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Voices from the Field:

The Other Side of Media Literacy Education: Possible Selves, Social Capital, and Positive Youth Development

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Figure 1: Two young men set up for a scene in Chester, PA in July 2009.

I walked several steps in front of Sean,¹ Michelle, and Ashley as we wound our way towards the familiar building that agreed to house us while we edit movies. Michelle checked for text messages while Ashley joked with Sean about college plans. Since Sean is a senior, juniors Michelle and Ashley complained that he would be leaving them in a year. They talked of plans for Michelle to catch up with Sean at Clark Atlanta University once she graduates, and Ashley complained that she doesn't want to go to Clark. With all of the talk of colleges and supportive comments

of making it to Clark, these teens laughed and linked arms, drawing attention from the few others on the walk that morning. Just over a year earlier, I had first met Sean, Michelle, and Ashley when they came to a film production summer program I ran for six weeks. At first they were all quiet. However, in the year that passed since that time, Sean, Michelle, and Ashley became close friends who support and encourage one another.

The friendship between Sean, Michelle, and Ashley is an important source of support, and it is a side of media literacy education that often goes overlooked. As much focus as there is on critical thinking and technical skills gained through media education, there is another essential and influential aspect of these programs: positive youth development. For many media education programs, it is simply assumed that the goals of learning cooperation, building leadership, and developing a community of support will be accomplished. In looking at media literacy education as a critical part of education for today's youth, it is also important to highlight the other side of these programs, demonstrating the many social benefits they offer in addition to their skill development. To draw attention to this quieter side of media literacy education, this article focuses on both the individual growth and the social supports that can be developed in these programs. Specifically, it draws from research conducted in the summer of 2009 during a six-week film production program, the [Chester Voices for Change](#) (VFC) Summer Institute. Based in Chester, Pennsylvania, the Summer Institute worked with ten local teens, aged 12-18, training them in film production and providing them with part-time internships at local newspapers or media-related businesses.

¹ Names of participants have been changed.



Figure 2: Chester teens get used to the equipment in July 2009.

Background

It is important to begin by providing several key definitions, the context, and the methodology for my research, each of which are included below in tables. The definitions have been informed by countless other scholars in earlier publications. Included here are the key definitions, as I understand them in relation to my research. The context for the research highlights main features of the 2009 program, and the methodology shows my techniques and the limitations for each aspect.

Development of Possible Selves

The VFC program supported exploration and development of possible selves through project experiences, the internship program, and opportunities

Table 1: Working Definitions for Research

Concept	Definition	Example from VFC
Positive youth development	process through which young people grow and learn to be adults, including assets like development of positive relationships with other peers and mentors and personal confidence and belief in oneself (Hamilton et al. 2004)	development of mentoring relationships with internship hosts
Group identity	sense of self that is created and reinforced by participation in and interactions with a particular collection of people (Ivanic 1998)	identification with sports team or church community
Social capital	personal assets in the form of societal systems developed through social interactions (Portes 1998)	supportive parents or mentors
Possible selves	ideas of self in the future, positive or negative, likely or unlikely (Markus and Nurius 1986)	careers in fields of media and communication
Salient others	people who are important enough to influence one's plans and decisions in life (Markus and Nurius 1986)	parents or coaches

Table 2: Program Overview

Basic Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. • 5 days a week • 6 weeks • 10 teens, ages 10-12
Program Aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main focus: producing a 45-min. film about teen issues • Local internships with media organizations, 6 hours/week • Field trip to Philadelphia media organizations • Help Youth Positively Excel (H.Y.P.E.) campaign: organized by VFC participants
Sponsors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swarthmore College Lang Opportunity Scholarship • Chester Police Activities League (PAL) • Team Making A Change (MAC)

Table 3: Research Methodology

Method	Goals	Limitations	Solutions
Overall: Participatory Action Research (PAR)	Conduct research while being able to identify meaningful ways to improve VFC		
Observation Notes: reflective, taken weekly about each participant and key events	Note relationship changes, personal and group development	Personal involvement in program	Shared notes and reflections with other people
Participant Interviews: individual, conducted before and after VFC	Understand participants' motivations and plans for the future		
Participant Surveys: one before and one after VFC	Measure students' level of interest and evaluation in the program	Only 9/10 participants completed both surveys	More limited use than the interviews
Parent/Guardian Surveys: after the program	Get a sense of parents' thoughts about VFC	Only 3/10 surveys completed fully	Limited use in research

for outside exploration of possible selves. There were three main kinds of possible self development in the program: the creation of new possible selves; the revision of existing possible selves; and the reaffirmation of possible selves. These are demonstrated by Ashley's development as an editor, Tony's decision to be a mentor to local youth, and Faith's determination to be a journalist.



Figure 3: The Chester teens quickly learned how long editing takes.

New Possible Selves

In her pre-program interview and survey, Ashley detailed her plans for the future. She explained her plans to attend Cornell University and, she said, "I kinda want to, like, be on television, kinda like *The View*." It was clear that Ashley had vivid possible selves as she joined the program. She knew where she

wanted to go to college, setting up her possible self as a college student. Furthermore, Ashley's possible selves stressed being on camera, as she mentioned both *The View* and *Oprah* during her interview. The mention of these shows indicated that Ashley wanted to be a confident and well-known woman. Ashley said she liked acting, and she was clearly ready and focused on being a performer.

Towards the end of the program, Ashley recognized her interest and skills in editing. She had not been particularly engaged with editing at the start of the program. However, this time around, Ashley loved editing, and it showed. Her passion came through as she burst out in anger when the computer malfunctioned and shouted in excitement when she finished her first scene. Ashley's dedication to the editing process was evident when she asked if she could come in over the weekend to help me edit the final piece (Field Notes, 14 August 2009). She wanted the final product to meet her standards of excellence, and she was ready to put in extra time to make that happen. For Ashley, the summer gave her experience in a new field, editing, and it was clear that she enjoyed it.

By the end of the summer, Ashley had created a new possible self that moved her behind the camera. In her post-program interview, Ashley said her plans for the future were basically still the same, but that she enjoyed editing a lot more. She explained that editing is "a lot of work, but it's worth it" (Ashley, Post-Program Interview, 17 August 2009). She also said that she found herself "paying attention to editing in [television] shows," explaining that she noticed scene composition

and thought about new techniques that she could try out in her own editing (Ashley, Post-Program Interview, 17 August 2009). These comments from Ashley point to a development of new possible selves for her as an editor and producer.

Ashley and I stayed in touch, and she volunteered in the summer of 2010 to work with other teen groups in Chester to make movies for them, developing her possible self throughout that time. She asked me what colleges had good film editing programs, and said, "I learned that I really like editing, and that's what I want to major in in college" (Field Notes, 30 August 2010). She also was the main one to brainstorm ideas about how to film and edit difficult scenes like a car crash (Field Notes, 16 September 2010), which demonstrated the development of her skills in editing because she was thinking about how to edit the scenes together before the filming ever began. Through her experiences with VFC, Ashley was able to develop, strengthen, and identify with a possible self that started when she first started to edit film.

Revised Possible Selves

In his pre-program interview, Tony explained that he wanted to be a graphic designer, a music producer, and an entrepreneur. He said he had seen entrepreneurs in Chester and thought they seemed nice and that they gained a lot of experience from having their own businesses (Tony, Pre-Program Interview, 1 July 2009). His possible selves were strong and clear in his own mind, and he was ready to work towards those dreams.

Throughout the summer Tony developed his own graphic design business, and his internship allowed him to work with a local graphic designer who designed and printed his products. By the end of the summer, Tony had strengthened and revised his possible self as a graphic designer and entrepreneur. In his post-program interview, he described how he still wanted to be a graphic designer with his own business, but he also recognized his desire to have his own computer and printer. He said he wanted to "cut out the middle man," which would save him money as an entrepreneur (Tony, Post-Program Interview, 19 August 2009).

Tony had also added a new part to his future plans: he had plans to hire local neighborhood kids by developing a mentor program in his business. He explained that the program would start with unpaid training, just getting the kids to learn and understand the programs and process of his business. Then, once

the kids were good and had mastered some of the skills, Tony would hire them for his company (Tony, Post-Program Interview, 19 August 2009). This new part of his plan indicated that his intern experience had a strong influence, both in showing him about managing a business and in helping him to understand the importance of role models during adolescence. Now, Tony had added something to his possible self: being a mentor to neighborhood kids.

Reaffirmed Possible Selves

Faith came to the program knowing that she wanted to be a journalist, and she knew that VFC would help her to gain experience in reaching that dream. During the summer, Faith learned a lot more about her possible self as a journalist, and she reaffirmed her plans to make that dream a reality. Through the internship program, Faith worked for a local newspaper, which gave her a chance to try out her possible self and publish a two-page feature article. In addition, on our field trip to Philadelphia, we visited *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and Faith seemed to enjoy imagining herself as a journalist there. Through these experiences Faith's possible self as a journalist became even stronger over the course of the summer. She experienced and practiced her possible self. In presenting her possible self, Faith had salient others reaffirm it as a likely and positive future. These external sources of affirmation and possibilities for exploration helped Faith to see herself as a journalist. Finally, in the spring of 2010, it was clear that Faith was making moves to ensure that her possible self of a journalist would become a reality. I received an excited and proud email from Faith's mother explaining that they had just visited the University of Richmond, which was Faith's "dream college." Faith's mother went on to say that the chair of the journalism department met with Faith and:

He asked her had she ever worked in journalism or written an article, and thanks to the VFC and the Chester Spirit [Faith's internship host], we already had her portfolio with us for them to review; she had her FRONT PAGE article on the South Africa trip, and she pulled out the newspaper, and he was so impressed he began to ask her a ton of questions... which she responded to with such substance. (Email message to author, 19 April 2010).

Now a senior, Faith is applying to colleges and waiting for decisions, but it is clear that she is also working hard to follow her reaffirmed possible self as a journalist.



Figure 4: Part of the process is practicing being on camera, behind the camera, and managing sound equipment.

Possible Selves & Youth Development

These three different paths of possible self development are important parts of positive youth development. By giving adolescents the opportunities to try new activities, gain support from peers, and find new mentors to help guide them, youth media programs are able to provide several main assets that are part of positive youth development. Specifically, this helps build the “connectedness,” “integration,” “attachment,” “confidence,” and “planfulness” identified as assets that facilitate positive youth development by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (in Hamilton et al. 2004, 4). Connecting teens to a community of support and helping them figure out what they must do to achieve their possible selves allows participants to gain confidence, feel connected, and plan their futures. These attributes are common in media literacy education programs because all programs allow teens to try out new possible identities and roles through production, while also building a community of peers and adult mentors.

Social Support & Capital

Throughout the 2009 Summer Institute, the participants grew closer and developed friendships. Membership in the VFC group generally provided participants with new opportunities to develop social capital in the forms of in-group protection, positive group association, and positive peer pressure. There

was a distinct element of in-group identification amongst members and within the wider community. This in-group identification led to a sort of protection in which participants were ready and willing to defend their fellow group members. Additionally, participants changed and developed through positive group association because they came to understand their role within the community. Positive peer pressure within the group also pushed participants to grow as their fellow peers influenced them through both comparison to salient others and through direct comments about behavior and work ethic. These elements of group membership served as sources of social capital for the VFC participants, which further supported their positive youth development.



Figure 5: Another key aspect of the program was making friends, like the two seen here with a little brother at our final celebration in August 2009

In-Group Protection

One clear example of in-group protection occurred during our field trip to Philadelphia. We were walking through downtown to catch the train when Sean’s protection for his group mates kicked in. During the walk to Suburban Station, three teenage boys ended up following our group for about two blocks and

talking to the girls. The Philadelphia boys said things like, “You’re the most beautiful thing to ever walk past that McDonalds.” The girls were somewhat flattered and liked the attention, but they were also shocked by the terrible attempts at pick-up lines and the persistence of the boys. On the other hand, the boys in the program got a bit angrier as it was happening. Jamal and Tony started walking faster, saying that the Philly boys must be crazy to keep following. Conversely, Sean walked with the girls for a while, and he then walked with me for a bit as well. As we walked together, he told me that if any of the Philly boys had laid one finger on any of the girls in the program, he would have “gone off” in anger (Field Notes, 24 July 2009). Sean had a strong sense of need to protect the girls in the program.

This example shows the in-group protection that evolved throughout the summer. Sean made several decisions that indicated his desire and need to protect the girls in the group. First, he stayed and walked with girls for a period of time, indicating that he wanted to be in the immediate area in case anything happened to the girls. Second, he moved to walk with me. This was just after one of the boys had started to say something to me, and it showed that Sean felt a need to protect me as well. Finally, in our conversation, Sean shared that he was ready to “go off” if any of the Philadelphia boys tried to do anything inappropriate. This showed his desire to protect in several ways: expressing his willingness to protect and sharing those thoughts and concerns with an authority figure. Since I was the person in charge, Sean recognized that I was someone to tell about his thoughts, showing his desire to protect because he wanted to be sure that he would have the appropriate kinds of support from an authority if he were to take action.



Figure 6: Friendships, relationships, and support are key parts of the youth development that occur in most MLE programs.

Although few other examples were as vivid as Sean’s actions in Philadelphia, the group did show signs of providing and understanding this new form of social capital they had developed amongst themselves. There was a common sense of verbal support and protection throughout the process of creating the film. The teens would jump in to support each other or elaborate on ideas during discussions, demonstrating both a sense of protection in the group as well as the bonds of friendship that had sparked over the summer.

Throughout the summer, the VFC group also began to establish itself within the community. Keith, one of my community partners, set up several opportunities for the group to work at citywide events, positioning the group as a collection of positive youth working for change in the city. By arranging meetings between the participants and several local community members, Keith introduced the group to key leaders and pushed them to be role models for other teens in the area. These experiences established the VFC participants as a group that was positively associated with new opportunities for youth in the city.

Although not all of the participants fully accepted their role as a young leader, Michelle was one of the students who was deeply affected by the positive group association. In one particular incident, Michelle came to understand that she was representing a group and she changed her behavior as a result. The incident happened at the citywide teen party, which was also our first filming event. Michelle later explained what happened to the rest of the group during a discussion about the party and what could have been improved. She said that Keith had pulled her aside and asked her not to dance so provocatively at a party that was run by the city of Chester. Michelle said that she had not thought she was doing anything wrong; she was simply dancing with a boy at the party. However, she told the group that after Keith talked to her, she actually stopped to think about the messages she was sending and the image she was presenting. After she thought about it all, she decided to stop dancing like that because she felt that it was not the way for her to present herself as a young leader in the community (Field Notes, 31 July 2009).

This particular incident is one illustration of how the positive group association can affect the teens’ decisions. For Michelle, once she recognized that she was representing more than just a teenager having fun, she changed her behavior. Michelle came to see that her group association had to be maintained in a positive

manner. By changing her actions, Michelle showed both personal growth and one of the effects of this kind of positive group association: behaving according to the outside expectations for a role. Adults, like Keith, who are salient others and mentors, expected Michelle to represent a good, positive youth leader, and she was willing to change to satisfy those expectations.



Figure 6: One Chester teen checks the sound as the other prepares for an interview.

Positive Peer Pressure

In addition to this positive group association, the participants also exerted immediate pressure on the other participants to behave well and make good decisions. One example came from Ashley when the group was editing the film in early August. People came back from lunch, and lots of participants were yelling and arguing. Ashley had come back earlier, wanting to continue editing her scene, and she sat with her headphones on, clicking away as the rowdy group entered the room. At one point, Ashley sarcastically yelled to the group, “Come on guys! We’re supposed to be voices for change! Why are we always arguing?!” (Field Notes, 7 August 2010). Her comment made her and the rest of the group laugh and relax, ending the previous argument with her sarcasm, but it still showed

that something had clicked for Ashley. Even though she said it sarcastically, she did know that the group members should be role models, finding ways to work things out. The group settled down to editing and got back on track after laughing with Ashley, but it was one instance in which positive peer pressure helped the group refocus and be productive.

Social Capital & Youth Development

These examples highlighted how VFC participants gained new forms of social capital by becoming part of the group. These benefits supported their overall development while also illustrating key characteristics of media literacy education programs that encourage this kind of growth. As with the possible self development, group membership and the resulting forms of social capital allowed for the teens to feel connected, integrated, and attached to one another and to the program as a whole. These characteristics help to reinforce the assets needed for positive social development according to the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (in Hamilton et al. 2004). Furthermore, these relationships can continue to offer the support and encouragement, as seen with Sean, Ashley, and Michelle talking about their plans for college. Although most participants felt that they were a part of the group, it is important to note that Olivia, the lone 12-year-old in the program, often felt isolated from and rejected by the older teens. This meant that she did not receive all the benefits of group identification, but she did still recognize herself as a member of VFC, and she was able to connect more strongly with the instructors and other adult mentors involved with the program.

Youth Development in Media Literacy Education

This study found that youth involved in the VFC media production program were able to develop possible selves and establish a strong sense of group identity, which created new sources of social capital for the participants. Both of these aspects of the program help encourage positive youth development; specifically, they strongly support the assets connected to positive social development, which revolve around feeling connected to and supported by a community. Possible self development also clearly supports assets that lead to positive psychological and emotional development because they encourage growth in personal confidence, planning for the future, and development of a “coherent and positive personal and social identity”

(National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, in Hamilton et al. 2004, 4). These findings are likely similar to many media literacy education programs because they are drawn from many of the core principles and teaching methodologies that inform these kinds of programs and are focused on using student experiences and creating experiential learning environments with hands-on practice. As such, media literacy education must not only examine these kinds of program outcomes, but also emphasize and share the findings with a larger audience to gather support for increased availability of these programs. Further research is needed to examine the extent to which these findings apply to other youth populations and to figure out the specific aspects of media literacy education that encourage and allow for this kind of development. Nonetheless by creating and supporting friendships like that between Sean, Ashley, and Michelle, it is clear that youth media programs have another dimension: they go beyond skill enhancement to build communities and support adolescents on the path to positive youth development.

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Figure 7: Positive youth development usually accompanies youth media production.