who has wandered over from algebra) fight over who will get the voiceover position which Tony (the self-proclaimed director) wants to give to Kayvon because he has the “official voice” (movie voice). I joke back and forth in my own version of “the movie voice” ... ONE GIRL AND ONE BOY IN THE FIGHT OVER VOICE OVER.” Then I offer, “why don’t we have two trailers?” The chatter continues as ideas flow as well as banter about films. “Oh! we need to watch movies without sound!” I posit out loud, thinking about imparting the importance of sound in film.*

*A group of students led by Mira runs out to recruit teachers to die in the movie. Sara suggests we should film on the third floor (which at this point is just a relic of it’s former glory, full of old dusty classrooms and abandoned furniture). Nathaniel says, “I’m scared!”. “Let’s do a scouting trip on Monday,” I suggest.*

*The ideas continue to flow for what we need as well as what the script needs, “Oh! oh! let’s do a movie where the kids are there and they are trying to get out of school and they can’t.” Someone else offers, “some kind of zombie apocalypse.” Others join in, “we need makeup! costumes!”. Someone else says, “there’s going to be a monster trying to get us.” Sara throws out ideas about kids trying to get in to the building, jostling the locks, acting it out for emphasis.*

*Mira is excited at the end, smiling from ear to ear and saying, “Miss you got me excited! Even if this ends we have to finish our movie.” I tell her we will.*

*(Field Note, March 24, 2015)*

I still don’t recall exactly how we moved from one ‘act’ where everyone was upset, to the second ‘act’, where we were planning a film we wanted to make. However, I do remember the marked difference in how I felt and how the space felt. The students

assembled in the room, who were not from similar social groups, were sharing ideas, offering opinions, and revealing things about themselves. The students were making connections between the work we wanted to do and ideas or contexts that were meaningful to them. They were finding a way to talk about affinities, interests, and aspirations. Moreover, instead of lecture on film, we engaged in a dialogue about what was required to produce a film. This created opportunities for students to offer their knowledge of genre, plot development, and production. Students employed their funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) as they engaged in dialogue with each other and with me.

I singled out Mira because this was a turning point for both of us. I was aware that Mira enjoyed writing and heard about her work in the after-school poetry club. However, her identity as a writer was not fully visible. Moreover, Mira had not ever revealed her love for films and television. That afternoon was the beginning of an ongoing conversation that continued for the duration of the study. Our shared love for films, particularly cheesy romances, revealed a shared affinity that created a new understanding between us.

I was surprised, as I said in the field note above, that she knew and loved films that were so familiar to me like *Troop Beverly Hills*, a very campy movie that feels rather specific to growing up in the 1980s. This spurred many subsequent conversations both in the film club and outside of it about favorite shows, favorite moments, and started an exchange of film titles between us. Sometimes I would randomly just email Mira, with the subject line something like, “have you seen this?” with the name of a film or a YouTube link that I thought she would like. Often, she had already watched them.

Connected learning is ultimately about connecting to young people and



supporting them in pursuing things that matter to them (Ito et al., 2013). To do so, it requires time to listen and hear each other and learn about one another. It's not necessarily that we agreed on everything but in that moment, we saw each other and connected as human beings.

### **Dialogic Relationships: Students and Adults Co-Creating and Learning Together**

In this section, I use some of the discourse that occurred in film club to illustrate how Mira's passion for writing the movie script and my acknowledgement of her expertise and positionality as a writer, created opportunities for her to take ownership of the script writing in film club and in doing so, shifted the adult-student dynamics in a space that was not originally conceived as youth-led. In our second week together, on the last day of March, the digital humanities room was buzzing with excitement as we discussed potential plotlines for the film we had agreed to make. There were debates about genres, (horror vs. comedy or both), plot details, and even the names of characters. Early in our film club meeting the debate started out like this:

Ms.V: [SO:]

Mira: [SO] Like we started with the main character right now, [like right now we at her house or somethin']

Denise:  
[O:CTAVIA!]

Sara: OH N:O↑!

Mira: So she had a nightmare or somethin'=?

Sheila: = [Who da main character?]

Ms. V: [main character!]

Mira: So we was thinkin' bout Hazel for the main character (.) it can be a girl=

Denise: =No  
her name is Octa:via! =

Sara: [ =NO! (1) NEVER! =]

Mira: =NO! if y'all wanna change it can be a male, we just come  
up with a male name =

Sara: =that name is [BA:AD!]

Tony: [Why don't we just have two?]

Mira: We're [(stickin')] with this main character cuz we didn't get that far.]

Ms. V: [So can I just (.) can I stop you right there?] for a second? (.) oh no  
you keep going actually. [Let her keep going and then let's do feedback [right  
after!]

Mira: [Oh (3) Okay so right now she's like havin' (.) a ba:d dream (.) she  
like (.) she wakes up (.) she writes in her diary (.) and start talkin' about how she  
feels and when she looks up (.) she look at the time (.) cuz Nathaniel said he  
wanted to make it like the first day of school or somethin' like tha:t =

Ms. V: =Kay =

Mira: =So then she's like OH SHIT I'm gonna be late

Ms. V: OK(.)AY

Mira: And then she runs out = (2)

Ms. V: OKAY! =

In the above exchange, there are many voices engaged in this brainstorming and story construction. Mira however steered the above scriptwriting and brainstorming session in film club. I acted as a note taker and quasi-facilitator but it was Mira who made decisions about the main plot line for the movie. Other students were chiming in but her

voice is the most consistent throughout this session, sometimes crowding others' out because of her enthusiasm. Her statements are also all declarative statements like when she explains the plot: "She's havin' a bad dream, she wakes up and start talkin' about how she feels. When she looks up, she look at the time." Each of these statements are declarative and begin with Mira explaining what she (the main character Hazel) will be doing in the opening scenes. Then, Mira continued and includes Nathaniel's suggestion stating, "Nathaniel said, he wants to make it like the first day of school." So here, she included another student's suggestion but it is couched within her statements about what the opening scene will look like.

Then in the next turn, I came back into the conversation trying to make the connection to the planning and pre-production elements of filmmaking:

Ms. V: Scene's on Hazel.

Mira: Like she wakes up and she's just like UHHH and there's a little bit of sweat or whatever [you wanna call it]

Denise: [Miss Veena] [((inaudible))]

Mira: [hold on]

Ms. V: So does this make sense? So far we wake up (.) this is good! And guys we might change stuff but at least we have the root of an idea (.) everybody should be think (.) Picture this right now (.) that's what a storyboard does (.) you guys know what a scary movie looks like and feels like and sounds like but for us to put it all together we gotta GET there! (.) So Hazel wakes up she's like UHH UHH ((feigning shock)) right?

Denise: THAT WOULD BE SO COOL IF HER EYES JUST POPPED OPEN LIKE THAT=

MS. V: =And we got the camera like ((gesturing implied on audio)) BO:OM! Oh sorry!

In this excerpt from our brainstorming conversation I had piped up to explain that film team's job was to try and visualize the film so we could create a script and produce a film. In this hybrid space particularly because the film club was on the school schedule I felt more pressure for students to learn and make connections. Moreover, there were aspects of filmmaking that we needed to discuss to produce a film.

In the next turn, as the plot brainstorming continued Sheila lamented the idea of kissing a ghost. However, as the dialogue below illustrates, Mira, who asserted herself as the person who would be in charge made it clear that her vision did not include Sheila in the main character role. The exchange went like this:

Mira: Sara want her to fall in love with a ghost!

Sheila: No: GOD! If I'm the main character, I'm not fallin' in love with NO ghost!

Mira: I didn't say you were gonna be the MAIN character. YOU are NOT gonna be Hazel!

Denise: ((inaudible))

Mira: You gonna be the MAIN come:dian character

Denise: I think Daria got the the main character type uh=

Mira: =They BOTH CAN BE!

Ms. V: So we need some scriptwriters right? We need to like

((simultaneous chatter))

Sheila: (I don't wanna be in the movie no:w)

Ms. V: SO Hazel wakes up in this sweat! We see her eyeballs (1) We see her sweat! We see like sweat dripping down (.) We see her eyeballs (.)

Sheila: We see her eye(.)balls=

Ms. V: = UHH UHH Then the next scene is what? Her walkin' into this building?

Denise: =Wait what about her pa:rents ↑?=  
↑

Mira: = Her next scene she got outta her bed and writin' in her diary.

Denise: =what about her pa:rents ↑?=  
↑

Ms. V: Okay (.) so Hazel needs a backstory

Denise: =[° Like maybe one of her°]

Mira: [WE SAID SHE GONNA BE ADOPTED]

Ms. V: OO[OH!]

Denise: [OOH] that's SO cool! [And then like!]

Mira: [And then like!] And she gonna meet her parents in the school or something like that

Kayvon: ((clapping)) [ AND THEN SHE ESCAPE FROM THE ORPHANAGE]

Denise: Oh and!

Mira: I LOVE WRITIN' STORIES I CAN'T HELP IT!

Ms. V: I can see that!

Mira told Sheila that she won't be the main character, but that she can be a comedian in the film. This was only the second time we have met as a group and already the idea of making a film has resonated deeply with Mira. It brought together so many of the things that she loves dearly: writing, films, and imagining fantastical plots and characters. She grows so excited, stating at the end, conscious of her own enthusiasm, "I LOVE WRITIN' STORIES I CAN'T HELP IT!" She said this with so much joy. This

afternoon she drove the composing conversation. Her voice was the most audible in the room and the most authoritative.

Mira led the conversation and opted to ‘hear’ students’ ideas as she moved the plot discussion along. Through her facilitation of the discussion, Mira played a role that would have traditionally been taken up by an adult. This role reversal led to Mira making the ‘final’ choices about the plot. When Sheila, in the above exchange (on page 152 said she was not interested in falling in love with a ghost, Mira corrected her and explained that she (Sheila) was not going to be in the starring role. Mira already had a clear picture of who the main character was and Sheila was not it. She sounded like a film producer or director. (Eventually Mira did become the de facto director given her outsized role in writing and envisioning the film). Here and there in the excerpt of conversation above both Denise and Sara piped up with their thoughts and opinions but Mira continued to steer the conversation with her voice literally and figuratively being the most audible in the room. In asking questions and helping her clarify things, I acted as a mediator and facilitator but did not drive the discussion, I was, working collaboratively with Mira and the other students. This adult student relationship was dialogic (Freire, 1969) because each of us believed that we had something to offer one another.

### **Collaborative Work Sessions Create Opportunities for Sharing and Composition**

At the end of May (about six weeks after our initial meeting), the film club wanted to start filming their horror movie. However the script and the storyboarding weren’t completed. Mira, who had taken the lead on writing the script had written it increasingly as a romantic drama. The scary or horror elements had been supplanted with more romantic and emotional plotlines, which reflected her own interests in a range of

slow, romantic movies that included complicated love affairs and character development. When I arrived at school that Friday morning most film club students were in a frenzy; some were trying to finish assignments that had piled up, others were completing standardized tests, and others were simply trying to stay cool in the oppressive heat of the hundred-year-old school building. Mira and I agreed to meet to work on the script because she was ahead on completing her competencies for the year.

Our goal was to storyboard a few scenes that we could film the following week. Mira and I walked around trying to find a space to work. We arrived at the literacy lab to find that students were working on standardized testing. Mira looked up at me and suggested that we find another place to work since we needed to talk as we worked. So we walked next door to the digital humanities room and found a seat at some desks that were situated by the row of windows and underneath the only air conditioner in the room. As we got settled, Kendrick, who often roamed the halls during lunch, decided to join us for storyboarding.

I pulled out a sheaf of empty storyboard templates that I had printed out and spread them out on the desks where we sat. As we worked Mira explained each scene, going through the written script on her computer in Google Docs helping Kendrick and I visualize key facets of the scenes like the settings, props needed, and character details. In the weeks prior, we had done a table read and other collaborative writing sessions with several members of the film club and Mira had incorporated all of the details into the script.

As we worked on the storyboards, the conversation turned to television shows and Mira started telling Kendrick and I about a show she and her aunt used to “geek out” on,

called *Roswell*. Then she pulled up her computer and shared, with Kendrick and I, clips of the show while explaining the complex plot and individual storylines. She shared that, “Roswell will have you bawlin’ in tears,” because it was so emotionally charged. Then, she regaled us with several stories and sub-plots growing excited and nostalgic about the characters who she had come to love dearly. It was this same passion for others’ written characters that Mira brought to the script we were developing in film club as well.

Kendrick who had expressed his interest in acting in the film worked with Mira to read parts of the script out loud so we could hear the scenes come to life. Both students, Mira as a writer, Kendrick as a performer were invested in seeing the script come to life. As we discussed the nitty gritty details of the script, Mira, Kendrick, and I worked together as collaborators. We looked to Mira for the ideas and back-story on characters. I asked her questions when I found something confusing or odd-fitting. Thus, Mira was positioned as the content expert. As the afternoon unfolded, Kendrick and I made suggestions and offered commentary, but we posed them to Mira, reinforcing her identity as a writer.

Kendrick also found a space to cultivate his own interest in writing that afternoon. At the time, I did not know the extent of Kendrick’s love for writing. When we first met and started working together in the early weeks of his freshman year, I often saw him writing in a notebook. He eventually shared that he was writing down raps and poems. Other times I would see him sitting far back in a classroom, headphones on, rapping quietly under his breath, his head swaying ever so slightly. However not until we sat together reading, editing, and storyboarding, did his interest in a broad range of creative writing become clear. Film club, beginning with writing and eventually acting and



performing revealed that Kendrick was invested in the creative process more broadly. By working together within the larger context of making a film revealed this part of Kendrick's identity and created a common area of interest and understanding that continued to bring us together<sup>18</sup>.

It was important for me to relate this collection of stories that may seem mundane. This is because so much of the time I spent with students during my fieldwork was in conversations like the one I related above. That afternoon, Mira, Kendrick and I storyboarded, shared stories, and spent time together. We cultivated relationships that were not about grades, discipline, or assignments. Instead, we were focused on the moments that we were in. Wissman (2007) in her work with young women writers alluded to Audre Lorde's notion that we should be "here" or in the present, so that students could be "visible, acknowledged, and heard" (p. 348). It was precisely this sentiment of being in the moment with students that undergirded much of the work we did together. In doing so, we shifted traditional power dynamics between adults and students and created new kinds of relationships that were developed around interest-driven making.

### **Cultivating Connected Relationships Within the Boundaries of School**

These glimpses into the emergence and everyday practices of the youth-led spaces provide insights into three kinds of connected relationships that developed through making. First is the connection between Denise and school. In engaging in acts of self-making and articulating who she was and what her values and beliefs were within the

---

<sup>18</sup> In his third year of school (2016-2017), Kendrick participated in becoming a Writing Fellows Mentor. The program was developed by members of our larger research team and while his friend Aziz eventually stopped showing up, Kendrick continued to participate and eventually earned his mentor certification.

institution of school, Denise was in parallel changing the way she as a student participated in school. Second are the connected relationships between peers. In this chapter I shared glimpses into practices that reveal how Ruby and Star and Ruby and David learned to work one another, letting their guard down so they could be vulnerable and open with each other. This led to new ways of relating to one another, where they became collaborators and participated in dialogic relationships of teaching, learning, and feedback. Finally, I shared some of the ways adults and students connected with one another through some glimpses into my work with Mira and other students in film club. We shared common interests which led to dialogic writing and composing and at times a repositioning where Mira was the content expert and leader.

Relationship building is essential to creating safe spaces. This cannot be emphasized enough when discussing students of color who have historically fraught relationships with school. Many have argued that when students don't feel cared for, safe, or welcome, they are unable to meet their educational goals. This precludes them from ever being able to open up and reveal who they are; ultimately creating gaps between youth and their educational and life goals.

As the youth-led groups began to hit their stride, having a shared purpose or context was an important catalyzing force. These relationships were cultivated within an academic institution but they were not traditional ways of relating to one another. Instead, the freedom that came from a school that was both trying to establish routines and policies but whose leader in particular encouraged students to take ownership and in many ways expected them to help build up the school.

For students – they sought out likeminded peers who would support their ideas and with whom they could work together. The making relationships provided important infrastructure for the larger making contexts or spaces that would get created when students were in dialogue around a shared goal. These conversations and interactions with students reveal their interests, aspects of their academic selves as well as other factors that shape their identities.

In this chapter I employed multimodal analysis to examine relationships between students. I did this by looking at the making activities and the positionings students were taking up while in the youth-led spaces. While I wanted to opt to produce pieces of this dissertation with film, I had to balance students' own consciousness about how they were portrayed in these short films with the goal of communicating ideas. I was particularly conscious of negative representations of young people of color that permeate the media. Each of the three youth-led spaces were frenetic spaces where students felt safe and comfortable. This meant that they were often doing lots of joking around, giggling, gossiping, dancing, goofing off, and more. What in some contexts could be viewed as 'kids being kids' for youth of color, who don't always get to experience 'adolescence' in the same way, this gets construed as kids being rude, loud, and inappropriate. In dance, students would wear different kinds of outfits, sports bras, shorts, etc. and I did not feel like it was appropriate to document these private moments for posterity given that they are just going into the world and are looking at college and beyond in the coming years.

I do think in hindsight that film could have conveyed, through students own words, the ways in which their positioning shifted as students and the reasons why feeling valued in school mattered to them. Given the different kinds of marginalization

some of the students have felt in school settings I think students' own voices could have made a more forceful point. This I think is a limitation of the final ethnographic rendering. However, given my concerns around representation, I ultimately constructed the chapter using text and image- still multimodal- but different in its import.

## Chapter 5: Youth as Agentive Curators of Their Mediascapes: Immersions in Self-Imagining and Composing In and Out of School

*On a late Spring afternoon the dance team and I are gathered for practice. It is a few weeks after our first talent show that did not go as planned as the music and technical issues had overshadowed the students' artistic contributions. Surprisingly however this had not dampened the team's spirits – instead it had energized them to move forward and make the next show better.*

*At most practices the students devoted significant time to trying things out – riffing on choreography, teaching each other a new move or practicing flips and acrobatics. At other times students would look up or share new songs and run around the room twerking and joking around. This particular afternoon, David – who has adopted the role of team choreographer, is trying to figure out how to do a 'death drop' as others riff and practice other things.*

*David tries several times to figure out how to do the move but he keeps flopping on his back, not quite able to put all the mechanics into place. He grows frustrated but keeps trying. Then, he attempts it again; jumps up in the air, his arms shoot behind him until his palms hit the floor while simultaneously moving his legs into an air split, with his toes toward his head, and then, he draws his arms and legs into a straight line and laid flat and still. On his umpteenth time, he had done it. He screamed with joy and then immediately requested that Ruby, the captain of the dance team learn this move as well.*

*The 'death drop' quickly became a fixture in the dance team's choreography: it punctuated the end of a complex sequence or signaled the finale of a dance. Even though the move was difficult to accomplish David was able to encourage several members of the dance team to learn how to do it. The 'death drop' was also well received by audiences – drawing applause and cheers from delighted parents and friends at the team's subsequent talent shows. (Memo, August, 2015)*

On that afternoon, I was unaware of what a 'death drop' was or where David had come across this particular dance move. I did however notice that once David had mastered the 'death drop' it started to show up in the dance team's choreography. A few months later as I sat poring over my data, I realized that I had seen the 'death drop' on a

reality television show called *Bring It!*, a television show that chronicled the experiences of an African American hip-hop majorette group, the *Dancing Dolls*, from Jackson, Mississippi. The hip-hop majorette style of dance that is featured in the show encompasses a genre of highly acrobatic, energetic, and technically demanding choreography. This revelation led me to examine the dance team's choreography more closely which is when I observed that David and other members of the dance team had sampled and remixed (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008) pieces of the *Dancing Dolls*' stands (or short dance routines) and remediated (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) them for their own performances. Other dance moves that were more prominently located in popular culture like the whip<sup>19</sup> were also visible in their choreography. Students' dance performances also made use of other global influences like their choice of music, the variation and range in their choreography, and in some of the theatrical elements they integrated into their compositions.

I eventually confirmed with David that he had learned about the 'death drop' via the television show, *Bring It!*, which he had originally seen advertised when he was watching television with his mother. He also shared with me that he had been obsessively watching the show since it aired on television (in the Spring of 2014) and in that time he had memorized all of their stands (or dance sequences). With each episode he watched he was motivated to learn and perfect different dance moves that he had never attempted before. Over time the *Dancing Dolls* have had a significant impact on David, who in turn has heavily influenced the dance team's choreography.

I found it rather compelling to analyze how the *death drop* had moved across time

---

<sup>19</sup> A dance move that became popular in 2014. See: [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/sports/football/nae-nae-the-dance-that-swept-the-world-has-a-sequel.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/sports/football/nae-nae-the-dance-that-swept-the-world-has-a-sequel.html?_r=0)

and space to become significant in the dance team’s everyday lives. In terms of this story, the *death drop*, journeyed from the practice studio of the *Dancing Dolls*, in Jackson, Mississippi, to episodes of a reality television show, *Bring It!*. The television episodes were then remediated into YouTube clips that David and others could pull up and revisit on computers, phones, or other mobile devices. Then, the ‘death drop’ made its way into the dance team’s choreography via after school practice sessions and eventually onto the performance stage for the school community to behold. Below I have depicted the media flow (or journey) that the *death drop* traveled by picturing the literal and figurative ways this ‘media’ traveled (see figure 6 below).



**Figure 6 - The journey of the 'death drop' from Jackson Mississippi (top left) to spring talent show (bottom right)**

The *death drop* was circulating in the world but it was David’s aspiration to master the move that brought it into the figured world of dance team practice. The show sparked David’s attention because it resonated with his identities like dancer and entertainer. David was taken with the dance moves and genre because they stood out: the dancers on *Bring It!* were fiercely talented and in their own words, each week they

prepared for battle<sup>20</sup>.

While David also engaged in more traditionally social ways of using media like scanning friends' Instagram photos and videos, sending Snaps<sup>21</sup>, and commenting on people's Facebook pages, a substantive portion of his media consumption was also interest-driven. This interest-driven media consumption included watching YouTube videos or Instagram clips of other dancers (a very popular genre), funny skits featuring YouTube stars like @TheKingOfWeird, and films and documentaries on Black culture. While being social with friends can most certainly be construed as 'interest-driven' media consumption, this chapter is concerned with the interests that are tied to outward expressions of identity. In David's case he saw himself as a performer and dancer and imagined a future where he was successful at a professional level as an artist or entertainer. Therefore watching *Bring It!* illustrated David's agentic process in curating media, identifying ideas or images (in this case dance moves) that were worth distilling from those media, and then incorporating those images into a composition, in this case the dance team's choreography.

David's story is one illustration of how the youth-led spaces created opportunities for students to draw on their mediascapes to shape their multimodal making. I define mediascapes as the tapestry of social, technological, and cultural influences that shape and mediate the way youth make, compose, and interact with others. In this chapter I offer a closer examination of the nature of youth's mediascapes and the ways they influence youth's making and composing within the youth-led spaces. Examining youth's mediascapes makes visible the way that young people are in dialogue with media; they

---

<sup>20</sup> Commercial from Lifetime for March 2014: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=WIM1BryXEFA>

<sup>21</sup> Snaps are messages you can send via Snapchat, a social media mobile messaging app.



are active, agentive, and discerning curators of images, sound, ideas, etc. Being attentive to the ways young people cultivate their mediascapes can offer insights as to how we can invite youth's out of school media, literacy, and making practices into more formal learning contexts.

### **Youth's Mediascapes**

To define mediascapes, I turned to Appadurai (1996) whose seminal work on globalization and the project of modernity examined how images, people, capital, technology, and ideas flowed around the globe. He titled these flows mediascapes, ethnoscapes, techscapes, finscapes, and ideoscapes respectively. He was concerned with how content flowed or took shape within each of the scapes or how images, ideas, etc. could cross literal and figurative boundaries, expanding how far people could 'travel', so to speak. Mediascapes in particular were the integration of both the distribution mechanisms or media (e.g. television sets, computers, magazines) as well as the images produced by these media (e.g. television shows, films, YouTube videos, music, podcasts), which illustrates the flowing and ever-proliferating nature of these images (Appadurai, 1996).

Appadurai (1996) was prescient in that he understood that electronic media could decisively shift how we engaged in the world, arguing that it resulted in, "self-imagining as an everyday social project" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). In other words, he realized that being able to 'travel' the world through media would change how people understood themselves within the global world and how they portrayed themselves outwardly. Moreover, he made visible the ways in which new technology and media, increased by

magnitudes, the ability for individuals to journey across national, ideological, and cultural boundaries.

Mira's foray into Korean pop culture is an illustration of how youth can cross boundaries through their mediascapes and engage in everyday self-imagining. Mira is a 17-year-old African American girl who grew up in an urban community that is predominantly African American. Mira was only in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade when she came across Korean Pop music (more popularly known as K-Pop) on YouTube, and eventually fell in love with the genre. She started searching for K-pop music videos on her computer, used Google translate to make sense of the lyrics, and as social media has evolved, started to learn about her favorite bands and artists' personal lives by closely watching their social media accounts. What started as an interest in K-pop music evolved into an interest in Korean television dramas, which had become increasingly available on the internet (or via streaming services). Ultimately access to more cultural materials expanded her interest into Korea's culture and history.

In her sophomore year, she began working with a Korean member of our research team to start learning to speak and write the language. She started eating Korean food and declared she wanted move there during college. Her interest-driven mediascape also shaped several of Mira's compositions at school. For example, Mira wrote her final sophomore humanities essay on the Korean War and the partition. In April of her sophomore year, she performed a poem in the talent show that included a small verse in Korean.

Over time and using the technology and media available to her, Mira gained more exposure to aspects of Korean culture like learning to speak the language and absorbing

historical defining moments of the country's history. Mira did not just find images and re-post them. Instead, her interest-driven media consumption changed her everyday practices from her written compositions (e.g. the essay, poem), to the food she ate, to the media that she sought out online (e.g. K-Pop videos).

Above, I shared that I defined mediascapes as the tapestry of social, technological, and cultural influences that shape and mediate the way youth make, compose, and interact with others. I introduce the term *interest-driven mediascape* to specifically address how media that circulates and proliferates, or in Appadurai's (1996) words, *flows*, could shift or change youth's practices. In Mira's case, her interest-driven mediascape is one of Korean culture that continued to expand and change over time and as she made agentive choices about what she wanted to learn about and focus her attention. She was knitting this interest-driven mediascape together by spending time with someone from Korea (the social) and using various mobile devices to search for videos, texts, and images (the technical). This chapter is concerned with what happens when youth utilize an interest-driven lens to curate their mediascapes to cultivate *interest-driven mediascapes*, which are curated by youth, through the choices they make on what to hold onto and what to ignore or let go. I liken interest-driven mediascapes to be a kind of figured world (Holland et al., 1999).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will delve deeper into the nature of youth's interest-driven mediascapes. First, I will examine how interest-driven mediascapes can facilitate new kinds of self-imagining, serve as a source or site of inspiration that catalyzes student action or personal change, and act as an aspirational looking glass, such that when youth see someone like them engaged in a practice that is interesting or

valuable, they aspire to emulate others. Second, I return to the *death drop*, and illustrate how inviting youth's interest-driven mediascapes into school had an impact on the dance team's collaborative compositions and making practices.

While the youth-led spaces are at the heart of this dissertation, I trace the evolution and practice of these mediascapes across the different facets of the students' lives, as they were lived and experienced across spaces and times. While this chapter hones in on several 'telling examples,' it only scratches the surface of the ways youth constructed these mediascapes in relation to myriad of influences.

### **Designing Mediascapes as Figured Worlds**

In the participatory moment, it is possible to connect with people and information based on different aspects of our identities like race, socioeconomic status, community, geography and linguistic practices. It is also possible to come together around views or perspectives on an issue or cause (e.g. we both believe in LGBTQ rights), affinities (e.g. I am a dancer so is she) or simply voice an opinion on something we care about (e.g. I hope Nicki got a Grammy's nod this year) and, share social information (e.g. "*I am eating breakfast*" or a 'Snap' of being bored in class). The shift from having access to content that comes from traditional forms of media (e.g. established cable news stations, newspapers, print magazines, network television shows) to the new media (e.g. bloggers, YouTube videos, micro-blogging, photo-sharing apps) both expands what young people have at their disposal and offers them more connections to people doing similar things, anywhere in the world. More importantly *how* youth participate has changed, the world youth know today is increasingly participatory and personalized (Jenkins, 2006; Alvermann, 2008; Watkins 2009; boyd, 2008).

This section of the chapter is concerned with how interest-driven searching, curating, and sharing can fundamentally impact or shape youth's practices. Just as a television show ultimately transformed David's composing practices and just as one K-pop music video led Mira on a winding journey into Korean culture that has visibly influenced several compositions, this section looks at other illustrations. In doing so, I keep central the idea that youth are cultivating interest-driven mediascapes as a figured world that continue to evolve and change as the youth who curate them do as well.

### **Interest-Driven Mediascapes As Windows into Self-Imagining**

In my examination of youth's interest-driven mediascapes I observed how youth curated media to engage in self-imagining that located them as part of other worlds. In Nathaniel's case, his interest-driven mediascape on Cambodian culture was a way for him – a young man who identifies as part of the Cambodian diaspora – to connect to a place that is far away yet central to his identity.

Nathaniel and I bonded early on in his freshman year of school on our love for cooking (and eating) food. He shared that he wanted to become a chef. There were four primary kinds of images that Nathaniel shared on his Instagram account: pictures of himself with friends, pictures of food he's eating or thinking about (which is often Cambodian food), inspirational quotes, and less frequently clips or images of Cambodian singers and entertainers. (See figure 7 below).

Nathaniel is of Cambodian descent and he often half-jokingly lamented in the first year of school that he was the only Asian at his high school (this was true). It would not be until we sat down to interview would I understand just how central his connection to

his Asian and Cambodian identity were to who he was. In the fall of 2015 Nathaniel told me about his affinity for classic Cambodian music. “So like in YouTube, I watch like Cambodian performers like performing stuff like singing and stuff, and I want to become a Cambodian entertainer.” This came as a surprise to me given his outwardly quiet and reserved demeanor.

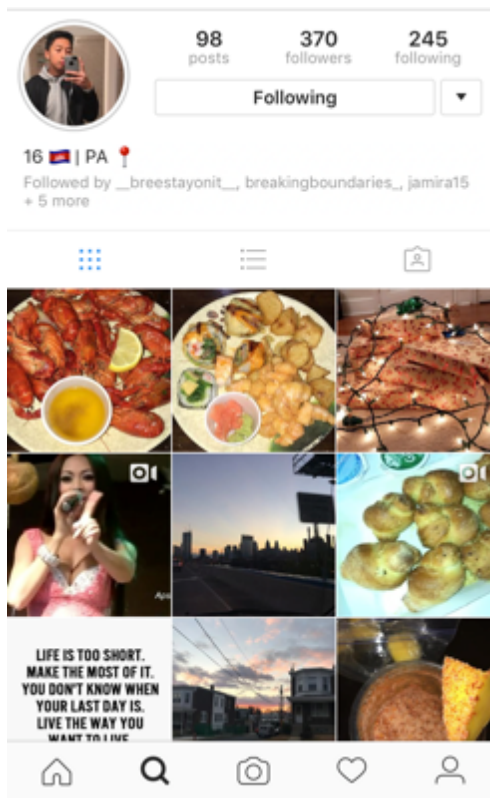


Figure 7 - Snapshot of Nathaniel's instagram December 2016

He mentioned that his love for older Cambodian music was inspired by his grandparents who were singers before the war. Now, during holidays, they sing for family members. Nathaniel said as he reflected on his grandparents' influence, “I guess the music runs in my blood you know?” (Interview, November 15, 2015). His grandparents fled the war and his parents both came here as children from Thailand.

When I asked him why he wanted to learn to cook Cambodian food and sing old Cambodian songs he said, “it helps me stick to my roots and make me not lose touch with nationality unlike some teens/ adults who are Cambodian who barely know Cambodian” (December 14, 2016, personal communication).

Nathaniel’s interest-driven media consumption and curation emerged from an interest or passion that is core to his identity. Even though he is a young man growing up in an American city far from Cambodia and his cousins and peers aren’t actively engaged in the historical aspects of culture, Nathaniel actively sought out ways to cultivate his cultural Cambodian heritage. While he isn’t quite confident about singing Cambodian music, it was a dream that he had in addition to becoming a chef – one that he kept alive by figuring out the lyrics and jotting them down in his music notebook and actively searching for songs on Youtube. He makes these important decisions about what matters using personally relevant criteria connected to fundamentally who he understands himself to be.

Nathaniel’s cultivation of his interest-driven mediascape around his Cambodian cultural heritage illustrate the ways youth are agentive and discerning curators of the media in their lives. The choices he made in finding songs, images, and old videos to stay connected to the Cambodian music that were part of his cultural heritage also dispels tropes that circulate in popular culture that describe young people mindless zombies or slaves to their devices, simply browsing into oblivion. Instead youth like Nathaniel are actively engaged in media consumption on multiple platforms, devices and across time and space in search of things that matter.

Nathaniel is a savvy curator of his mediascape and is in dialogue with media by

not only identifying songs or videos of the classic romantic songs he enjoys but by reposting and sharing with his personal networks, those that matter. This also shifts the way young people maintain or engage with their own cultures. Nathaniel can cultivate his cultural ethnic identity as a Cambodian through an online world - even though he has no physical ties to Cambodia. This is reflective of the different kind of self-making that is possible now – one that allows for us to present ourselves through the things we produce. So, who we are is not just what influences us but what we make or mediate as a result.

### **Messages and Images In Media Can Inspire Action**

One aspect of youth's interest-driven mediascapes are the ways in which the images that are visible to youth can be sources of inspiration. In some cases youth drew inspiration from popular figures like musical artists and actors. In other cases, youth were inspired by the creative work and expertise of other young people. What I began to observe in the data were the ways in which they youth were inspired by images in their mediascapes, to take action. Using illustrations from three students' interest-driven mediascapes, David, Denise, and Aziz, I look at how media served as sites of inspiration such that they impact youth's practices and compositions.

#### **How Media Images Can Inspire Us To Feel Confident About Who We Are.**

As I shared above, David's identity as a dancer and entertainer shape his interest-driven mediascape, which include images of popular artists who he respects and values. David had found solace in the words and actions of artists who gave him confidence to be who he was. David's sexuality was something that had been a challenge for him to navigate in his early adolescence. He shared how his father, who died just as he started high school, had found it difficult to come to terms with his sexuality (he identified as a bisexual) but



eventually accepted him and told David that he was proud of who he was. However, his brothers and other family on his father's side have distanced themselves from David – unwilling to acknowledge him because of his sexuality.

David offered that observing Nicki Minaj's acceptance was one way he felt validated and secure with choices that were not always supported by people in his life, namely family. He said of Nicki Minaj, "she was my inspiration to be myself; that's who inspired me to be yourself like, 'Don't care what nobody has to say.' ... She said, 'Anybody that feels the need to talk behind your back is clearly beneath you and isn't worth your time.' And when I heard that I was like, 'Wow!' ... I always worried about what a person got to say about me" (interview, June, 2016). Hearing Nicki's message made David wonder why he cared what others were saying about him. Meeting David you would never think he wasn't happy or self-confident. However other people's words and actions significantly impacted him and he found it more difficult to be confident in who he was.

Nicki Minaj was someone he appreciated and respected. Her style, her music, and the way she carried herself, which are seemingly confident and fearless, appealed to him. This generation of young people is engaged in a very different relationship with popular media figures, they are privy to what they are 'really' like apart from interviews or seeing them on stage or in a music video. Even five years ago it was uncommon for so many people to be so public with their personal lives. Feeling connected to someone who is miles away and is not in one's immediate social circle is now possible in a way it has never been before. In David's case, Nicki's voice impacted how he made sense of who he was in the world. She advocated for youth to be unapologetic about being themselves.

She carried herself as fearless and confident which appealed to youth of his generation. Thus, interest-driven mediascapes can lead to important messages that have personal meaning for youth, in David's case, he felt empowered by Nicki's words to be who he was.

**Images Can Inspire Action.** In other instances, youth drew inspiration from the works of others. This was true for Aziz, who found that another young man's tumblr blog inspired him to start thinking about creating his own compositions. Aziz was fourteen when I met him on the first day of school his freshman year. His love for fashion was one of the first things he shared with me. In a field note from the fall of 2014, I jotted down my delight that Aziz walked over to ask me if I had been checking his fashion blog; something he hadn't yet shared with other students or teachers. At that time, he was re-blogging images from tumblr of outfits, accessories and single articles of clothing that connect with his own sense of personal style. Aziz shared that he wanted to be a fashion designer after he started to use tumblr because it offered a window into another world. Below is a part of our interview about how Aziz thought about the impact of images on his own self-imagining:

Aziz: Dream that I have?

Ms. V: Yeah.

Aziz: To be a big fashion designer.

Ms. V: To be a big fashion designer? So tell me a little bit about what that looks like in your mind.

Aziz: Billboards with my clothing all over the world, especially in Paris though, and that's—

Ms. V: Especially what?

Aziz: In Paris.

Ms. V: In Paris?

Aziz: That's what I want to do [inaudible].

Ms. V: So where does this dream come from?

Aziz: When I started using Tumblr.

Ms. V: Oh, really?

Aziz: Yeah, it opened up the fashion world to me, and I just – I became fascinated with it.

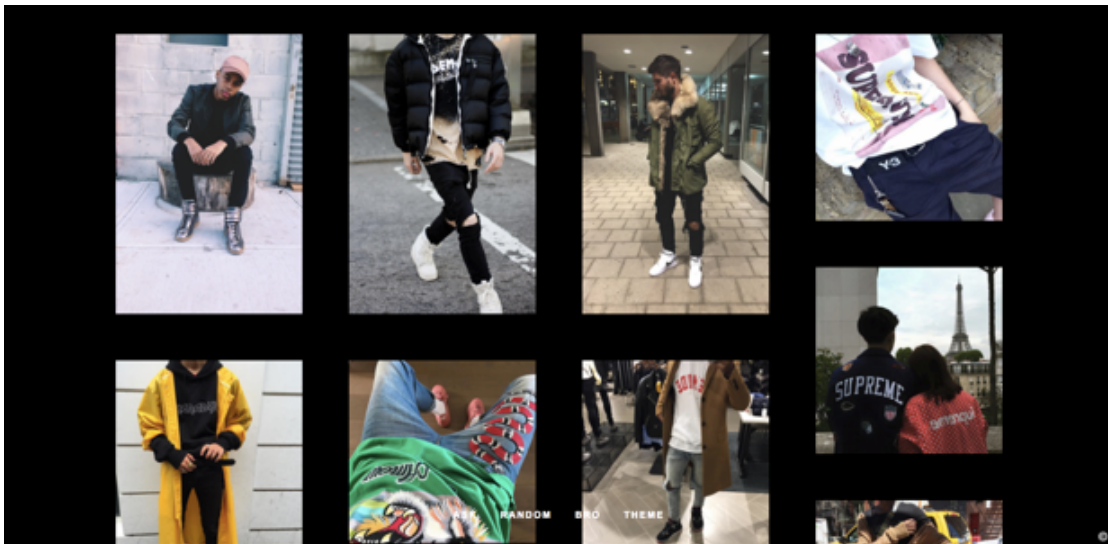
Interview, June, 2016

Aziz offered that tumblr “opened up the fashion world” and that he became “fascinated with it.” Seeing others share their ideas inspired him to want to do the same. He was introduced to Tumblr by a friend but it was not until he came across Anthony Lozada’s blog did he become intrigued by fashion. To that end, he offered, “his [Anthony’s] blog made me fall in love with the finer things in terms of clothing and ever since then I’ve been dedicated to keeping my blog up to date with the hottest streetwear/foot wear photos” (Personal communication, December 7, 2016). Through the cultivation of his blog Aziz ventured into a new kind of self-making where he was communicating what he saw was good fashion. (See figure 8 below of his blog).

He had also shared with me that before fashion became his interest, he had wanted to become an architect. As he thought about it for a few minutes he reflected that he was “always into design and how things looked – if it caught my eye...” (Personal communication, December 15, 2016). The visual and aesthetic nature of the world was something that had been part of who he was for a long time. It wasn’t however until he came across Anthony Lozada’s tumblr blog and observed images that Anthony had curated that Aziz’s interest in the aesthetic was reactivated or inspired in him. When I asked him who is favorite designer was he told me it was Raf Simons from Belgium, who designed high end wear for men.

Aziz also shared explained that he wanted to have billboards in Paris, which is of course known as the home for high fashion and couture. The images that circulate the

globe, of the streets of Paris and the famous fashion houses - are as Appadurai (1996) might characterize - part of the fantastical imagination; one that is made possible by the flow of media into individuals lives. Paris of course has long-held symbolic power for anyone who aspires to fashion just as New York does for so many who aspire to become theater stars. Appadurai (1996) argued that it was not that a global imagination had not existed before but that new technologies created ways for individuals to imagine themselves in new contexts. In Aziz's case, his interest in the aesthetic and 'seeing' the world through a design eye was always a part of who he was. However, seeing a new world through the eyes of another blogger reframed this connection to the aesthetic and inspired him to create his own work. Aziz was ultimately inspired to action.



**Figure 8 - Screenshot of Aziz's Blog December 2016**

By re-mediating others' images for his own blog, his blog was an outward reflection of the dialogic relationship youth can have with media. In the Spring of 2017 Aziz, emboldened by the photography classes he had been taking, started taking his own fashion photographs. These have landed on his Instagram page. He has worked with other

students interested in fashion design and photography and sought out a bunch of places around the city that represent his artistic vision (See figure 9 below). Slowly, the influences that arose from Aziz's fashion and design interest-driven mediascape inspired him to action. Now he has some tangible artifacts, a fashion blog and his own photography, as evidence of how he has been working towards the ultimate dream of having a billboard on the streets of Paris. The nature of self-imagining led Aziz from just reading others' blogs to creating his own, to ultimately taking his own photographs that reveal his identity as a designer.



**Figure 9 - Aziz Instagram Includes His Photographs of Street Fashion (including friends posing as models)**

### **How Media Can Inspire Youth to Channel Several Passions into Media**

**Production.** Denise, was one of the two leaders of *Breaking Boundaries*. She was featured in chapter 4 in the section on self-making. In this section I draw on a different aspect of Denise's life, which is the way her interest-driven mediascape, focused on

music, inspired her to start composing music mashups. Denise's love for music, teen fiction, and television shows ran deep. She was 'plugged in' so to speak – having an account on almost every social media platform popular amongst American teens including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Wattpad. I often would find Denise, when she wasn't feeling like doing work in class, huddled in front of her school-issued Google Chromebook laptop with her earphones in, listening to music videos or stealing moments away to watch a film. Several times she would share an earbud with a close friend so they could watch together. The social media platforms she used were windows into other worlds and opportunities for her to stay connected to people and ideas that mattered to her.

Her love for musical artists like Melanie Martinez and *Twenty One Pilots* was on a particular level of fandom: she has stood for hours by herself at concerts to watch them perform live. Often this involved one of her parents patiently waiting in the parking lot of the concert venue for hours until it ended. She also scoured social media for videos and related information on her favorite artists. Denise followed *Twenty One Pilots* on Instagram, Twitter, and via her other social media apps and had many (if not all) of their lyrics memorized; easily singing or rapping full songs. Their music, Denise shared was “everything you think but you didn't say – they became a part of me – they are family.” (Interview, December 16, 2016). Denise also felt connected to the fans of *Twenty One Pilots*, explaining that the people who appreciated their music were likeminded people. She had many fond stories of attending concerts and meeting ‘really cool people’ who just “got her.”

Denise's fandom eventually transformed into something more substantial. As part

of her interest-driven media consumption related to artists like *Twenty One Pilots*, she came across a genre of remixed music videos where others have mashed up snippets of videos of one artist with music from another artist “to tell a new story.” Denise shared that she “thought they [the videos] were pretty and it looked like it was complicated so I just wanted to see if I could do it. ... and then when I tried I liked it and I kept doing it... even though it takes 30,000 hours to do one video” (Personal communication, December 14, 2016). Albeit a slight exaggeration, Denise was reflecting on the effort required to expertly edit videos. They had to be good enough to share because of the public nature of the videos – she posted them on Instagram to be found by other music enthusiasts like herself.

Denise embraced the challenge of remixing images and mashing it up with new music. Her fandom opened her up to a new genre that led to her learning how to compose the music mashup videos therefore continuing to hone her proclivities toward remix, video editing, and graphic design that she had shown in other contexts.

Denise’s interest in media production grew considerably over time. In her first year of school she loved working a digital storytelling assignment in Digital Humanities class and in the second year she embraced photography. So much so that she managed to hold onto a school camera as her own during her sophomore year and eventually convinced her dad to purchase a professional-grade camera for her sixteenth birthday. In producing the music mashup videos, Denise was engaged in storytelling with music and existing visuals. She engaged her own knowledge and understanding of music and aesthetics to produce something new. Moreover, Denise, found solace in the words and music of certain artists who spoke ‘to her soul’. They inspired her emotionally – by

offering comfort when she felt most down. The videos she produced became an homage to the artists that inspired her but also illustrated how the genre itself inspired her to action.

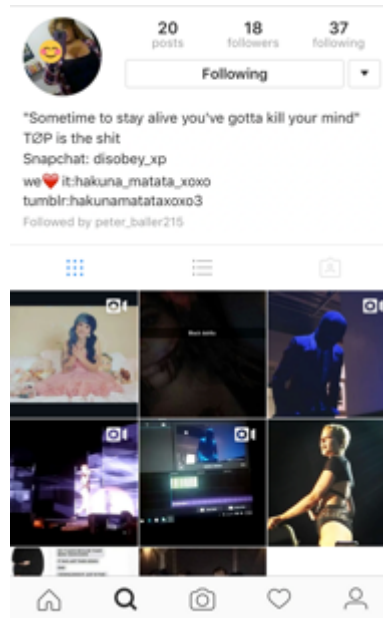


Figure 10- Denise's Instagram where she posts her remixes

### Media as an Aspirational Looking Glass

In the media-saturated world that we live in it is possible to ‘see’ ourselves in the media we consume. To ‘see’ oneself, one must identify the identity categories that connect them with other people. In this next section I look at how mediascapes can act as an aspirational looking glass, where youth come across images of other people with whom they identify and aspire to emulate. These images had an impact on youth’s practices and thinking.

**Aspirational Media: How Images Can Facilitate New Kinds of Self-Imagining.** Ruby, as I shared in Chapter 4, was the captain of the dance team. She was always outwardly self-assured and confident in practices and on-stage. Her teachers and



peers often lauded Ruby for her stage presence. However, it was only months into knowing Ruby that she revealed to me that she did not see herself as a natural performer. Unlike David, who embraced the identity, for Ruby this identity did not come easy to her. Even after all the successes the dance team claimed Ruby would undermine her own talent or efforts as a performer. However, she continued to persevere and work hard to lead the team and to be an accomplished dancer and performer at school.

Before matriculating at the Design School, Ruby had attended a performing arts middle school. During middle school Ruby chose to study ballet. This is when her interest in dance piqued. Around the same time, Ruby watched a popular romantic comedy, *Step Up*<sup>22</sup>, which tells the story of two young dancers who work as partners to win a dance competition during which they fall in love. In the film, the main character's best friend, an African American girl, was both an accomplished singer and dancer. Ruby was struck by this and found herself inspired by this young woman. She said of the experience that it made her think, "wait, she's a dancer, she can sing?" And she was like [in the movie] ... she said that since she can sing she might as well dance too right? So I used that as my model" (Interview, October, 2015). Seeing this young African American woman sing and dance in the movie made Ruby think she could do the same. Ruby explained that seeing someone who looked like her and was doing things she wanted to do, in this case be a singer and a dancer, gave her confidence to aspire to the same heights. Despite her talent and confidence as a leader on the team – she was hesitant to grab the identity of performer or dancer. Even though she was captain of the dance team and confidently performed on stage, she didn't fully embrace the identity, dancer or artist.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Step Up* stars Channing Tatum and his now wife, Jenna Dewan Tatum and the film focuses on two dancers from opposite sides of the dance track who fall in love and share a love for dance.

She had been so reticent to embrace the identity of dancer and performer that she had even kept the fact she could sing from her dad, because she hadn't gotten good enough to avoid critique. Her dad was in the music industry and she wanted to sing well enough to impress him. Ruby connected to the character in *Step Up*, Lucy, because she was also a young African American woman who had a passion for the arts. Finding a substantive connection gave her something to aspire to - she said that the movie character was a model to start to grow into the performer she wanted to become.



**Figure 11 - image of actress Drew Sidora playing Lucy in Step Up!**

Moreover, the storyline in *Step Up* is about students in high school who are trying to find themselves. There were other African American women artists who could sing and dance that were in Ruby's global mediascapes like for example, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj. However, Ruby connected to the young woman in the film because her story was more relatable. She was a girl striving to become somebody in the world. She wasn't already successful, she was on a journey. Ruby often spoke about how she loved to read books because they transported her to another world. With related media, it was her 'reading' of a different text – a film – that transported her elsewhere and facilitated her self-imagining. In the media saturated world that we live in it is possible to 'see'

ourselves in the media we consume. To ‘see’ ourselves – we must find ways to identify the identity categories that connect us with other people.

**Media Facilitates Big Dreams.** David, over time, became more comfortable in the role of lead choreographer on the dance team – he has embraced the identity of an entertainer and dancer. Since he could remember he would try to make people laugh or smile or cheer them up if they were in a bad mood. When we talked about his dreams many of them were interrelated and centered around becoming a professional artist. He offered the following reflection about his dreams, “I want to be – like I’m dreaming big. I want to be at award shows, I want to be snatching Grammys for choreography; I want to be on Oscars, everywhere. That I just love the big – I love big performances. Like I love the big film shooting and the smoke and the props; I love it all. And I just want to – because I always imagine myself being on the stage dancing behind Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé and Ciara; I want to do that and I want to do music videos too,” (Interview, June, 2016). David’s big dreams, included winning Grammy for choreography and performing at the Oscars – two of the most visible awards show in music and film respectively. They are also arguably two of the largest stages you can appear on in the world. He imagined himself backing up some of the most popular female hip hop and pop artists – these are superstars whose stage shows are legendary – especially Beyoncé. Seeing these women perform and seeing the dancers who support them made David want to do the same. He also spoke about the things he has seen – the high production value, being part of a major performance, that to him are bastions of real artistic success. His dream is to dance on that stage and choreograph for artists at that high caliber.

When David first watched *Step Up!*, he recalled that he and his mother were

impressed with all of the moves the dancers were doing, saying that “the Dancing Dolls was an inspiration to open my mind up to a new dance style” (Interview, June 2016). David was genuinely taken with their performance style. He shared that “when they started uploadin’ the ba- the competitions on YouTube, I used to learn every single stand.” He spent hours memorizing the various sequences. In doing so he had to learn a lot of things he had never known how to do before: “I never knew how to do a toe touch. I’m like, ‘Wa!’ I’m like, ‘Whoa,’ I’m like, ‘How do they jump up and spread their leg?’ Because I didn’t – because now I also do cheerleading, but I never knew – I didn’t do that in 2014; 2014 I danced, but I never did that type of trick. So a toe touch – I’m like ‘Oh, wow!’ Then I saw them do a toe touch into a split. I never- I never knew how to do a split - I had a split but I never knew how to go from a jump to a split. So I was like, this is REALLY good” (Interview, June 2016). As his thoughts came tumbling out David explained how each subsequent move he learned by watching *Step Up!*, was more impressive than the last. A toe touch into a split is a move that he had never seen before, one that he was eager to learn and incorporate into his repertoire. This move required dancers to jump up, spreading their legs wide enough so they can touch their hands to their toes, and then land in a split on the ground. This is a technical movement that requires balance and strength and is remarkable to behold.

David not only watched the show but he emulated the *Dancing Dolls’* choreography and style. *Bring It!* was a more relatable form of aspirational media because it offered a glimpse into everyday Americans’ lives. The team was comprised of young African American women who unlike the super stars mentioned above (e.g. Beyonce, Nicki Minaj) were relatable in some way – they dance in school gyms and get

yelled at by their coach to stay focused. So even though the *Dancing Dolls* were global to David, in that they are not part of his immediate world, there was still a more intimate connection because they were African American youth dancers. Like Ruby, for whom it was powerful to see a young African American woman succeeding as a dancer and a performer David also aspired to be like other strong and fiercely talented African American performers, entertainers, and cultural icons. The show expanded his imagination and eventually expanded his repertoire. The images in the show became part of his mediascape and expanded what he imagined was possible.

---

### **Making in Youth-Led Spaces Invited Youth Mediascapes Into School**

I started this chapter by recounting how the *death drop* made its way into David's mediascape and subsequently the dance team's choreography. In recounting that exchange, I illustrated David's interest-driven mediascape constructed around performing arts intersected with the figured world of dance team practice. One substantive implication of these two figured worlds colliding or interacting with each other is that the dance team's routines became increasingly technical and sophisticated and as a result the way students composed, or the way they structured the practices and worked with new dancers had to change to match the expectations laid out in the compositions.

The first time David discussed the *death drop*, it was just after our initial talent show in mid-March 2015, which as I alluded to early in this chapter had not been a success. It was mired with technical issues and the students ended the show in tears, as did I. When I arrived back at school that following Monday, full of trepidation that the students would be totally miserable and not want to continue (or speak to me for that

matter), I was pleasantly surprised and relieved that they had taken the show in stride.

Ruby, while initially upset about how things had ended also felt strongly that if the team could put on one talent show, they had potential to do much more.

By the time, we arrived at the fateful practice where David tried and executed the *death drop*, dance team practices had become a place where students were increasingly comfortable with trying things out, sharing parts of themselves, and revealing their aspirations. As I shared in chapter 1, this was visible in students being able to dance with one another, invite their music, and informal modes of expression into practice. It was a place where they did what made them happy. For the *death drop* to have taken root, we needed to have a space where youth's mediascapes were valued and welcomed and most importantly could continue to be shape and be re-shaped.

The death drop was one of many examples of how youth's mediascapes outside of dance were invited into dance. What these invitations did was to shift how the team made and composed as well as pushed individuals to expand their own dance repertoires. David shared how "every day, I go home and I watch all these dances, over and over and over, and over. And I learn them, I learn every single – I don't want to say I'm crazy. I don't want to say I'm crazy or nothing... but this show came out March 2014, and its June 2016, so that has been two years since the show came out, and I know every single stand that they own" (Interview June, 2016). Recounting the influence the show had on him he was also aware that perhaps not everyone would have memorized each and every one of the *Dancing Dolls'* stands, but he had. This show had become a part of his everyday routine: he watched, re-watched, and emulated their moves. He seemed aware that it might seem absurd to some people to be passionate about something to the point of

acknowledging that he might be crazy.

If there was no dance team where he had a significant say in the choreography, this might have been the end of the obsession – save for lunch times and moments in the hallway where many students liked to take breaks to dance, jump rope, and hang out. He may have had to save it for the school dances where he always brings his dance moves or the extra-curricular dance team outside of school. Instead, the space, as I described above, that we created was one where he could share these ideas.



**Figure 12- Dancing Dolls demonstrate Death Drop in Youtube clip**

Some students were already watching the show- but even still – they had not yet mastered or attempted the move. see the inspirational and aspirational media engagement coming together. David was inspired because of the Dancing Dolls’ technical prowess. So he watched every single show and then something happened. David went from watching the shows to practicing the stands. He memorized each and every single one. David moved from being inspired by the *Dancing Dolls*, to emulating them. He used the videos as a guide, perfecting and practicing new moves.



**Figure 13-** (left) The first part of the death drop where hands are on the floor and legs are in the air, feet pointed towards the body. (right) The end of the death drop where the body is completely still.

### **Mediascapes Bringing the Global to the Local**

The journey or flow of the ‘death drop’ moved through what Appadurai (1996) would call mechanisms (e.g. phones, televisions) and media (e.g. television shows, YouTube video clips) so they could literally and figuratively flow into our school. When the dance move entered our youth-led space – the students pulled up a YouTube video that was replayed so David could figure out the dance move. However, in the teaching and transmission of the move –it was David who embodied this move and thus re-mediated it for the dance team and subsequently the team members would go on to teach newer members (with varying degrees of success). Since David had increasing influence over the team’s choreography and was very vocal about his identity as a dancer, incorporating the ‘death drop’ into the dances meant that others had to aspire to be able to do the same move. Other students on the team including Aria, Star, and Ruby also watched the show so they could see their own mediascapes reflected in their practice space. What David did was to realize this aspiration in a tangible way.

Once David mastered the death drop it began to show up in the dance team’s choreography. This was similar for the increasing number of acrobatic elements in the



dances like tumblers and rolls and the other death drops that were also showcased on Bring It!. Similarly, other students like Aria and Ruby brought dance styles and choreography from their own worlds. Ruby for the talent show that took place in April 2016 choreographed a lyrical piece that drew on her former dance experience as a ballet dancer.

Each of the individual dance moves or influences got woven into larger dance performances that ultimately became multimodal compositions that reflected youth's mediascapes. As students were in dialogue in this case through their bodies – their mediascapes collided. (See figure 13 below, of students doing the death drop in Spring 2016 performance).



**Figure 14 - The death drop in the T-Payne Remix at Spring 2016 Talent Show**

Once they mastered the *death drop* it became a critical move in the team's dance performances – it punctuated the end of a tough sequence or would be the last move at

the end of a dance. It is considered a finishing move, one that wows the crowd and silences critics, particularly in the majorette style of dance. Incorporating these moves is also a way to engage their primary public, the community and family in the audience, many of whom also are familiar with this style of dance. Therefore, when students were executing these moves – the crowd is at those moments most vocal cheering them on with pride and excitement. Here is where we come back to the idea of flow – from the global – outside of David’s immediate world – to the very local – to the small stage in the high school.

Incorporating the *death drop* into the dance team’s choreography was emblematic of a larger shift in the dance team’s compositions. While each of the dances students choreographed reflected their mediascapes and the social, cultural, and technical influences that young people brought with them to the figured world of dance, the death drop was a more complex move, one that required practice and training. Students couldn’t simply pick it up, they had to try each time to execute it correctly. Even David, who perfected it, faltered now and again. The *death drop* and other influences also reflect the ways students were taking substantive leadership and ownership of their choreography so that it conveyed the aesthetic that resonated with their understanding of a high-quality dance performance. This is something students derived from popular music videos on television and YouTube and increasingly Instagram clips that get posted by amateur to expert dancers. Standards about what constitutes ‘good’ dance also emanates from students’ own cultural backgrounds where certain styles, dance moves, and music are popular.

Three things changed when mediascapes were invited into the youth-led spaces

that impacted youth's compositions and their composing practices. First, students' compositions became more technical, in that they incorporated more difficult choreography and more acrobatic stunts (e.g. flips, death drops, somersaults). Second, the choreography itself became more complex in terms of variation in the kinds of steps students incorporated within a dance. In other words, less steps were repeated for multiple counts and the sequencing also became tighter. Third, and perhaps most importantly was the ways this changed students' practice sessions. Dance team practices were split between practicing and running through choreography that was already learned with spending time on technical training like learning a complex sequence or how to do a certain kind of move. (I highlighted this in chapter 5 with regards to Ruby and David coaching younger students on a technically challenging sequence, see pages 132-144).

As part of this chapter is thinking about how dance is a multimodal text, I want to take these three ideas and translate them to text. First, in terms of technicality, this would translate to the selection of words or phrases, that comprise a composition. In written texts, we can see a writer is maturing because their word choice becomes more sophisticated and varied. Second, in terms of complexity, this would translate to the structural choices writers make and the sequencing that writers do to unfold the story or argument they are making. Finally, in terms of the 'practice sessions' and the shift in how students composed, this reflects a shift in how 'writers' (or dancers) spent time to perfect their knowledge and practice of vocabulary and how they put it into practice.

To illustrate this more clearly, I analyzed two dances that students composed. I compared their first dance the group choreographed their freshman year of school (2014-2015), with the first dance they choreographed in their second year (2015-2016). The

two songs, *Yonce Electric Bodega Remix* (I'll call this *Yonce* for short) and *Drunk in Love Remix* were both originally composed by Beyoncé. Each of the songs also included music videos without dance choreography, which meant students had to come up with their own original choreography for the entire songs.

The song *Yonce* is 3:14 minutes. In their first song, most the dance uses repeating counts. So, one dance move or a sequence got repeated for multiple counts. In this dance, the students repeated several of the moves. Second is how the choreography was distributed. In *Yonce*, each student executed the same choreography except for the very beginning when students walked on stage to get into position, and the very last sixteen counts when David dropped to the floor dramatically and the other dancers formed a circle around him. The movements in this dance are much slower and much less complex in terms of intricacy of the hand movements, complexity of the footwork, and general energy required to execute the dance moves. David and Ruby, despite being the tallest members of the team were also always in the front of lines, making it impossible to see other students behind them. In terms of the number of formations students used, they did employ a variety. They used the traditional windows format, where students stagger themselves in 2-3 lines, and make sure each has a 'window' to the audience. They also used a horizontal line across the stage a few times. They gathered in two vertical lines in a 'battle' and used a vertical line when they were doing a variation on a popular move called 'the whip.'

The *Drunk in Love*, remix was 3:34 long. Like the *Yonce* remix there is a baseline throughout the song but there are more rhythmic sections of the song. In this dance, the moves vary tremendously. They vary by dancer and by section of the song. They also

have varied who is dancing at certain times. The moves are also much faster and less repetitive. This variation in style and speed contributed to the overall complexity of the dances. At the beginning of the song, there are sixteen beats where the dancers form two vertical lines on stage doing a rapid succession of poses to the beat. One dancer starts the song doing a style of dance called animation. Then, he turns and flips away as two dancers, David and Aria, break out to do a mini-duet, sashaying up to the front, and then dropping to the floor dramatically. Then, as the song everyone joins in and the dancers are now in three horizontal lines across stage.

At one of the most powerful moments on stage, as and are each doing different choreography that was designed the students line up in three vertical lines, each varying their movements from the core movement. Then later in the song as the energy level raises they break the movements down by row. The last row does high jumps the middle row does a death drop and the front row does a split.

There was a great deal of activity happening at once. This simultaneous movement executed by dancers in three separate rows was complex. It reflected both the larger team that had been assembled and was structured to meet the needs of the different comfort levels as well as offer texture to the dances. In the front row, Star and another student turn and do a split on the floor. In the middle row, David, Aria, and two other dancers and end in a death drop. The students also had to make accommodations for a dancer, Samuel, who was not a traditional hip-hop dancer. Instead, Samuel's strength was animation, a style of dance where the body tries to dance like an animated character in a stop motion film. The team found a way to incorporate animation and taught him how to do some of the hip hop. At the very end of the song, David, after everyone else has fallen

on the floor walked to the center of the stage and does a toe-touch into a split, which ends the performance. Each time the dance was performed he received a raucous ovation. It is the move he mentioned in his interview was something he had never seen before but immediately wanted to emulate.

Over time however, the team made it a point to teach the technical aspects of their dances so that more if not the entire team could perform the complex moves like the death drops. Now, after nearly three years, even Star, who hesitated for two years to attempt these moves has learned all the different death drops and does them confidently. She says of the experience, “I was scared but over time I just dropped the fear & did it because I had Ruby and David on my back too begging me to learn them 🤔 It took me a while but I came around” (Personal communication, March, 2017). Star’s evolution illustrated how youth acknowledges the shifts in their own repertoires. Katz (2008) argued that dancing gave young women that she worked with, “an unusual capacity to take the long view of their own development” (p. 15). Similarly, Star was conscious of her own growth and at the prompting of her dance partners, David and Ruby, she has grown more confident in her own abilities.

For David, dance is the one place where he can find intense stillness. Not in his movement but in his mind. When he is ready to dance and wants to ‘slay’ – which is to rise to a level where you silence others through whatever you are doing – nothing else could be on in his mind. In his own words, “when I dance, I feel free. When I dance, I feel creative. When I dance, I feel lifted. It’s just a feeling that comes over my body like I said once again, when I’m dancing, there’s nothing you can tell me; there’s nothing. I just feel free. Free” (Interview, June, 2016).

Dance gave David, Ruby, and Star, an anchor in school; a place to shine and demonstrate their talents for composing as well as song selection and audio editing. Over the course of two years, they grew into their leadership roles. Ruby held the team together and took responsibility for being the “mom” of the group. Star cultivated empathy and a big-sister attitude towards the younger students, encouraging them and teaching them when they got stuck. David’s inner creativity and imagination have been realized through the choreography he has composed and in his mentorship of other students including his peers, Ruby and Star.<sup>23</sup>

### **Mediascapes Reflect Youth’s Identities**

Mediascapes reflect the flows of images, ideas, sounds, etc. that permeate youth’s worlds. What we saw was how interests or students’ affinity identities (e.g. 21 Pilots Fan, aspiring fashion designer, dancer) impacted the way they constructed their mediascapes. The theoretical contributions of this chapter are first to reveal the ways in which youth are engaged in complex dialogue with media. Second, this chapter illustrates how youth’s mediascapes have substantive implications for the composing and self-imagining that youth do across contexts. The chapter illustrates how media can be both inspirational and aspirational and have implications for youth’s everyday practices.

For some students like Ruby, images in her mediascape, in this case a film she watched as a pre-teen, influenced how she could imagine herself in the world. The image of a young African American woman succeeding as a dancer and singer was one that

---

<sup>23</sup> As I was finishing my dissertation the students performed at an evening of a conference that I coordinated in February 2017. David, Ruby, and Star were tremendous. They had grown so much since the first talent show in March, 2015. Their theatrics and complexity of their movements were physically exhausting medley was impressive and moved many (me included) to tears.

Ruby aspired to accomplish. Evidenced by her stewardship of the dance team and in her own artistic prowess it's possible to say that she has indeed realized this aspiration or is on her way. In Aziz's case, the images visible in his mediascape were happenstance at first – he did not know he was into fashion until he encountered images that resonated with his interest in the aesthetic. Evidence of the influence Aziz's mediascape had on his compositions is visible in his Instagram page, where he has composed his own photographs of his personal sense of street style. Finally, this chapter also chance to invite mediascapes into school contexts, they have the potential to shape students' compositions. In David's case, the death drop was emblematic of many other global cultural influences that were part of his mediascape. However, because the dance team was a place where David was invited to compose and draw on this mediascape, he shaped the dance team's compositions (or their choreography). David's aspirations to emulate the *Dancing Dolls*, changed the way he participated in dance team practices and ultimately had implications for the team more broadly.

This chapter builds on important work that has come before that has looked at the ways in which youth's out of school literacies are vibrant and multiple and reveal the reading and writing youth do in a range of non-school settings (Hull & Schultz, 2002).



## **Chapter 6: How Making Activities Within the Youth-led spaces Created Opportunities for Students to Adopt and Try Out New Identities**

### **Identity is Constructed, Improvised, and Performed**

In this chapter I return to thinking about how identities are performed and what role the contexts or spaces youth inhabit play in shaping identity. In spending time with students across a range of school contexts including the youth-led spaces, I observed how their identities were fluid and could shift rapidly depending on the space, the students present, and the activities we did on a particular day. Holland et al. (1998) argued that identities get constructed and shaped through activity systems and social situations offering that, “identities are improvised—in the flow of activity within specific social situations—from the cultural resources at hand” (p.4). In the youth-led affinity spaces, the identities that youth ‘performed’, were shaped by the making activities we did together. In some cases, the identities that students performed became durable over time. The identities that became most durable were those of the student leaders within the youth-led spaces and will be the primary focus of analysis in this chapter.

Holland et al. (1998) use of the term improvisation has been a useful construct in my examination of identity performance within the youth-led affinity spaces.

Improvisations are “the impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as habitus, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18). In other words, improvisations are unexpected outcomes or responses and are ultimately an illustration of human agency (p. 271). When applied to the figured worlds of the youth-led spaces, it is possible to see how students, were also constantly improvising because they were

actively co-creating the spaces together. For student leaders of the youth-led spaces, I frame their improvisations as performances because they had been given outwardly the identity of ‘leader’ (or assumed these titles) but just because they had the titles did not mean they knew what the role always would entail from day to day. Therefore, the term performance indicates that these improvisations students were making were tentative and were an outward expression of how they thought things should be done. Each time they made a decision, demanded more of their peers, or tried to rally the group around an idea, they were improvising.

Improvisation also allowed me to tend implicitly to what Holland et al. (1998) described as history-in-person that might impact how a student (particularly the leaders) conducted themselves in the youth-led spaces. Improvisation helped me to see how even when students are assembled in a similar space or participating in a figured world, the interactions and activities continue to be shaped by history-in-person in a particular moment. Within the youth-led spaces, factors like the time of year, or where we were in the larger epoch of the school year as well as any of the things going on in students’ personal lives also mediated individual identity performances. In other words, even if all the same students were in the room on a given day, the space did not always look and feel the same from day to day because the energy shifted based on students’ participation in other figured worlds (e.g. home, the commute, academic classes). In light of the potential for improvisation and change based on these mediating factors, I also examine the ways in which the *space*, *tools*, and *making activities* created opportunities for a range of identity performances within the youth-led spaces.

The making activities within youth-led affinity spaces made new identities available to students that for students in this study had been out of reach in their other schooling experiences. For some students, the making activities within youth-led spaces created opportunities for them to perform identities that were new for them like film director or cinematographer. In other cases, students claimed identities like artist or singer privately but had not found a way to perform these identities within the contexts they inhabited in school. For a handful of students who helped create and eventually lead the three youth-led affinity spaces, they received the title of student leaders.

For the student leaders, their positioning within school changed over time. What were originally just titles became more durable over time through their work in the youth-led spaces in relation to other students. Anya, David, Denise, Mira, Ruby, and Star, the focal students in my dissertation research, embraced the youth development orientation of the school and were rewarded in how they were treated by other students and staff members. Over time these identities that were initially improvised became increasingly durable for students who took them up and have had longer term implications for student leaders, most notably the way teachers and staff have responded to their status as leaders by embracing this and shifting their social position within the school. Wortham (2004) argued that “identities often thicken, such that we can unproblematically treat particular individuals as certain types of people” (p. 166). In the case of the student leaders, the students within their groups, their teachers, and eventually students in the school community more broadly began to recognize them as leaders within the school. This was reinforced in how they were asked to represent the school during recruitment fairs, presentations, and other public facing events. For a subset of the student leaders, this

thickening has led to an understanding that they are good citizens within the school because they embody the values that the school holds in high regard. The ‘good citizens’ were called onto speak to journalists interested in the school’s innovative model, gave tours to new students and parents, helped with recruitment at the high school fair among other activities.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how the figured worlds of the youth-led spaces and the making activities youth engaged in created opportunities for youth to improve identities. Then, I look at how for student leaders the thickening (Wortham, 2004) or durability of their identities have positioned them within the school community as reflecting the school’s values. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, I explore the implications of how having opportunities to perform the identity ‘leader’ or ‘participant’ can offer new paths to school citizenship.

### **Making an Event Happen: How A Bake Sale Gave Students Opportunities to Perform New Identities**

In this section, I begin by sharing a vignette about a bake sale that was held in January 2015 by the students in *Breaking Boundaries*. This event was the culmination of several weeks of planning and deliberation by the students. While participating in a bake sale was not novel, holding an event for which they were solely responsible was indeed something new for most of the students. In describing the events leading up to the bake sale and the event itself I want to make visible how Denise and Anya, performed their identities as group leaders and how the making activities mediated these identity

performances. Similarly, I look at how the bake sale and the planning that led up to it also created opportunities for student members of *Breaking Boundaries* to become fuller participants of the group, illustrating their improvisations in these spaces as well. Below, I begin by sharing a vignette to contextualize the planning activities that culminated in the bake sale.

*In the second week of January 2014, I hurried to school in anticipation of a major event: the Breaking Boundaries students were hosting the school's first bake sale later that afternoon. In the weeks leading up to the bake sale, the group had been busy getting organized: they were figuring out what sweet treats to buy or bake and deciding who would head to ShopRite or Cousins with their parents for soda and chips. There was a great debate about prices and which roles were necessary, like cutting and disseminating cake, pouring juice, and handling the cash box, and to whom these roles would be assigned. Nearly every student was invested in these conversations and activities. The students had also posted signs around school publicizing the bake sale and sent a letter home to parents.*

*With the principal's permission students were able to leave class early to setup for the bake sale. We carried materials down three flights of stairs and once we arrived the little space adjacent to the cafeteria was a flurry of activity. Some put up posters, while others blew up and mounted balloons. Bobbie carried a heavy roll of brown craft paper down the stairs so we could use it as a tablecloth. We dragged tables into a U-Shape, as part of our plan to ensure no one walked off with any sweets, which was also a major topic in our planning discussions that past week.*

*During the setup, Denise and Anya, the student leaders of Breaking Boundaries, sprung into action. They directed the students on where to put up posters and balloons, how to setup the display table, and ran around looking for items like latex gloves to ensure that we followed the district's food-handling rules. Just before students began to trickle down the stairs, each student in the group took a position. Greg, Ryan, and Ally had volunteered to be the guards, making sure no one was walking off with food. Nathaniel and Sheila handled the cashbox behind the counter. Anya, Denise, and Mira were handling the front of the house orders and distribution. Sharon and Mary took responsibility for pouring the drinks.*

*As they finished setup, the students' first customers, two of the school security guards came over and purchased some sweets. Officer Franklin had even donated homemade cupcakes to the bake sale. A few minutes*

*later the Design School principal came down and purchased a dozen fried Oreos, compliments of Greg's mom, and offered them to the Breaking Boundaries students, which they happily devoured. Then, a group of students headed out on a trip to see the movie Selma stopped by to grab snacks for their journey. These first sales were met with glee and pride.*

*The students then braced themselves for the lunch rush. From a trickle to a steady flow, their peers came down the stairs, pondered the bake sale, and disappeared into the lunch line. Many eventually returned to purchase baked goods.*

*The massive crowd meant that every student in Breaking Boundaries was actively working, Nathaniel and Sheila were quickly scribing all of the purchases down and making change as quickly as they could. From the front Anya, Denise and Mira yelled out orders and "I need fifty-cents!" or "I need three dollars back!". There was a steady stream of soda being poured and served as well. As things sold out, one of the students cleared the area and refilled it with something that hadn't been on the table. In the meantime, the three students who were keeping guard made sure no one walked off with any unpaid for baked goods. At moments, they had to improvise their roles or fill in when someone was occupied.*

*It went on like this for the better part of an hour with one exception. A young woman, Tayla, was walking by when someone asked if she was going to purchase something at the bake sale. She glanced over with her face full of contempt, "I'm not going to buy anything from that nasty ass bake sale," and walked off. She was the only person who was audibly and visibly unwilling to entertain the bake sale. Other students had simply walked by without stopping if they weren't interested or hadn't brought money to school that day.*

*Still, the afternoon was a triumph: the students had made \$93 and change. They were elated and after chatting about their success, happily had an impromptu picnic with the remaining foods. (Vignette based on the events of January 12-16, 2015)*

Students in *Breaking Boundaries* looked back on this event with pride. It stuck in their minds for several reasons: it was the first bake sale that had taken place in the school's nascent history, they had made money and had the potential to make more, and everyone had contributed something to the event. Hours of preparation had gone into making this afternoon a success. The bake sale was also an opportunity for students to

become fuller participants in the school community by making something together. For students who were not group leaders and often shied away from participation in other school activities, like Mary and Sharon (who ultimately oversaw dispensing soda and drinks), the bake sale gave them a way to make a substantive contribution to the planning, preparation, and implementation of a school event. For Denise and Anya who were the student leaders, this event required them to more fully perform their identities as leaders of the group. In the above vignette, examples of their identity performances as leaders included their role in guided discussions amongst group members, finalizing details like pricing and roles for each student, and when they took charge of running the bake sale.

The staff at Design School had a deep commitment to encouraging and celebrating acts of student leadership so such an event was the ultimate expression of the Design School's mission *love, dream, do*. This is visible in the vignette above when the principal visited the bake sale to purchase sweets. By patronizing the bake sale, he positioned the contributions of the students in *Breaking Boundaries* as valuable. He also gave students permission to gather for planning meetings and leave class early to setup. Similarly, when the teachers and the security guard contributed baked goods to help students meet their fundraising goals, they showed students that their efforts were valuable. In supporting a youth-led effort, the educators and staff in the building were positioning what youth do as valuable contributions to the school community. (See figure below of students standing near bake sale setup).



**Figure 15 - Breaking Boundaries Students Gearing Up for Bake Sale**

### **Being Positioned as Leaders: The Role of Improvisation in Figured Worlds**

In this next section I examine how Denise improvised her role as a leader. Below I share a glimpse at the meeting where it was decided that *Breaking Boundaries* would organize a bake sale. This data illustrates how students in *Breaking Boundaries* were still situated as ‘student leader’ and ‘participants’. In presenting this data, I demonstrate that the ways that people and activities within the figured world of this *Breaking Boundaries* meeting created opportunities for improvisation that led Denise trying to perform the identity of leader.

In the last week before the holiday break in December 2014 the students and I met for a *Breaking Boundaries* meeting. We plopped down in the main hallway on the second floor of school because we couldn’t find any empty classrooms. Denise managed to snag a chair. That afternoon, Denise relied on Ally to speak on her behalf because she



had a sore throat. Each time she had something to say, she leaned over to Ally, who then shared it with the rest of us. Denise has just finished giving us an update on an event she attended the week prior when she notices that Billie is having a side conversation. The following conversation is recorded by Nathaniel on my iPhone camera:

Denise: °I think I'm gonna scream and if I scream it's gonna be a problem= °  
((seated in the chair looking at students))

Ally: =YO:  
(.) >pay attention!<

Amber: I a:m↑

Denise: Did I ASK you NOT! Cuz I just saw you >and what did I just say?< (.)  
OH Allright= ((gesturing towards Amber))

Amber:  
=Ummm Uh huh. Uhh okay

Denise: =Thank you=

Amber: =I'm sorry, Denise, I'm so:rry. ((her voice  
sheepish))

Denise: °Good, cuz, I'm not in the mood to yell and if you make me yell, it's  
gonna be a pro:blem°=

Nathaniel: =If she yell (.) she gonna lose her voice= ((from behind the camera))

Denise: Yeah so ()

Ally: [Yeah, and I'm gonna try and calm her down so just (.) just stop (.)  
((gesturing with her right hand in a waving motion, indicating *No*)) Don't.

Denise: °So y'all don't have any questions about the program? Y'all don't have  
any questions?°

Ally: Y'all don't have any questions? No? ((looking around at other students))  
Kay.  
((looking up to Denise waiting for the next announcement))

In this moment, the way Denise admonished the other students positioned her more in the vein of a teacher or even parent. She said that she's "not in the mood to yell" and then explained that if she was to get to that point that there would be trouble. This is very reminiscent of how a parent might admonish a child who is misbehaving, threatening to take action so that they will stop whatever it is they are doing. Denise's words or forceful tone were in part motivated by a sense of urgency and responsibility. She was trying to keep the meeting on track because she felt the weight of responsibility for their time spent together on her shoulders. However, at that time Denise was also impatient and as she said to me in early 2017, "mean back then." Denise did not always exercise patience with her peers – she grew frustrated when things didn't go her way and was not always willing to reflect on the circumstances before rendering a judgement.

This meeting also came on the heels of the previous week's meeting when several members were chatting and having side conversations making it difficult for the group to be productive. For Denise, being able to start this group was (and continued to be) a point of pride, and her concern that the group be productive was evident in her remarks. In rallying the group, in a forceful way, she positioned *Breaking Boundaries* to be a serious place and their work together was also to be taken seriously.

Amber, who was the student who was 'caught' speaking coalesced and apologized. Her response to Denise echoed the way another student would have responded to one of her teachers or another adult at the school. In doing so, Amber reinforced Denise's identity performance as a leader. Her response also reinforced Denise's social positioning as a leader within the group and as the person who dictated

the activities of the group. Amber and the other students were not frustrated by Denise's instructions because as a group, their roles had not yet been defined.

Ally's role in helping Denise could be construed as her performing the identity of a leader within the group because she was moving the meeting along. However here Ally was being a good friend to Denise. She knew that Denise might get irritated if things did not go according to plan which is why she told the group that she would try to "calm her down." (The her in this case being Denise). However, Ally did not make decisions in tandem with Denise but rather waited to hear what was next so she could report that to the rest of the group. Then, the conversation continued and the following exchange occurred in the next turn:

Denise: °Allright (.) so (.) I got the food sale thingy (.) >culture food sale thing<°  
((turning to Ally seated on the floor))

Ally: Who thinks (.) Uh okay (.) She's got the culture food sale thing

((A student, not in the study, who has been singing as she travels down the hallway sashays through the meeting singing with a mischievous smile on her face)) (5)

Daymon: RACH:ELLE! ((talking to student sashaying))

Ally: She's gonna try to do the culture food sale thing and like who wants to do it and who is able to?=((turning to the group to speak)) [You are?]

Nathaniel: [I'm sorry(.)] I'm too lazy to cook right now

Ally: Uhh you (.) you (.) ((gesturing with her finger and pointing to students))

Sara: I can bring cupcakes, right?=  
=I'm bringin' pot de leos!<sup>24</sup>

Amber: =I'm bringin' pot de leos!<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> This is a colloquialism for something that is like an empanada usually filled with meat and available at corner stores or poppy stores in the city where students live.

Nathaniel: [=Ooh I want pot de leos!]

Mira: [ I'm definitely buyin' it]

((simultaneous chatter))

Nathaniel: I'm gonna buy food from the Chinese store.

Ally: Ok

Nathaniel: For me only=

Miss V: =Should we write this down? Are you going to write this down? should [we open a google doc?]

Denise: [I just (disked) my laptop]

Miss V: Allright I'm gonna write this down (.)=

Mira: =I want to I'm gonna see if I can

Ms. V: Is it okay if (.) Officer Denise? ((laughing)) Should we go around and just say what people are going to make?=  
=

Sara: =cupcakes!

Ally: I can [try and bring something in]

Nathaniel: [We should make food at the school!]

Sharon: [brownies]

Mira: Can I bake a cake?

In this part of the conversation a new topic was introduced by Denise, via Ally. I included this part of this conversation to make two things visible. First, I want to note the communication challenges that students in youth-led spaces encountered as they learned how to how to collaborate. Second, was how Denise was positioned versus how the other student participants in *Breaking Boundaries* were positioned.

I will first turn to the communication challenges that plagued all the youth-led spaces. In the dialogue above, all the students jumped in with their responses about what to bring to the international foods sale. Soon everyone was speaking at once. This simultaneous chatter made it difficult for students to listen to each other and share ideas. This was a constant challenge that occurred in all three youth-led spaces. Students' enthusiasm often eclipsed their ability to be productive. This was largely because they had not yet worked out a way to communicate effectively and efficiently. Instead, during meetings, when a new idea would get introduced – in this case the possibility of the “culture food sale” – there would be numerous and simultaneous reactions from students. In these meetings, instead of making progress on something they had already started new topics of conversation would bog the groups down in arguments during which they debated minutiae and fought for air time. At times the group leaders, Anya and Denise, would also follow suit, joking along and chatting. Other times they would realize that it was up to them to manage the group, which were improvisations based on their outward identities as leaders.

I also want to reflect on how Denise was positioned in the above conversation. The students were chatting and discussing ideas but instead of necessarily chatting with each other, they are mostly directing statements and questions toward Denise. They asked *if*, they could bring an item or offering suggestions to gain permission or acceptance from her. Nathaniel does make an assertion suggesting to the group, “we should make food at school,” but it goes unacknowledged by Denise and the others. By asking for permission, the other students reinforced Denise's position as the authority figure.

Then, as Denise observed the dialogue and listened to students' suggestions and ideas, she had a change of mind. Denise leaned over to Ally and said:

Denise: We're doin' a bake sale

Ally: Okay, she changes her mind (.) she says we're doing a bake sale. ((looking at students))

Sara: YES! ((raising hands in victory above her head, her fists clenched)).

Ally: Chill!= ((pointing to Sara with both her hands up in the air))

Nathaniel: =I'M NOT BAKIN' NOTHIN' (for people at this school)

Upon hearing the discussion from students, Denise unilaterally decreed that they the group will instead host a bake sale. Here again, Denise performed a version of leader that was authoritative and not yet collaborative in terms of her leadership style. She didn't invite discussion about the ideas but instead moved onto asking what students could bring. Making decisions and offering a path forward was something she felt she had to do as a leader. When she declared to her peers that the group would switch the event to a bake sale, she performed the identity of a leader, in this case, someone strong, outspoken, and willing to make decisions. At that point in the school year, Denise was also anxious to accomplish something quickly and spreading the word about *Breaking Boundaries* and seeing the organization proliferate was high on her priority list. The work was personal and she felt like they could do something great. Her impatience to 'make a difference' was on display in these moments.

On the other hand, the other students assembled did not debate or ask questions about the decision she made to hold a bake sale but instead launched into another

discussion about what to bring. Some like Sara were enthusiastic but her reaction was like a student reacting to a teacher when they hear about an upcoming trip or extra time for a project, saying “YES!!!” The lack of questioning or opposition from the other students reinforced Denise’s position as the one who held power in the group. Holland et al. (1998) describe positionality as the “ ‘hereness’ and ‘thereness’ of people; it is inextricably linked to power, status, and rank” (p. 272). Within the context of this youth-led space, Denise was positioned as the decision-maker. Her peers were members of the group but by not opposing her decisions and going along with what Denise decided, they reinforced her position as the one in power. Here the interplay of identity performances from Denise as leader and the ways in which the making activities- brainstorming a fundraiser – work in tandem to create this social position within the group.

My intention in sharing some of moments from the *Breaking Boundaries* meeting was to illustrate the differences between Denise who performed the identity of leader and the other students who performed the identity of members or participants. In offering this explanation, I don’t mean to suggest that the other students did not have agency in the situation. Rather I offer that as students in this nascent phase of the group, the lack of structure by way of a making activity where everyone could have defined roles, did not create opportunities for them to yet take up more roles. In this way, the ‘culture’ of the group was one where most students dutifully attended meetings and participated in the planned or impromptu activities, but, took their cues from the two student leaders.

This meeting where it was decided that the group would do a bake sale would be the last meeting before students left on holiday break. They decided at that time to hold the bake sale on the Wednesday they returned (January 7<sup>th</sup>) in the new year. However,

when students came back in January, some could not financially commit to participating in the bake sale so soon after the holiday break. In addition, there were many details that had not yet been ironed out regarding the bake sale like school district rules, allergy policies, and scheduling coordination with the other school that shared the building. After much back and forth it was decided the bake sale would take place on Friday, January 16<sup>th</sup>, giving the students about ten days to finalize all the details. Denise was extremely disappointed and grumbled disdainfully that she had “given these kids three weeks to prepare” (Field Note, January 5, 2015). However, at that moment she did not seem to consider all the planning that needed to be done. This was an illustration of the sense of urgency she felt to show the group was moving forward. It was also telling about Denise’s impatience with her peers and her own learning curve when it came to planning and implementation. She was always confident and determined but in her first year of school (and even into the second) she was often unwilling to cede that thinking through a process could ultimately be fruitful in the long-term.

In the diagram below, I relate the chronology of events (meetings and work sessions) that culminated in the bake sale.



December 2014				
15	16	17	18	19
		Meeting to decide on a bake sale		
January 2015				
			1	2
5	6	7	8	9
Returning from break		Planning meeting that went awry		Planning meeting
12	13	14	15	16
Making & posting signs and printing letter		Final Preparation Meeting		<b>BAKE SALE</b>

**Table 15 -Bake Sale Events December 2014 - January 2015**

### **Urgency Within Making Activities Leads to Amplification of Identity Performances of Leaders and Group Members**

In this section, I examine the interactions amongst students that occurred in the final planning meeting before the bake sale. The students' goal was to finalize any outstanding details. I am sharing data about this meeting to provide several examples of how the student leaders' roles became more amplified through the making activities. By amplified, I mean that students were moving from simply having the title of 'student leader' to performing this identity through their discourse and practices across space and time. This dialogue in this meeting also illustrated how student members of *Breaking Boundaries* who did not have the outward title 'leader' became fuller participants of the group by exercising their agency to ensure the group would accomplish its goals. For both student leaders and student group members, their improvisations were mediated by the making activities. In this particular meeting it was the final decision making and planning but in the days leading up to this meeting the making activities also included designing, making, and distributing posters, writing a letter for parents, and brainstorming other details of the bake sale.

Several minutes of this meeting (January 12, 2015) were filmed on my iPhone by Nathaniel. When the video began, the students and I were seated in a circle. I was seated opposite Nathaniel and flanked by Mira and Ally (whose foot is up on a chair). Denise was to Mira's right. Across the circle, Nathaniel was flanked by Anya and Sara. The other students were situated in between. The video began with me reading a list from a google document. I said, "blow up balloons, setup tablecloths, move tables..." I was reading a list of all the activities that had to be done before the bake sale started. This prompted someone to ask if we could review their actual roles and responsibilities for the bake sale.

Anya decided to 'lead' this discussion. She was seated backwards in a 'rolly chair' (a swiveling office chair), her movements are restless as she moves around while speaking to others. In the first year of school, particularly during meetings, she was always in motion. Anya's forefinger stabbed the air with a sense of authority as she pointed to students to indicate they should be speaking.

Anya: Alright, can we go over that, just in case y'all forgot? Alright, starting from Ally (1) Ally! ((pointing at her))

Ally: Security

Anya: Sheila?

Sheila: Cashier

Anya: You good with math?

Sheila: ((inaudible))

Anya: ((nods at Sheila, and turns to next student))

Anya continued around the circle, pointing her index finger at each student to signal that they should be responding. When she got to Damon, he said something that made Mira and Denise laugh and they gestured towards me, “*miss did you hear that?*” Anya, who was trying to listen, as people chattered back and forth about whatever happened across the circle, admonished them for interrupting, “WAIT! Y’all gotta be QUIET! We- we just got mixed up!” Then she turned to me on the other side of the circle, “Miss did you just write this down?” I start mentioning the roles that are jotted in the Google doc students have created and Anya quiets the group down again, “WAIT, be quiet, be quiet!”

In the lead-up to the bake sale, Anya had become increasingly vocal about keeping students organized and on track. Even though just moments before she too had been joking around with everyone else, the sense of urgency had set in when another student voiced their concern that they want to make sure everyone knew their roles. This prompted her to act because she realized in that moment it was up to a leader to ensure that people understood their roles and responsibilities for the day. Within the figured world of *Breaking Boundaries*, the activities and ongoing discourse were in conflict, and she improvised by trying to keep the meeting on track.

Anya had slowly grown into the role of leader, asserting herself in meetings and demanding more of her peers. She was vocal when she felt like people weren’t being respectful or had veered too far off course. In that moment, she even softly admonished the other leader of the group (Denise) because her side conversation with Mira was getting in the way. This moment is an example of how an identity that she already had as founder and leader of *Breaking Boundaries* became more amplified within the process of

making something. Her role as a leader was more amplified in how she demanded responses from each student, expecting them to report on what they remember as their roles. She called each student by name, just as a teacher might when taking attendance or calling on them to see if they were paying attention to the lesson. We could also liken her behavior to a project manager on a technology team asking everyone to go around at a scrum to explain their goals. Anya also admonished her co-leader, Denise, because she wanted the meeting to progress. These speech events contributed to her interactional positioning as someone who was “in charge.”

A few minutes later, the conversation takes another turn and this time it is Denise who performed her role as leader:

Denise: If we're able to do this bake sale the right way (.) then we can do more complicated things but (.) if we can't even get this right=

Ms. V: [so that's why] [umm]

((In background: Kayvon, Tony are chatting off camera but words are muffled))

Anya: [WE LEARN]  
from our mistakes though (.) so (.) this so this bake sale could teach us things

In the brief exchange above, the contrast in the two leaders' approaches was on display. Denise's interpretation of 'leader' was to assert authority and offer wisdom by telling the group what she expected from them. By explaining that the bake sale was a test of sorts she positioned the other students again as kids. The bake sale was 'easy' to accomplish and if they could not execute it, it would be because people were not performing. Anya countered Denise, arguing the bake sale was a teachable moment. Within the context of identity performances and positioning, Anya's response to Denise

positioned her in a more empathetic leadership role. Her response was an improvisation because instead of agreeing outright with Denise to present a united front as leaders, she countered with a new idea.

Their contrasting leadership styles were visible throughout the year and created challenges for the group. Denise wanted students to be constantly doing activities and felt like they were always not moving as fast as they should be. Anya felt the purpose of the group was most evident in the sharing and storytelling students engaged in to support one another (See Chapter 4). Over the course of the year Anya expressed to other students that events like the bake sale were fine but that she did not feel it was the core ‘work’ of the group. However for Denise, getting the ideas about empowerment and acceptance into the world was the ‘work’ of the group. This fundamental disagreement in how they made sense of the larger philosophical goals of *Breaking Boundaries* continued to play out over the course of two years. It would also create challenges for them in terms of their willingness to work collaboratively and plan and negotiate, although the responsibility of being a ‘leader’ and their commitment to the group’s goals still pushed them forward.

**Voicing Their Concerns: Student Members Become Fuller Participants.** Over the course of the two weeks of planning some of the group’s members were becoming more involved in the activities. They helped make and hang posters, write letters, and involved themselves in the planning details. However, the pre-planning meeting that I’ve recounted, was where their participation in the group became much more palpable. This discussion picks up just minutes after the exchange between Denise and Anya in the previous section. As the group tries to go over important details, Ally expressed concern

and then Mary expressed her irritation which then catalyzes a more authoritative response from both Anya and Denise. Below is an excerpt from the conversation:

Ally: One thing that's kinda making me nervous is that most people aren't really payin' attention.

Denise: That's my POINT

Mary: [They KEEP talking!]

Ms.V: [So that's why] if we can get through this planning-

((Kayvon and Tony speaking but what they are saying is unclear on video))

Mira: [ I still think] we should

Anya: ARNOLD, so HOW's the day gonna go on Friday?=  
=KAY(.)VON! What

Denise: are we talkin' about?

Anya: WAIT! WAIT! On FRIDAY How's the day gonna go? If you were like listening. ((Facing Arnold & Kayvon who are to her right))

Mira: [Close it NOW!]

Ally: There's no point in you havin' it op(.) on right now

Mira: The only computer that should be open ((rubbing her eyes and looking at Kayvon))

Anya: [Do you know what's] gonna happen on Friday?

Tony: [So uhh, I'm gonna] ((sheepish))

Anya: No before that – how's the DAY gonna go on Friday?

Kayvon: So we were assigning jobs↑

Anya: No before that (1) how's the day gonna go on Friday?

Kayvon: Uhh I don't (.) know (.) but I remember you saying that I have to ((leaning over Tony's chair))

Sara:

=[(slaps her hand against her head in frustration as he says this)]

Anya: HOW COME YOU DON'T KNOW

Kayvon: ((inaudible))

Denise: What about you Tony, what are you gonna do?=

Sara:

=Just pay attention!

Anya: RIGHT! >We're not gonna waste our time and money on something that isn't gonna go well if y'all don't wanna pay attention<= ((swiveling around in chair))

Sara:

=If you don't wanna pay attention just

LEAAAAVE....

Tony: It's really not ((nodding head))

Ally: You guys aren't really payin' attention and ... (her foot that is propped up on a chair is restlessly moving as she speaks).

In the dialogue above, the urgency was palpable. The event was officially two days away and the team was trying to review all their plans. Two of the group members, Kayvon and Tony, have been having a side conversation that was perceived as detracting from the planning. They had been chatting on and off for most of the meeting and Kayvon had been unable to sit down in one place instead moving around the room frenetically. Denise had already admonished him a few times to no avail, including a sarcastic remark, "umm Kayvon since you aren't doing anything do you mind clearing off that table?"

The reason this moment stuck out to me in the data was that it was not the leaders who signaled their frustration towards Kayvon and Tony, but some of the student

members. This excerpt started with Ally's aside to me (Ms.V), that she was nervous that not everyone was paying attention. Then, Mary also expressed her frustration, "They KEEP talking" she said with utmost irritation. The girls' statements caught both Denise and Anya's attentions and they started challenging the boys with questions to emphasize that they had not been paying attention. In the meantime, Ally and Mary's statements set off a rapid succession of additional frustration from the other members.

The two student leaders were prompted to action after hearing Ally and Mary's remarks. Anya followed by Denise called Kayvon and Tony by name and questioned them. Denise and Anya worked in tandem as leaders, playing off each other. Kayvon and Tony were being positioned as kids through discourse. In positioning the boys as kids, who were not following the rules of discourse and were goofing off, Denise and Anya were reinforcing their positioning as two young women who held power in the group, reinforcing their identities as leaders.

Next I want to turn to the participation of the student members of the group. A few weeks prior, Ally was an active participant in the meeting when Denise declared that the group would do a bake sale (see page 210 for reference). In that meeting, she was performing the identity of Denise's friend, helping her run the meeting because Denise was unwell. In the final planning meeting, Ally was the student who initially voiced her concern that not everyone was paying attention. Instead of turning to the boys however she said the comment to me but loud enough for everyone else to hear. This was then followed by a barrage of other comments from her peers. As the conversation escalated, she felt emboldened by the collective frustration and eventually addressed the boys directly. The shift was important because it illustrated her willingness to speak up for



something that mattered to her and showed how other students' passion encouraged Ally to speak up more directly.

In *Breaking Boundaries*, Ally's participation moved from being a supportive friend to a member of the group who wanted to see it succeed. Ally would later in the year become a vocal critic (at times) of the group's lack of productivity, something many of the students felt as the year wore on. There was a collective sense amongst the group that they could have accomplished more if people didn't 'play too much.' However, at other times Ally and other students attributed this to a lack of leadership and guidance from Denise and Anya. Ironically, Ally was often implicated in 'playing too much' as were all the students at one point or another. In the case of the bake sale however, Ally was one of the group members who worked to ensure that the group was successful. This can be attributed to the boundedness and clarity of the making activity and students' understanding their roles.

Seeing Ally actively engaged in the making of this bake sale was a shift in how she was in other school contexts. In the transition to high school she had a lot of personal challenges at home that made it difficult for her to feel connected in school because her mind was often somewhere else. Moreover, in classes, she kept to herself or stuck to hanging out with a few close friends (most of whom were in *Breaking Boundaries*). For these reasons, Ally's actions and words were so profound in that moment because they illustrated a different side to her that was visible when there were activities she could embrace.

Mary was a second student who spoke up in this part of the meeting. Like Ally, MARY was very quiet and removed within school. So, it came as a surprise when I

observed Mary speak out with such conviction. Her remark, “they KEEP talking” catalyzed responses from the leaders as well as other students. As a member of the group, Mary had dutifully shown up to meetings but most often did not speak up or share a great deal. The bake sale had presented an opportunity to get more involved. When we first returned from the holiday break, Mary asked if she could help design the posters to publicize the bake sale. She wasn’t sure exactly sure about how to design the posters but by offering to help she was showing that she was invested in doing something.

In the final meeting, her assertion “*they KEEP talking*” was not done quietly or under her breath which is often how she conveyed information without calling too much attention to herself. Mary maintained high expectations for her peers both in academic spaces and elsewhere, she did not think dancing, talking over teachers, or goofing around was appropriate in classroom settings. When she voiced her frustrations so audibly or publicly, instead of hanging back, she engaged in an improvisation that was truly an agentive act. The making activity, brainstorming and planning, interrupted by peer chatter created a situation where Mary could have continued to remain quiet but instead she acted.

Mary’s frustration was then echoed in statements made by Ally, Sara, and Mira, who all piped up and chided the boys for having a separate conversation and not listening to the details. Their phrases also again echo what teachers often might say to students when they are not paying attention in class, for example, “shut that laptop,” or “close it.” Sara, is so discouraged she just asks them to leave, clearly aggrieved as her hand found her forehead in frustration. Each of the girls were unhappy with their peers’ lack of attention when they themselves were willing to take things seriously.

They were frustrated because a lot was on the line, students were purchasing things to sell and their time and resources could be wasted if the event wasn't executed properly. This required everyone's cooperation and the leaders of the group, Denise and Anya, as well as invested members of the group like, Mira, Mary, Ally, and Sara, were frustrated because they didn't see the level of cooperation they believed was required. Each of the subsequent utterances after Denise and Anya challenge the boys, are illustrations of how students become fuller participants of the group in light of what they were making together. Each of their utterances contributes to a collective argument they are making about the expectations for conduct in preparation for the bake sale. The group wanted to feel prepared and make sure everything was organized. This dynamics in this meeting differ significantly from the meeting when Denise declared that they would hold a bake sale. Even though in that meeting, student voices were present, the participants were directing their questions towards the leader like "can I bring cupcakes?" In this final preparation meeting student participants like Ally, Mary, and Mira acted as integral members of the group, offering directives and setting expectations for other members. They took up more agentive roles in the conversation and in the group by directly addressing the two boys who were positioned as violating the expectations for conduct at this crucial moment in time.

After this exchange, the planning conversations continued for several more minutes as we went back and forth about details. At one moment Mira piped up, "*can we confirm what everyone is bringing?*" This stirred up a new set of things that had to be hastily jotted into the Google doc we had created a few days prior. As the students went around, Mary wondered out loud what happens if someone can't bring something to

which another student replies, “then they can’t be in it.” Immediately Mary piped up saying, “Y’all can do other stuff too! We can have more people behind the table. More eyes on the tables.” Anya backed her assertion up saying, “they don’t have to bring something, if they got somethin’ goin on at home...” In doing so Mira’s comments were positioned as valuable because they were reinforced by a student leader. Some students were still unsure if they could financially commit, others were unsure they could get their parents to take them to the store, and for others they were unwilling to contribute anything to the bake sale for other reasons. As some students hedged on whether they could contribute, Mira piped up that students could still participate even though they weren’t bringing food, instead they could contribute by showing up and being part of the event.

Here Mira, showed empathy and offered important cover for students who might not have been comfortable participating for a variety of reasons. She explained that giving time and energy was equivalent to bringing physical goods. In doing this Mira performed the identity of leader even though she did not outwardly hold that title. By offering this guidance to the students assembled, she positioned herself as someone who also made decisions for the group. Throughout this meeting and in the five prior planning meetings Mira had gotten increasingly involved. She helped type up the lists of bake sale items, edit the price list, and was involved in the discussion of the small details.

Mira’s empathy toward her fellow students could also be likened to the way a mother or big sister, or aunt might act, to give someone cover. She was the middle child in her family and doted on her little twin sisters and was responsible for them on a daily basis. Her attention to detail making sure everyone knows what is expected of them also

follows in the same vein. In these moments, Mira was drawing on her funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) as a caring, organized young woman.

In the final meeting before the bake sale, Mira was involved in two key moments. First, she like the other students, expressed frustration that the other students were not paying attention to the final details that were being reviewed. Second, she made it okay for students who weren't bringing something to still feel comfortable participating. With each contribution, she performed her identity as an active member of *Breaking Boundaries*, but also as an involved student who was unafraid to tell people how she felt. Her empathy for other students' needs revealed Mira's personal identity which included loyal friend and caretaker. She would go all out to support people she cared about and was unapologetically outspoken.

When I met Mira in the fall of 2014, she hardly spoke to anyone. Three years later, you would never know she was the same person. She became actively involved in many school activities and was often called on to represent her school. What might come as a surprise to some readers was that Mira was labeled as a student with disabilities. In other schools this institutional identity could have led to isolation and poor treatment (McDermott & Varenne, 1999), but at the Design School, she found many ways to perform new institutional identities (Gee, 2000) like citizen, representative, and leader.

I examined the events of this planning meeting because it illustrated an evident shift in students' identity performances. Ally, Mira, and Mary were not the most vocal students in classes or in other non-academic spaces when they began school. The bake sale created opportunities for them to take ownership of different tasks, exercise their voices, and work collaboratively with their peers to execute a major school event. This

section also illustrated how the two student leaders, Anya and Denise, made sense of their roles and interactional positioning in the group.

The girls' efforts had an important impact on the remainder of the meeting. In the subsequent clips that were filmed by Nathaniel, students engaged in much more productive discussions, they took turns listening to each other and making sure they were prepared for the upcoming bake sale. At times when there were overlapping discussions, students were trying to problem-solve instead of having side conversations that were off-topic. So ultimately by communicating their sense of purpose and agency, they changed the group dynamics.

### **Leadership Identities Thicken Through Making Activities**

The bake sale also illustrated the differing leadership styles of the two leaders of *Breaking Boundaries*. In this section, I examine how Denise and Anya understood leadership and the ways this positioned them in school. While each of the girls approached leadership differently, they were both ambitious and earnest, and felt the weight of responsibility on their shoulder to make things happen. With the bake sale, both Denise and Anya, over the course of a few weeks had many opportunities to perform the identity of leader. Making the bake sale a success was important to them. However, as I illustrated above, it was having to perform this identity in relation to other students and within the larger context of school that contributed to the thickening of their identities as 'leaders.'

**Having a Voice: Students Contribute to Social Fabric of School.** For Anya, the bake sale was one of the group's most substantive accomplishments. She shared this:

I guess like that was like our big test like everybody had a job, like Sheila was like managing the money, and you know like everybody had what they had to do and they knew that like, “Okay, if I mess up, then we’re not gonna make this certain money and we are not gonna get what we want.” So like since everybody like knew exactly what to do and they like – they felt like they were doing something... so I guess like everybody found a purpose in the bake sale. So like I don’t know, I guess it went really good. (Interview, November 10, 2015).

Anya recognized that everyone had a role to play in the bake sale. She also explained that there was a certain kind of pressure on students to do well because if they did not execute their respective roles, they would not succeed in raising the funds that they needed to do other activities. She also felt that, “everybody found a purpose” and that everyone “felt like they were doing something.” Anya understood how making something together, in this case making a bake sale happen, created opportunities for fuller participation from all members of the group. Each person had a purpose and felt connected to the activity which made it meaningful for them and ultimately a success.

In a survey that I had shared with students in the summer of 2015, I asked students to explain in their own words what they had gleaned from their participation in *Breaking Boundaries*. Anya offered that being a leader of *Breaking Boundaries* forced her to “take responsibility” and that she realized “the program depends on your actions and your decisions you can’t just blame it on someone else if it doesn’t work, you learn ownership and become understanding. Communication plays a huge role too and all these things are important anywhere.” (June, 2015). Taken together with her remarks above, it is evident that Anya felt the weight of responsibility in being a leader. Being a student at the Design School and her experiences in *Breaking Boundaries* had changed her understanding of the importance of learning to effectively communicate with others.

Moreover, she started to understand that the group's work was dependent on the actions (or lack thereof) of the individuals who were part of it. In addition, she recognized that learning to be an effective communicator was a skill that was valuable in other contexts.

Anya continued to cultivate an identity not only as a leader within the school but as one of the school's foremost ambassadors. As I mentioned in the introductory section to this chapter, the student leaders at the Design School have been called on for their 'service' to the school. The principal, Mr. Greene, as well as other staff members often called on these students because of their proclivities towards leadership at school. Anya was a student who consistently was asked to be a Design School student spokesperson.

#### **Having A Voice: Socially Positioning Students as Leaders Nurtured Agency.**

In Denise's case, the bake sale was an important accomplishment because of the role it played in the school more broadly. It was the first time the Design School held a bake sale in its short tenure. She loved knowing that a group she started had contributed to the school community in a substantive way. Moreover, being a student leader was something she found remarkable because it wasn't an opportunity she had before. As she recollected her past experiences she shared that, "like other schools they was like really strict and like you didn't have like the choice to do certain things that you want to do. You had to be like the teacher's favorite to get to do something like this. But now like I can be someone who – some of the teachers may not get along on but I still get to do what I wanna do" (Interview November 17, 2015). Denise's previous school experiences suggested that one had to be considered 'special' to have a chance to be a leader and pursue a dream. However, at the Design School she felt that things were more egalitarian.



So even if she wasn't the favorite, or perfect student, she still had agency within the school.

Denise went onto explain that at the Design School she had “more of a voice, a bigger voice, like you're heard.” She felt valued and was conscious that her voice mattered. Given that schools are often, in the eyes of young people, institutions that are defined by what students *can't* do, Denise felt emboldened by the Design School's commitment to youth development. She also explained how being positioned as valuable within school gave her confidence stating: “like if I have like something to say about the school like I don't like a certain thing, they will actually listen to what I have to say, they won't just brush me off as just a kid. They'll give me time to like talk about it, like I could schedule a meeting with my principal like so like he's really busy and I'd get a chance to speak with him about something that I felt needs to change in the school so yeah” Interview, November 17, 2015). Again, we see that it mattered a great deal to Denise that she was a valued member of the school community. In her previous school experiences, Denise was involved in a range of activities, but did not feel like her voice carried the same weight. At the Design School she could sit down with her principal and feel confident that her words mattered to him. Denise felt positioned for success and the bake sale continued to reinforce her identity as leader.

Both girls continued to embrace their positionality as valued members of the school community. Anya, as I shared above, through her participation with a youth development organization, *Endeavors*, situated in the school fully embraced the identity of leader, representative, and valued student of the Design School. She was often called on to represent her school. Denise was also positioned this way for two years but as she

started to disengage from school, she wasn't called up for her 'service' as often as she had been in the past, something she lamented as she began her junior year of school - recognizing that she had maybe lost some of the clout she had initially garnered through her forays into leadership. Her lack of persistence in academic contexts and withdrawal from other aspects of school socializing had cost her some of the cache she had built her first year.

### **Civic Identities: How Making Together Creates Opportunities for Fuller Participation**

As I had shared in the opening vignette, the day of the bake sale concretized and made real the planning students had done. Students were buzzing with excitement as they exited class early and ran around gathering materials and setting up the space. They had thought of everything from balloons, to signs, to the location of the price lists. As they launched into action, Denise and Anya continued to perform their identities as leaders, dictating what each of their peers should be doing, nitpicking details of which cookies should go on what tray, and ensuring that the space was setup to their standards. Every student in the group including the girls who stepped up in the meetings (Mira, Ally, and Mary), ran around posting signs, organizing food, and moving things around to make the space conducive to the sale. Some students like Mira and Ally stepped up during the bake sale setup addressing important details like the décor, posting up signs, and helping with the layout. Others like Mary and Amber looked for more guidance, asking, "where is this?" and "what should I do?" instead of directing others but they were still active participants and took their roles and responsibilities seriously.

The bake sale itself was a public event. All the students, teachers and staff that were present that afternoon had a chance to see the culminating efforts of *Breaking Boundaries*. As I have illustrated in the previous sections, the bake sale created opportunities for students to engage in different kinds of identity performances that made them visible in the school community. Other students, staff and building staff benefited from the bake sale. This is not to suggest that all things students did in the youth-led spaces were school-facing activities. By creating opportunities for students to engage in different kinds of identity performances, the youth-led affinity groups created opportunities for cultivating citizenship, as defined by the frameworks and as students engaged in these smaller acts of citizenship, they could see themselves increasingly as part of a school community.

Holland et al. (1998) would offer that seeing themselves as a member of this group or institution shaped the way young people participated. Making something together that they had contributed to over time led to students identifying as members of the group but also representatives who were doing something that contributed to the school community. When students had a shared purpose for the work at hand, then the making they did together on those days was productive. Students felt it.

Creating a sense of community within a school is a complex process. Students, educators and staff who feel like they belong to a school community need to be unified by some sense of belonging to a place, an idea, or set of values. The Design School's motto, *love, dream, do* and the Design School values that included, *persistence, collaboration, passion, empathy, reflection, and risk taking*. While the school had a longer list of values, these were the ones that were emphasized by the principal and adults

in the building as the primary set of values that embodied Design School students. The three youth-led affinity groups even as they were being imagined were woven into the school's fabric. Each of the three youth-led affinity groups created opportunities for students to become fuller participants within these groups but also within the school community as well. We saw this in how the principal talked about the groups and treated the student leaders, often giving them latitude like the use of rooms or gathering at hours when students would normally not be able to gather.

I am framing school citizenship as the public acknowledgement of being part of a community or place, not simply existing in those places, but acknowledging a relationship between you and a community, in this case, school. While we usually think about citizenship in terms of country of nationality, I bring citizenship into this conversation because I want to get at the notion of belonging and public recognition and most importantly that citizenship usually implies a set of expectations for civic engagement. In this case, the expectations for civic engagement in the school community were about embodying the school's core values and motto. Students who visibly displayed them were celebrated and appreciated for their efforts. Moreover they were held up as examples of 'model citizens.' In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1938) argued that,

Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others. A book or a letter may institute a more intimate association between human beings separated thousands of miles from each other than exists between dwellers under the same roof. Individuals do not even compose a social group because they all work for a common end. The parts of a machine work with a maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they

regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community. But this would involve communication. Each would have to know what the other was about and would have to have some way of keeping the other informed as to his own purpose and progress. Consensus demands communication.

(Dewey, 1916, p. 4)

This framing is instructive because it helps me to think about how it was not just being part of an affinity space (or having something in common) or co-existing in the same space or proximity that made someone a citizen. Instead, Dewey (1938) argued, it required people to have a “common end” where people are invested and more importantly work together and communicate effectively to accomplish goals.

Within the larger context of a school community students were ultimately engaged (especially when they were engaged in school-facing work) in building the school or in contributing to the school community and at times engaged in acts of school citizenship. Ways into school citizenship matter because not all young people have a sense of belonging or comfort within school. Many young people have been engaged in organizing for a better education at the local and state level, or working on issues that impact their communities. These small acts of citizenship by could ultimately help students to find a foothold in their school communities and might be a lever for shifting how schools think about preparing youth for civic engagement.

## Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

History tells us that race and class have and will continue to mediate youth's school experiences, keeping educational equity at bay. Youth on the other hand, continue to push back against hegemonic forces through agentive acts: they design fashion blogs, inspire their peers to speak up for human equality, and they dance like they are on the world's stage. However, there are realities that are beyond youth's control - larger forces at work that demand *real* systemic change. I conducted my dissertation research in service of finding ways to nurture educational equity for youth of color in urban public schools and offer insights to ongoing scholarly conversations about how to bring about systemic change in a macro-educational system that continues to bend towards technocratic and standardized approaches to education. In my research, I explored how educational frameworks that were developed to nurture equity, namely, *Connected Learning*, could be operationalized within the institutional boundaries of an urban public high school. Undergirding this research was both an orientation towards youth as creative, cultural producers and a belief that making created new ways to nurture youth's literacies and shift what learning looked like in the classrooms. What this dissertation tried to ask was what impact did making have on youth's identities. In the remainder of this chapter I reflect on the findings and articulate some of the implications of this research.

### **Towards a Theory of Connecting to Youth**

The three youth-led affinity spaces that I examined in this research, a film club, youth activism group, and a dance team, offered a window into how youth created spaces

that emanated from their interests, passions, and curiosities, within the institutional boundaries of school. These spaces revealed how making within these interest-driven spaces gave youth opportunities to try out new or reveal facets of their existing identities in schools. These spaces also illustrated what happens when youth are positioned as agentic, creative, and resourceful.

One of the central findings that emerged from this research was the generative value of finding ways for students to feel connected; to each other, to their school and its values, and to the ways students spent time in school. The connection and the act of connecting were integral in this research both in cultivating relationships and in the data collection and analyses. While the spaces I worked in with students were not academic in nature, they were still contexts where students were involved in intentional work that was driven by connections to their passions, curiosities, and, interests in the world. Or, to borrow from the Connected Learning framework, these contexts were openly networked, had a shared purpose and were increasingly production centered (Ito et al. 2013).

In the first findings chapter, I examined three relationships that I argued were integral to realizing Connected Learning in school contexts. The reason these relationships were important was that they illustrated how making activities could create opportunities for students to be open, honest, vulnerable, creative, and friendly with one another in school. For many students, it was the first time they had been positioned as collaborators and keepers of the school's values. Instead of being at risk of breaking the rules, they were part of making the rules.

Historically youth of color are asked to suppress their voices and subscribe to norms of whiteness. At the Design School and in particularly through the youth-led

spaces, students had agency around how to use their time, where they wanted to be situated within school, and how they could interact with one another. This level of freedom over their bodies and activities was new for many students who were accustomed to strict schedules that dictated how their school-time was spent. Being positioned differently meant that other relationships could shift as well including peer-to-peer relationships. Students worked in the spaces as collaborators, as teachers and learners, and as friends.

The youth-led affinity spaces also usurped traditional school power dynamics and instead created opportunities for adults and students to work together as collaborators – learning with and from each another. These findings support other research in informal learning contexts that has found that shifting relationships between youth, their peers, and adults to be more dialogic and egalitarian, meant that youth feel like their ideas, modes of expression, and ways of being are welcome (Filipiak & Miller, 2014; Wissman et al. 2015).

These new ways of working and being in school were made possible by connecting to youth's interests. They were also facilitated by a supportive school environment that encouraged students to pursue their interests and dreams. Thus, nurturing connections between youth and their peers, educators, and school community, built around youth's personal affinities, offers a potential avenue for schools and educators to shift their ways of working.



## **Pathways to Civic Engagement Start with School Citizenship**

In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Holland et al. (1998) described the fate of a man who had fallen off the wagon after attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. They concluded that the man had not internalized the values of the organization: he had not internalized the identity of a “recovering alcoholic,” like other participants of AA. Therefore, Holland et al. (1998) argued, it was easier for this man to start drinking again because he did not see himself in relation to the organization and its values. For the Design School students who internalized the motto, love, dream, do, they experienced agency and ownership within the school community. They noticed that their dreams mattered.

For those students who participation in school events gave them a chance to see themselves from a new perspective. This was most evident for the student leaders who started to see themselves as leaders not only within youth-led spaces but within the school more broadly. For a few students like Anya and Ruby, their identities as leaders within the school have endured over the course of their high school experiences. This outward claiming of leader was bolstered by their performance in academic contexts and their enthusiasm to tackle new challenges. Over their three years in high school they were continually called up for service to the school. Moreover, these student leaders’ identities as school leaders have been reinforced by teachers, staff, and peers who continue to rely on them and make new opportunities available to them because they have proven themselves in the public eye.

Of the six leaders that I shared in this dissertation, five (Anya, Denise, Mira, Ruby, and Star) were young women of color. Women are scarcely represented in the

highest levels of leadership across most industries including government, technology, and even education. Positioning young women as leaders has huge implications, because women still go unnoticed and underappreciated despite their talents. Nurturing young women leaders early on in their educational careers could lead the way for them to take on new roles in the future.

The youth-led efforts were situated within a wider universe of youth leadership and organizing efforts. There has been substantive work done within the contexts of youth participatory action research and youth activism to nurture leadership (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). There have been many documented illustrations of youth leadership: leaders who advocate specifically for educational change, others who advocate for social justice causes more broadly and those that take up economic or environmental concerns. In many cases, these instantiations of youth leadership are evident in out of school or after school contexts. Often organizations nurture youth to be leaders and take up the causes that matter to them, teaching them how to organize, advocate and more recently use new media as a lever for activism and civic engagement (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Others have illustrated how adults and youth can be partners together in making substantive change and in developing critical consciousness around social justice issues (Hosang, 2006; Cammarota, 2011).

To date efforts to nurture students as leaders *within* schools have not been extensive. At the Design School students were not only part of the student body they were part of the school's fabric, they were heard and it mattered. The youth-led spaces are evidence that supporting youth can lead to demonstrations of school citizenship and

leadership. Moreover, they offer new models to perhaps extend and expand the face of civic engagement that is rapidly changing in our new political climate.

### **Non-Dominant Youth Need to Be Prepared for the New Economy**

The world we live in has fundamentally shifted because of significant advances in media and technology, particularly since the advent of e-mail and the World Wide Web. These technologies have shifted how we communicate, how we compose and create and fundamentally shifted our social relations. Moreover, these technological shifts are situated in a more globalized world where people, capital, and ideas traverse the world rapidly (Appadurai, 1999; Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009). Today's youth are born into a world where information moves at warp speed; allowing them to ask and answer questions, share things with friends and family and be connected locally and globally. Schools have been slow to understand or make sense of the rapidly changing landscape. Technology is still discussed by most educators and policymakers as an autonomous thing or set of skills that requires pedagogical attention, belying the social situated nature of our media and technology practices (cf Cuban, 2013). Irrespective of arguments about who is (or isn't) a digital native, the reality is that society has transformed and schools need to acknowledge the implications of these shifts by understanding how youth operate in the world.

These technological advances have still not been enough to curb the growing income inequality that has widened the gap between the rich and poor (cf Reardon, 2013). This climate has led to substantive economic uncertainty for the most vulnerable Americans, many of whom attend public schools. So, it is concerning that schools are

failing to prepare students for the world that awaits them – a world that requires youth to be critical thinkers, problem-solvers, and entrepreneurs (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This is not to undermine what youth are already doing in their out of school time. However, in school too many hours are spent on mindless activities that enforce pedagogization of literacies, mathematics, and STEM subjects.

Such concerns have been circulating in literacies research for more than twenty years. Scholars argued that to be literate in the 21st century required more than being able to read and write text, it required an understanding of how to employ multiple modes like images, text and sound (Bezemer & Kress, 2008) to produce meaning. Researchers became cognizant of these shifts early during the proliferation of the internet and new media and argued for a multiliteracies approach that employed more inclusive pedagogies that were reactive to the changing educational landscape for literacy teaching (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The multiliteracies approach was a response to the increasingly “culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 9) and called for a pluralistic approach that did not assume there was one best set of literate practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

More recently scholars have been arguing that there are ‘new’ literacies that have substantive implications for schools (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) because of the vast and unprecedented shifts in what comprises reading and writing in the digital age. Others have acknowledged the rich and multiple media practices that youth are engaged in as they produce and maintain online identities, cultivate friendships and relationships, and produce and share creative work (boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2010). Even with this awareness, youth of color experience what Haddix and Sealey Ruiz (2012) argued was

“criminalization and policing of digital and popular literacies” (p. 190), where young students of color (they are specifically talking about boys) do not have the latitude to compose and create with digital tools that they use with fluency outside of school.

In chapter 5, I examined youth’s interest-driven mediascapes and the impact they had on shaping youth’s compositions within and outside of the youth-led affinity spaces. While not explicitly discussed in that chapter, unlike the boys that Haddix & Sealey Ruiz (2012) were referencing in their studies, youth’s media and technology savvy were integral to their compositions. While their devices were not always welcome in academic classrooms or even in the youth-led spaces depending on the activities, these devices signified connections to youth’s broader social worlds. New modes of expression demonstrate how youth are not simply passive consumers of media rather they are actively engaged in agentive curation and complex composition and making practices. Being attentive to the ways youth cultivate their mediascapes, prepares educators to invite youth’s out of school media, literacy, and making practices into more formal learning contexts. Youth’s compositions within the youth-led spaces were mediated by the reading, writing and living they did in the world beyond the classroom. Being able to shape their compositions using the things that were most influential or interesting or impactful on their lives was transformational for some students like David, who found joy and success in being able to shape dance compositions in school with ideas that were embedded in his interest-driven mediascape.

Moreover, tapping into youth’s mediascapes within school contexts can create opportunities to nurture ongoing local-global connections that youth make each day. This happens as they are listening to local radio stations, browsing YouTube stations, or

thumbing through their Instagram accounts. By locating youth in the world more broadly than their immediate geographic, racial, gendered, etc. identity positions, has the potential to push youth's critical consciousness. In other words, inviting youth's mediascapes into school contexts can help to foster conversations about their location in both local and global communities. This can build increasing awareness about larger hegemonic forces and challenges that cut across communities, contexts, and geographies.

Thus far, even with many grassroots efforts, research, and reform initiatives, the realities in schools has not shifted significantly. Inequitable educational access will continue to exacerbate inequalities that are much starker on a global level. In an increasingly technocratic society with vast income inequality gaps, technology is not enough of an equalizer. The new divide, as *Connected Learning*, also realizes, is one where it is not enough to be creative with technology tools or know how to navigate media, it is knowing how to solve problems, communicate across vast audiences, and position oneself for success in a globalized world.

### **A New Standardization: Personalized and Interest Driven Learning**

One of the more prevalent discourses in education today is around personalized or student-centered learning. These terms conjure images of smart software programs that suggest books based on standardized assessment data or systems to let students go at their own pace. In a recent article in *Education Week*, there was news that the Chan Zuckerberg Foundation would be funding "personalized learning engineers" as part of a large initiative to develop and test software in K-12 schools (Herold, 2016). The Gates Foundation invested \$1.5 million dollars in 2011 into the Khan Academy, which started

as a series of YouTube videos on a range of topics. Examining these ways of student-centered learning they don't seem to consider students' interests, passions, curiosities and modalities of learning into account.

Student-centered learning is not new but it is contextualized within a larger set of sociocultural shifts that are occurring as new media and technology have evolved and fundamentally shifted how we live. This includes how we communicate, cultivate expertise and knowledge and how we make and create in the world. Across disciplines these shifts have forced human beings to contend with what should change about their industries: it is making everyone question what technology and new media can afford, enhance, or simply not replace. In education, student-centered learning has been a way to best leverage this era of technology and mass media. Politically, it allows districts to communicate that they value youth as learners and individuals within learning contexts. Practically, this shift gives resource-starved districts a way to lessen costs by outsourcing teaching and learning to online programs and pre-developed curricula. In other cases, technology has shown to be effective in freeing up class time via blended learning programs to create opportunities for teachers to address more students' needs within overcrowded classes that also contend with stringent time (cf Staker & Horn, 2012).

This technocratic approach to learning suggests that students should learn from computers, which is an Instructionist approach to learning (Kafai, 2006). Whereas others have long called for kids to learn *with* computers (and in this era technology more broadly) which is a Constructionist approach to technology (Papert, 1980; Kafai, 2006). For example, in chapter 6 of my dissertation, I shared an account of the events leading up to the school's first bake sale. As students prepared for the bake sale they typed up price

lists, made digital and handwritten posters, and wrote letters. They used Google Docs, Google image search, and everyday art supplies. Through these activities, students were learning *with* technology (e.g. computers, pencils). Even though the main making activity was learning how to organize and implement a bake sale, they had to use many tools to make the bake sale. Alternatively, students in their sophomore year of school (2015-2016) had an online blended learning software that maintained content for their core subject areas like science, humanities, and mathematics. Each day, they had to login to the system and click through tutorials, watch videos, answer questions, and pass quizzes. Students found this system to be frustrating and often lamented that they weren't learning anything. This is an example of learning *from* computers.

Today the emphasis has become learning *from* computers. Where “personalized learning” or student-centered learning is now mired in a technocratic mindset where "personalization" is code for preferences. In a Web 2.0 paradigm, logics are applied to interpret our preferences and spew out suggestions for books, shoes, and appliances. In the educational context, this is employed differently, for example, software that predicts what books or texts a learner might enjoy based on reading levels, past selections, and other inputs. However, personalization engines do not consider, students' histories in person (Holland & Lave, 2001). These kinds of learning experiences do not consider factors beyond the screen like whether a student had a bad bus ride into school, or how to pivot when a student wants to embark on something new and adventurous, or allow for opportunities for students to ask questions and be in dialogue with a set of ideas. Ultimately these conceptions of ‘student-centered’ draw on a framework of content transfer and delivery, or a dressed-up banking model of education (Freire, 1998). Such



models do not fully realize or appreciate that human beings learn through experiences. Students may learn something from these kinds of content-delivery mechanisms, but it might be how to use the software, or how to click through to get a perfect quiz score. These, I suspect, are not the learning outcomes that are intended. By emphasizing preferences as personal, the personalized learning approach could quickly become a new kind of standardization; laptops instead of books, online quizzes versus paper ones, and so on. This is where my dissertation research offers a much more nuanced look at the lives of youth and their cultural practices that included their media and technology practices. By understanding learners in context and focusing on authentic activities that emphasize learning with technology versus learning from technology, schools are more likely to make substantive connections with students and offer personally meaningful learning experiences that build on their creative and technological capacities.

### **Towards Connected Classrooms**

We are in an era that is ripe with possibility to reimagine teaching and learning in schools that moves away from standardization and overly structured curricula to one of tinkering, play and creation. Research across several disciplines illustrates how when students' lifeworlds are valued and when they feel connected to what they are doing, learning occurs and literacy flourishes. Resource rich spaces, authentic materials, appropriate technologies, and deeply skilled facilitators who can support and guide youth are also integral to this project. In this dissertation, I offered an examination of what happens when we reposition students as agents of their own learning.

As was visible in each of the findings chapters, spaces where youth lead the work look and feel different – they are playful, active and always changing. They were also spaces where students could be themselves. Sometimes students’ playful attitudes got in the way of their progress, but often their play led to great new ideas.

This work has led me to believe strongly that connecting to youth in tangible ways can have transformative potential. Students need to find footholds in school. They need to know that someone cares about them but also that someone is interested in their intellectual development and their long-term growth and development. Increasingly however, more youth, particularly those in urban districts across the country are unhappy with schools because they are often divorced of personal connections to their own lives and limit how they can participate. It is important to think about new constructions of classrooms where youth are positioned as the cultural producers they are everywhere else in the world.

## APPENDIX

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Students**

*\*\*Students will be asked a subset of these questions*

**Framing:** I'm going to ask you several questions some of which we have discussed and others that we haven't discussed. My goal is to learn a little more about you as a person, about your educational and professional aspirations, about your perceptions about school overall and about this school in particular and about the impact of your participation in the youth-led spaces.

#### **Family and Community**

1. Tell me about your family.
2. What are your family's expectations for you in terms of career or schooling?
3. Many students talk about how they want to be different than other kids in their neighborhood or even members of their own family. Do you connect with this idea?

#### **Hobbies, Passions, Background**

1. What are your hobbies and interests outside of school?
2. Tell me about your favorite books, magazines, blogs, etc. (Genre? Topics?)
3. When and what do you write?
4. What kinds of things do you enjoy doing online?
5. What is a dream you have?

#### **School and Community**

1. Why do you come to school everyday?
2. How could school support your dreams? How does it not?
3. Can you tell me how (or if) you have changed as a student since middle school? Since elementary school? What changed & why?
4. What has been your proudest moment academically?
5. What has been a challenging or frustrating moment in school?
6. What do you think matters most in having a supportive school?

#### **Youth-Led Spaces**

1. Tell me about your work with (youth-led space).
2. What was the purpose of \_\_\_?
3. Why did you choose to participate?
4. What was your role?
5. Describe the challenges of this type of work. (e.g. being with peers, playing)
6. What were one or two favorite moments from last year in \_\_\_? Why?

7. What was the most frustrating moment?
8. What was your proudest moment?

## **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Key Educators**

*\*\*Participants will be asked a subset of these questions*

### **Philosophy of Teaching and Learning**

1. Can you tell me why you decided to embark on the journey of designing and leading a new school?
2. What is your ultimate vision for the school? (or even a student?)
  - a. What do classrooms look and feel like in this vision?
3. How do you see your role as principal?
4. What are some of the most pressing challenges in trying to achieve your vision?

### **Pedagogies**

1. What is the relationship between student-centered/ online learning and the maker/design ethos in the lab spaces? Why are these not at odds with each other?
2. Where are students academically when they arrive?
  - a. What are the greatest areas of need?
    - i. Literacy, numeracy, learning to learn
3. How do you feel about the last few weeks of school?
  - a. Are students responding to the model the way he expected?
  - b. How and where is the learning happening?
  - c. Did the needle move at all from last year?

### **School Community**

1. What are some of the facets of this school community that you think contribute to the school's mission?
2. What aspects of the school community would you like to change or improve?
  - a. What challenges or barriers are there to fulfilling your vision for the school?
  - b. What opportunities are available?
3. Can you tell me how you interpret the school motto, "Love, Dream, Do?"
4. What role do you believe students are playing in developing the school community?
5. What role do you believe teachers play in developing the school community?

### **Nurturing Student Leaders**

1. What do you think are the conditions that kids need to become leaders?
  - a. Ask about BB this year... what he believes happened
  - b. About dance team
  - c. Other initiatives
2. How did you originally envision students being involved in the school's design?
3. What impact do you believe the Future Project is having on students?

### **Students as Literacy Learners**

1. What are the most pressing pedagogical challenges from your standpoint?
  - a. Ask about literacy challenges

- b. Ask about numeracy
  - c. Ask about learning to learn
- 2. How do you feel about the idea that classrooms are places where teachers can create common conversations? Is that an arcane idea?

## Transcription Conventions

:	<u>Colon(s)</u> : Extended or stretched sound, syllable, or word.
<u>          </u>	<u>Underlining</u> : Vocalic emphasis.
(.)	<u>Micropause</u> : Brief pause of less than (0.2).
(1.2)	<u>Timed Pause</u> : Intervals occurring within and between same or different speaker's utterance.
(( ))	<u>Double Parentheses</u> : Scenic details.
( )	<u>Single Parentheses</u> : Transcriptionist doubt.
.	<u>Period</u> : Falling vocal pitch.
?	<u>Question Marks</u> : Rising vocal pitch.
↑ ↓	<u>Arrows</u> : Pitch resets; marked rising and falling shifts in intonation.
° °	<u>Degree Signs</u> : A passage of talk noticeably softer than surrounding talk.
=	<u>Equal Signs</u> : Latching of contiguous utterances, with no interval or overlap.
[ ]	<u>Brackets</u> : Speech overlap.
[[ ]]	<u>Double Brackets</u> : Simultaneous speech orientations to prior turn.
!	<u>Exclamation Points</u> : Animated speech tone.
-	<u>Hyphens</u> : Halting, abrupt cut off of sound or word.
> <	<u>Less Than/Greater Than Signs</u> : Portions of an utterance delivered at a pace noticeably quicker than surrounding talk.
OKAY	<u>CAPS</u> : Extreme loudness compared with surrounding talk.
hhh	<u>.hhh H's</u> : Audible outbreaths, possibly laughter. The more H's, the longer the aspiration. Aspirations with periods indicate audible inbreaths (e.g., .hhh). H's within (e.g., ye(hh)s) parentheses mark within-speech aspirations, possible laughter.
pt	<u>Lip Smack</u> : Often preceding an inbreath.
hah heh hoh	<u>Laugh Syllable</u> : Relative closed or open position of laughter
\$	<u>Smile Voice</u> : Laughing/chuckling talk between markers.

## REFERENCES

- Alvermann, D. E. (2008). Why bother theorizing adolescents' online literacies for classroom practice and research? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(1), pp. 8-19.
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Revised edition. London: Verso.
- Anderson, J. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.
- Anderson, C. (2012). *Makers: the new industrial revolution*. New York: Random House.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (2000). Literacy Practices. In Barton, D., Hamilton, & Ivanic, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Bezemer, J. & Kress, G. (2008). Writing in Multimodal Texts A Social Semiotic Account of Designs for Learning. *Written Communications*, 25(2), pp. 166-195.
- Bezemer, J. & Jewitt, C. (2010). Multimodal Analysis: Key Issues In Litossoeliti, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Research Methods in Linguistics*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group
- Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blikstein, P. (2013). Digital Fabrication and 'Making' in Education: The Democratization of Invention. In J. Walter-Herrmann & C. Büching (Eds.), *FabLabs: Of Machines, Makers and Inventors*. Bielefeld: Transcript Publishers.
- Brahms, L. & Werner, J. (2013). Designing Makerspaces for Family Learning in Museums and Science Centers. In Honey, M., & Kanter, D. (2013). *Design. Make. Play. Growing the Next Generation of Stem Innovators*. New York: Routledge.
- boyd, d.. (2008). Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. *MacArthur foundation series on digital learning—Youth, identity, and digital media volume*, 119-142.
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bucholtz, M. (2002). Youth and cultural practice. *Annual review of anthropology*, 31(1),



525-552.

- Cammarota, J. (2011). From hopelessness to hope: Social justice pedagogy in Urban Education and Youth Development. *Urban Education, 46*(4), 828-844.
- Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. New York: Routledge.
- Carter, A., & O'Shea, J. (Eds.). (2010). *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Chavez, V. & Soep, E. (2005). Youth Radio and the Pedagogy of Collegiality. *Harvard Educational Review, 75*(4). 409-434.
- Clifford, J. & Marcus, G.E. (1986). *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Collins, A., & Halverson, R. (2009). *Rethinking education in the age of technology: The Digital Revolution and Schooling in America*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. South Yarra, Victoria: Macmillan.
- Csordas, T. J. (2002). *Body/Meaning/Healing. Contemporary Anthropology of Religion*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cuban, L. (2013). *Inside the Black Box of Classroom Practice: Change without Reform in American Education*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Denvir, D. (September, 24, 2014). How to Destroy a Public-School System. The Nation. Retrieved from: <http://www.thenation.com/article/181754/how-destroy-public-school-system?page=0,2>
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience in Education*. New York: Kappa Delta Pi.
- Dougherty, D. (2012). The Maker Movement. *Innovations, 7*(3), 11-14.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). Writing ethnographic fieldnotes.

University of Chicago Press.

- Ferguson, A. A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. USA: University of Michigan Press.
- Gadsden, V. L., Smith, R. R., & Jordan, W. J. (1996). The Promise of Desegregation Tendering Expectation and Reality in Achieving Quality Schooling. *Urban Education*, 31(4), 381-402.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of research in education*, 25, 99-125. Chicago.
- Gee, J. P. (2005). Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces. 214-232. In Barton, D., & Tusting, K. (Eds.). *Beyond communities of practice: Language power and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green, J. & Bloome, D. (1996). Ethnography and ethnographers of and in education: A situated perspective. In Flood, J., Heath, S. B., & Lapp, D. (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts*. New York: Macmillan Publishers, pp. 181-202
- Grimshaw, A. (2001). *The Ethnographer's Eye*. Boston: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Groenke, S. L., Haddix, M., Glenn, W. J., Kirkland, D. E., Price-Dennis, D., & Coleman-King, C. (2015). Disrupting and dismantling the dominant vision of youth of color. *English Journal*, 104(3), 35.
- Gutiérrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational researcher*, 32(5), 19-25.
- Haddix, M., & Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2012). Cultivating Digital and Popular Literacies as Empowering and Emancipatory Acts Among Urban Youth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 56(3), 189-192.
- Halverson, E. R., & Sheridan, K. (2014). The maker movement in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(4), 495-504.
- Hatch, M. (2014). *Maker Movement Manifesto*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, S. B., & Street, B. V. (2008). *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research*. Language & Literacy (NCRL). New York: Teachers College

Press.

- Herold, B. (2016, March 7). Facebook's Zuckerberg to Bet Big on Personalized Learning. Retrieved from: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/03/07/facebooks-zuckerberg-to-bet-big-on-personalized.html>
- Holland, H., Lachicotte, W. Jr., Skinner, D., Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Holland, D., & Lave, J. (2001). *History in Person*. Sante Fe: SAR Press.
- Hull, G., & Nelson, M., (2005). Locating the Semiotic Power of Multimodality. *Written Communication*. 22 (2), 224-261.
- Hull, G. A., & Katz, M. L. (2006). Crafting an agentive self: Case studies of digital storytelling. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 43-81.
- Hull, G., Zacher, J., & Hibbert, L. (2009). Youth, risk, and equity in a global world. *Review of Research in Education*, 33(1), 117-159.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban high school*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an Analytic Lens for Research in Education. *Review of Research in Education*, 25(1), 99-125.
- Gee, J. P. (2005). Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces. From the Age of Mythology to Today's Schools in Barton, D. & Tusting, K. (Eds). (2005). *Beyond Communities of Practice: Language Power and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gutiérrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural Ways of Learning: Individual traits or Repertoires of Practice. *Educational Researcher*, 32(5), 19-25.
- Honey, M., & Kanter, D. (2013). *Design. Make. Play. Growing the Next Generation of Stem Innovators*. New York: Routledge.
- HoSang, D. (2006). Beyond policy: Ideology, race and the reimagining of youth. *Beyond resistance: Youth activism and community change*, 3-20.
- Hull, G., & Nelson, M., (2005). Locating the Semiotic Power of Multimodality. *Written Communication*. 22 (2), 224-261.

- Hull, G. & Schultz, K. (2001). Literacy and Learning out of School: A Review of Theory and Research. *Review of Educational Research*. 71(4). 575-611.
- Ito, M., Baumer, S., Bittanti, M., boyd, d., Cody, R., Herr, B., Horst, H. A., Lange, P. G., Mahendran, D., Martinez, K., Pascoe, C. J., Perkel, D., Robinson, L., Sims, C., & Tripp, L. (2010). *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking out: Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., Schor, J., Sefton-Green, J., Watkins, S.G., (2013). *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.
- Jackson, J. L. (2004). An Ethnographic Filmflam: Giving Gifts, Doing Research, and Videotaping the Native Subject/Object. *American Anthropologist*. 106(1). 32-42.
- Jackson, J. L. Jr. (2013). *Thin Description*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jewitt, C. (2008). Multimodality and literacy in school classrooms. *Review of Research in Education*, 32(1), 241-267.
- Kafai, Y. B. (2006). Playing and making games for learning: Instructionist and constructionist perspectives for game studies. *Games and culture*, 1(1), 36-40.
- Kafai, Y. B., & Peppler, K. A. (2011). Youth, Technology, and DIY Developing Participatory Competencies in Creative Media Production. *Review of Research in Education*, 35(1), 89-119.
- Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (2012). Digital media shapes youth participation in politics. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94(3), 52-56.
- Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2008). Remix: The art and craft of endless hybridization. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(1), 22-33.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown.
- Kress, G. & Street, B. (2006). 'Multi-Modality and Literacy Practices' Foreword to *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of Practice*. Edited by Pahl, K., Rowsell, J., *Multilingual Matters: Clevedon* pp vii-x.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47.
- Lange, Patricia, G., & Ito, Mizuko. (2010). Creative Production. In Ito, M., Baumer, S.,

- Bittanti, M., boyd, d., Cody, R., Herr, B., Horst, H. A., Lange, P. G., Mahendran, D., Martinez, K., Pascoe, C. J., Perkel, D., Robinson, L., Sims, C., & Tripp, L. (p. 244-293). *Hanging out, messing around, geeking out: Living and learning with new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2011). *New Literacies*. United Kingdom: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Lave, J. (1991). Situating learning in communities of practice. *Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition*, 2, 63-82.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lesko, N. (2012). *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Levinson, B. A., & Holland, D. (1996). *The cultural production of the educated person: Critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Maira, S. (2014). Youth. In Burgett, B. & Hendler, G. (Eds.), (2014). *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition* (p. 245-248). New York: NYU Press.
- Maira, S. & Soep, E. (2013). *Youthscapes, the National, the Global*. Philadelphia: Universtiy of Pennsylvania Press.
- Malinowski, B. (1950). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge.
- McDermott, R., & Varenne, H. (1999). Adam, Adam, and Adam: The Cultural Construction of Learning Disability. In H. Varenne & R. McDermott (eds.), *Successful Failure* (pp. 25-44). Boulder: Westview Press.
- McDermott, R., & Varenne, H. (1999). *Successful failure*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Moje, E. B. (2000). " To Be Part of the Story": The Literacy Practices of Gangsta Adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 102(3), 651-690.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- New London Group. (1996). A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92.

- Nieto, S. (1999). *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*. Multicultural Education Series. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noguera, P. A. (2003). *The Trouble with Black Boys: : The Role and Influence of Environmental and Cultural Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males*. *Urban Education*, 38(4), 431-459.
- Papert, S. (1980). *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas*. New York: Basic Books.
- Peppler, K. A., & Kafai, Y. B. (2007). From SuperGoo to scratch: Exploring creative digital media production in informal learning. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 32(2), 149-166.
- Petrich, M., Wilkinson, K. and, Bevan, B. (2013). It Looks Like Fun, But Are They Learning? In Honey, M., & Kanter, D. (2013). *Design. Make. Play. Growing the Next Generation of Stem Innovators*. New York: Routledge.
- Reardon, S. F. (2013). The widening income achievement gap. *Educational Leadership*, 70(8), 10-16.
- Resnick, M., & Rosenbaum, E. (2013). Designing for Tinkerability. In Honey, M. & Kanter, D., *Design, Make, Play*. (p. 163-181). New York City: Routledge.
- Rony, F.T. (1996). *The Third Eye. Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rusk, N., Resnick, M., Cooke, S., (2009) In Kafai, Y. B., Peppler, K. A., & Chapman, R. N. (Eds.). (2009). *The Computer Clubhouse*. (p. 17-25). New York City: Teachers College Press.
- Sánchez, G. J. (1995). *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice* (Vol. 9). Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, J. C., & Street, B. V. (1991). The Schooling of Literacy. In D. Barton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Writing in the community* (pp. 106–131). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Street, B. (2003). What’s “new” in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), 77-91.
- Street, B.V. (2003). ‘What’s new in New Literacy Studies?’ *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 5(2)\_May 12 , 2003 <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/>

- Staker, H., & Horn, M. B. (2012). *Classifying K-12 Blended Learning*. Innosight Institute.
- Stornaiuolo, A., & Thomas, E. E. (2017). Disrupting Educational Inequalities Through Youth Digital Activism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 337-357.
- Suhr, C., & Willerslev, R. (2012). Can Film Show the Invisible?. *Current Anthropology*, 53(3), 282-301.
- Thomas, D. (2002). *Hacker culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Valenzuela, A. (2010). *Subtractive schooling: US-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Vasudevan, L. & Campano, G. (2009). The Social Production of Adolescent Risk and the Promise of Adolescent Literacies. *Review of Research in Education*, 33(1), 310-353.
- Vasudevan, L. & Wissman, K. (2011). Out-of-school literacy contexts. In D. Lapp & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching the English Language Arts* (3rd ed.) (pp. 97-103). New York: Routledge.
- Vasudevan, L., Schultz, K., & Bateman, J. (2010). Rethinking composing in a digital age: Authoring literate identities through multimodal storytelling. *Written communication*, 27(4), 442-468.
- Vossoughi, S., & Bevan, B. *Making and Tinkering: A Review of the Literature*.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Boston: President and Fellows of Harvard College.
- Watkins, S. C. (2009). *The Young & The Digital. What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wissman, K. K. (2007). "Making a way": Young women using literacy and language to resist the politics of silencing. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 51(4), 340-349.
- Wissman, K. K., Staples, J. M., Vasudevan, L., & Nichols, R. E. (2015). Cultivating Research Pedagogies with Adolescents: Created Spaces, Engaged Participation, and Embodied Inquiry. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 46(2), 186-197.
- Wortham, S. (2001). *Narratives in action: a strategy for research and analysis. Counseling and development series*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wortham, S.E.F. (2004). From Good Student to Outcast: The Emergence of a Classroom Identity. *Ethos*. 32(2). pp. 164-187.