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Professional Resource:

Arts, Media, and Justice: Multimodal Explorations With Youth (2013)

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Arts, Media, and Justice: Multimodal Explorations with Youth, by Lalitha Vasudevan and TiffanyDeJaynes (2013). Peter Lang Publishing: New York, NY.

Arts, Media and Justice: Multimodal Explorations with Youth explores the experiences of marginalized, court-involved youth in two New York City alternative to incarceration programs through delicately honest and diverse narratives written by invested scholars and practitioners. Each chapter gives insight on how the adolescents explore their sense of self and examine their relations with others through projects engaging them with multiple media texts and modes of expression.

While the book is a pleasurable read that easily captivates its reader, the content has much to offer the field of media literacy. It is particularly important because it sheds light on court-involved youths' perspectives; addresses how media and art-based programs can help court-involved youth; highlights components of the creative process that can translate to other educational contexts; and recognizes the importance of informal learning spaces.

The term court-involved youth refers to young people who are caught up in institutionally arranged lives and going through unsettled negotiations between the systems of law, education, and child welfare. With nearly 500,000 youth being placed in detention centers in the United States each year, this population cannot be ignored (Holman and Ziedenberg 2006, as cited in Vasudevan and DeJaynes 2013). Questions on why so many youth become entangled in such a system and what happens to them once they are court-involved need to be addressed.

While there has been research on how youth become entangled with the justice system through

zero tolerance policies and school-to-prison pipelines, this book dares to unravel what happens once they are involved with the court. What education do adolescents receive once they've been incarcerated or put in other court induced programs and where do they end up? The unfortunate reality is that those who become court involved as a result of their arrest often experience many consequences such as unemployment, economic hardship, discrimination, and interrupted access to education. The programs described aim to help break the vicious cycle these youth face through media and art-based programs.

The modalities covered in the book include creative writing, video production, photography, theater, and museum art observation. As Kristine Rodriguez Kerr observes, "For court involved youth, opportunities and programs that allow them to work towards understanding self, coming to terms with past actions and imagining possible futures outside of the justice system are critical" (28). Examples of how art, expression, and the creative process help adolescents reach points of discovery and reinvention are given in numerous ways throughout the chapters.

Students are encouraged to write fictional pieces in the creative writing program, however many still draw upon their life experiences. The secure explorations of their life's events allow them to reflect more deeply on past occurrences and craft new narrative possibilities. In the photography programs, the youth become aware of their perspectives by looking through the lens of a camera. While taking photos of people, places, and items around them, they become conscious of how they are situated in their surroundings. They are able to break away from the selves they feel pressured to portray in their everyday lives when they act in the theater program. Whether they are creating stories,

photos, videos or plays the youth begin to present their lives creatively to others and develop their identities as artists, while making themselves heard, seen and known to their audience.

The book focuses on small learning moments situated within each program rather than the varying larger final products. By shifting attention to minute pedagogical moments, the authors are able to emphasize the creative process in which the students engage. Such a creative process offers benefits to learning in educational settings that extend beyond the programs described.

For instance, the book portrays the arts as a site of engagement, which reiterates the importance of focusing on the process rather than the product. The text illustrates that this pedagogical approach puts student exploration and inquiry at the forefront of learning. This results in multiple approaches to one common project and diverse results that reveal unique student interests and strengths. For example, while students worked on one video project together, the production process allowed for multiple points of entry. Some students preferred to act while others felt more comfortable running the camera or directing. They were able to contribute to the video through their specific strengths while also exploring new skills within the fluid role structure.

The authors do not hide the challenges involved with their work, but instead reflect on obstacles they face as integral parts of the creative process. By doing so, they encourage educators to embrace the messy, improvisational and playful components of learning. They particularly describe how integral these pieces are when composing multimodal texts with youth. Multimodality, which consists of communication across various media formats, genres and modes of expression, is presented in this book as a close partner to the arts, particularly when it comes to understanding the meaning-making practices of adolescents. Taking a playful, spontaneous approach to the meaning making process is important because it helps both the instructor and the students come to terms with the unknown and embrace their vulnerabilities. By writing primarily about the midst of their work, the authors reiterate the notion that there are no easily digestible answers or assurances for the students, but a positive focus on the present may help prepare for the future.

The participant researchers' bold instructional stance is informed by their reflective practices and

willingness to expose themselves to their students. One contributor to the book, who is an alumnus of one of the programs described, wrote about how he strived to have the participants see him as staff, but came to realize putting up boundaries did not work well because it prevented the development of positive relationships. The photography instructors wrote about moments where both the students and themselves shared personal stories initiated by photographs the students took. Building such rapport helped create open-ended dialogue around the students' work and their process in creating it. By taking their students seriously as cultural producers, the instructors helped empower the youth to feel capable of meaningful contribution. Beyond helping their students, the instructors also opened up to learning from their pupils, which is evident amongst their written reflections.

While the programs described in this book offer examples of engaged learning environments that have remarkable implications for the participants involved, such scenarios are unfortunately not present in all educational contexts. While much research and work is focused on making improvements in formal education sites like public schools, this book stresses the importance of informal learning spaces.

In the first chapter of the book, Vasudevan and DeJaynes write, "Within formal sites of education, like schools, possibility is too quickly translated into 'potential' for which the acceptable modes of output fall within a narrow range. More focused on academic achievement than the cultivation of self, schools have become largely places where engagement with the arts is endangered" (3). Within such institutionally sanctioned spaces, room for play has significantly dwindled and freedom to explore modes of expression is restricted. How are students wrapped in court-involved negotiations and consequences supposed to out-step their given identities and imagine hopeful futures when they are only viewed a certain way? "The arts have the ability to inspire the as yet uninspired or render visible the unseen" (3). If a lack of art programs in school renders these youth to be uninspired and unseen then such opportunities should be fostered in informal learning environments such as those described within this book.

Arts, Media and Justice: Multimodal Explorations with Youth is a diverse collection of artfully written pieces from an array of contributors, and it keeps its reader reflecting on the role of art in

education well after reading. By focusing on smaller educational moments within the programs, the book highlights pieces of the creative process that can help enhance learning in other educational contexts while acknowledging the importance of informal learning spaces. As Eric Fernandez writes, “The arts enable youth to confront and better understand their realities and build better futures. We all need the time and will to express ourselves. We must come together as a people and understand that everyone has his or her own story, which is entitled to be heard” (87). The book offers a way to tell these stories, often underrepresented in media literacy literature, and gives insight on how media and art can make a difference in understanding the power of new approaches to work with court-involved youth.

References

- Holman, B. and J. Ziedenberg. *The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2006.
- Vasudevan, L., and D. DeJaynes. *Arts, Media and Justice: Multimodal Explorations With Youth*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2013.