

## **“Spaces of action: Teaching critical literacy for community empowerment in the age of neoliberalism**

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*ABSTRACT: The low educational achievement of our poorest youth is fundamentally a political problem. Against a background of interconnected gaps in educational achievement, health and wealth, and political participation, this paper calls for a liberatory educational praxis that disrupts these reinforcing inequalities. This is a critical literacy grounded in situated learning practices in what we call public “spaces of action”, which may be in school or community settings. Engaging students in community inquiries into the social problems wrought by neoliberal policies, this expanded notion of a critical literacy empowers them with greater confidence and efficacy to break through cultures of silence and form new identities as agents of self-representation and change. We discuss two cases of apprenticeship-like youth media programs that promote civic engagement in communities with virtually identical high poverty and low high school graduation rates: one rural and southern (the Appalachian Media Institute in Kentucky) and one urban and northeastern (the Educational Video Center in New York). Through the process of counter narrative, documentary storytelling and bearing witness to the social problems in their neighbourhoods, students partner with community activists, apply critical literacies, and develop agentive identities as documentary journalists, media artists, and critical citizens affirming their voice and place in their community in solidarity with others struggling for more humane living conditions.*

*KEYWORDS: Critical literacy, communities of practice, documentary, identity formation, media education, neoliberalism, situated learning, voice.*

### **INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR LIBERATORY POLITICAL LITERACY AS EDUCATIONAL PRAXIS**

“The alphabet is an abolitionist. If you would keep a people enslaved, refuse to teach them to read” (Education in the Southern States, 1867). Those who criminalised teaching slaves to read until the 1860s, and those who used literacy tests (and terror) to prevent freed slaves and their descendants from voting until the 1960s, understood well the powerful links between literacy, freedom and political self-determination. This editorial was specifically criticising the systemic assault on both recently freed slaves and impoverished whites through the southern states’ minimal funding of the schools that served them, as opposed to the abundant resources they gave to academies serving the “children of the oligarchy”. As a barrier to literacy, this structural inequity and the underfunding of schools for the politically, economically, and socially disenfranchised was – and remains – a barrier to political action and political power. Because of the unique system of school financing in the United States, dependent on local property taxes, the great majority of students living in

impoverished communities attend “high-needs” under-resourced schools. The social-economic conditions of poverty have a tremendous impact on students’ health and social emotional wellbeing, as well as their literacy and academic performance. The dropout rate for students in the lowest 25% of family incomes is about five-and-one-half times greater than the dropout rate for students in the highest 25% of family incomes (United States Department of Education, 2012).

The web of interrelated neoliberal economic, political, social, and education policies that favour the wealthy and disempower the poor in the United States today appears normalised as the natural state of things, and overwhelming as if it were intractable. But inequality is not inevitable; it is historically constructed and always subject to change. What is needed, we argue, is a liberatory critical literacy – an educational praxis, grounded in local communities and encompassing broad-based, social justice concerns, that develops young people’s identities as empowered and democratic participants with agency and voice. By this we mean the building of a political literacy and efficacy needed to create public spaces of action in school and community settings, spaces that open new possibilities for more just and equitable opportunities and outcomes for our most marginalised children. There is a rich history of literacy-based community and youth activism for enfranchisement dating back to the 1950’s and ‘60’s Civil Rights-era Citizenship Schools and Freedom Schools, and even earlier (Carson, 1981; Cobb, 2011; Horton, 1990; Lynd, 1965). These activists well understood that there cannot be improved educational achievement without changing the economic and political conditions that shape them.

Building youth literacy in a way that engenders a sense of political efficacy breaks the cycles that reinforce inequalities, leading toward community activism for more equitable policy outcomes. Through the process, students develop a more agentive identity empowering their voices and their communities’ voices to change those conditions, and even transcend them. As the late philosopher Maxine Greene describes, we need public spaces of action that foster public engagement where students can attend to the critical and the imaginative, “to name the obstacles in the way of their shared becoming” (1988, pp. 126, 133) in order to imagine a realm beyond those obstacles, and to develop the capacity “to think about things as if they were otherwise” (2001, p. 65). This not only entails a change in students’ ways of seeing and thinking about the world, but a change in the kind of person they are – a change in their sense of identity.

As a youth media educator and a political scientist respectively, our focus in this article is on the ways in which communities and organisations have pushed back, finding the cracks in the system, the spaces of action and resistance and the language of media to speak up against and talk back to the seemingly hegemonic political rationality of neoliberalism. We discuss theories of critical literacy, identity, and communities of practice; examine the political and social contexts in which these youth live, learn, work, and grow; and then profile two youth media organisations that work with young people to develop their art, critical literacy, and activism. While the Appalachian Media Institute is based in the rural south and the Educational Video Center in the urban north, both are situated within school districts with virtually identical high poverty rates and low, high-school graduation rates. The conclusion discusses the importance and the challenges of engaging in this transformative

cultural and political work of teaching critical literacy and supporting identity formation.

### **CRITICAL LITERACY, COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE, AND IDENTITY**

An educational praxis that promotes public spaces of action encompasses practices that are rooted in socio-cultural learning theories and a moral philosophy that seeks to counter dominant neoliberal ideology by replacing market-driven values aimed at increasing private wealth with public communal and humanistic ones that focus on improving the public good. Much of the current literacy for social justice work in marginalised communities can be traced back to Freire's (1970) seminal critical literacy project in Brazil. Literacy, in a Freirian sense, is not just the act of reading and writing that develops students as agents within a larger culture, but that questions their socially and historically constructed power relations in the world (Shor, 1999), through active engagement, and affirmations of selfhood and solidarity with others. It teaches students how to critique dominant ideologies and political systems (Luke, 2014), to examine the "discursive practices that actively produce and sustain patterns of dominance and subordination in the wider society" (Locke & Cleary, 2011, p. 121), and supports them in using "language to exercise power to enhance everyday life" (Comber, 2010, p. 44). By definition, a praxis of critical literacy integrates action with critical analysis, and it is often a public action outside of the classroom. As Horton described the activist pedagogy of the American Civil Rights-era, Highlander Centre-inspired Citizenship Schools, "Along with becoming literate, they learned to organise, they learned to protest, they learned to demand their rights, because they also learned that you couldn't just read and write yourself into freedom" (1990, p. 104).

Critical literacy is also a learner-centered pedagogy that foregrounds students' lived experiences and community as texts for study, and develops students as agentic creators of new knowledge. Recognising that knowledge production is never value-neutral, critical literacy develops students as producers of what may be called counter-narrative texts that challenge those dominant stories that dismiss, misrepresent or devalue their experiences (Goodman, 2003; Rosario-Ramos & Johnson, 2014).

However critical literacy, like all learning, can best be understood within the particular cultural and social context in which it is practiced, rather than as an individual, decontextualised, psychological process. As Gee argues, "Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (1996, p. 41). We have observed these wider practices powerfully developed in apprentice-like environments (Halpern, 2008) that can be described as liminal or hybrid "third spaces" (Bhabha, 1994; Hull, Kenney, Marple, & Forsman-Schneider, 2006; White, 2009), two of which are discussed in the cases below. These apprenticeship environments engage students in project work where they "face open-ended problems and shifting variables...marked by real-world constraints" and that affords them "...plentiful opportunities for the trial and error, practice and experimentation that solidify emergent abilities" (Halpern, 2008, pp. 23, 21).

These public spaces of action combine creative production and community-based activism in "communities of practice", where learning is measured not simply by

changing cognition but rather as changing participation, practices, and evolving social relations (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Lave and Wenger describe it, a new learner gradually comes to participate in particular social practices by observing and working alongside “old timers”, and take on a social identity as a full member of the given community of practice. In a school-based or afterschool setting, students will try on and perform new identities that grow out of the ongoing social interactions exhibited by the group. So, learning in communities of practice occurs not only through changes in knowledge, practice and participation, but through changes in identity. Students are becoming different kinds of learners and different kinds of people (Gee, 2003).

There is no one model of liberatory pedagogy, but rather common practices in both school and out-of-school settings that connect learning to social change, and support the development of more agentic identities for learners as critically literate social activists. (Comber & Nixon, 2014; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Goodman, 2003, 2012; Hull, Kenney, Marple, & Forsman-Schneider, 2006; Rosario-Ramos & Johnson, 2014). Changes in participation and identity are not caused by any single occurrence, but through a series of reinforcing experiences, each of which grows authentically out of their project work and is made possible by expanding and scaffolded social interrelations with peers, teachers, family, and community members. In the cases of the youth documentary programs discussed below, students in school-based or afterschool settings are provided multiple opportunities to try on real-world professional identities as researchers, cinematographers, editors, composers, narrators, directors, and social critics as they collaboratively explore, plan, produce and publicly screen a story that critically addresses a social problem in their community.

Teachers guide this exploration of issues and roles, keeping in mind that they are often undertaking identity “repair work” (Gee, 2003) with students, many of whom have internalised student identities as “failures” and “problems” learned from being labeled as such in their prior years of schooling, or from their rural upbringing. This process of learning and identity formation engages students in observation, imitation, collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, practice and revision and public exhibition of work. Across this range of practices, they use the intellectual and technical tools in that new identity as apprentices of documentary production to think, speak, act and produce media artifacts. These may include texts such as research notes, storyboards, interview questions, edit plans, journal entries, and narration scripts. While instances of this learning and identity formation are visible along the way, such as when students are out “on shoots” in the role of camera operators or leading their peers in “rough cut” critiques performing as editors and directors, changes are most clearly reified when they stand before school and community audiences at their premiere screening. They are publicly acknowledged on stage, identified in the on-screen credits, accept applause, and engage in dialogue in that changed identity. That identity shift will look different for different students, but it most commonly grows with and around the creative and critical work they have produced, where students move from a place of silence or detachment to inhabit an active, questioning voice, addressing injustice through art and action.

Below are three practices that we would like to underscore – transformative moments within the broader sweep of the youth documentary making process. Working at the intersection of art, civic journalism, and activism, they make possible profound changes in students’ knowledge, participation and identity.

*Bearing witness*

The Freirian idea of “naming the world” (1970) is put into practice when students use cameras to document and bear witness to their own social and material conditions of poverty and marginalisation. This part of the documentary storytelling process is a challenging step that requires students to learn to defamiliarise the familiar, in the sense they are asked to stop and closely examine their everyday experiences that they take for granted and hardly notice anymore. That might be filming the abandoned buildings in the city blocks that make up their urban neighbourhood or the high incidence of cancer and lung disease in their mountain mining community. Since they are shining a light on hidden problems that are not typically the subject of discussion or study in school or in mainstream media, and for which they may feel shame, participating in this process of creating video dairies or self-referential documentary helps them break this silence. The personal nature of the subject matter being documented often requires the teacher to develop a culture of solidarity and empathy in the class, that acknowledges the difficulty in breaking silence and supports the students in this journey.

*Partnering with community activists*

Documenting one’s own conditions is not sufficient if the broader political context contributing to those conditions is not understood. While the world of politics is often perceived as distant from low-income students’ lives in both its legalistic language and policies, interviews with community activists and partnerships with their organisations can connect concrete individual problems of injustice to abstract systemic political issues of public concern, translating the elite discourse into more of a “vernacular” that can be used in community political dialogue (Coleman, Morrison, & Svennevig, 2008, p. 786; Goodman & Cocca, 2013). In this way, students learn that teachers are not the only sources of knowledge, and that knowledge is shared and co-constructed by all students and the community members they interview. These individuals and their organisations introduce the students to important new “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992), and can contextualise and provide additional perspectives to their story, and propose alternative solutions to the problems they face. In some cases, partners can access help from community legal and social services, and in other cases inform students and family about ongoing social justice campaigns where they can make their grievances heard, and hold public authorities accountable. These conversations provide scaffolds for youth to find the knowledge, confidence and language to question individuals and dominant institutions of power. Youth learn to identify with their communities and see the connections between learning, power and social justice. The stories of injustice that they capture in their documentaries can in turn serve as educational and organising tools for community partners.

*Imagining possible selves*

The final public exhibition of student work is a transformative moment that helps students, who may have feared their future selves due to perception of past failures in school and elsewhere, a moment that helps them develop a belief in their more positive “possible selves” (Oyserman, 1990). The imagining of more agentic possible selves happens gradually throughout the production process as students experience new ways of posing questions and telling stories. But it is most evident when they make their work public – when they present and engage in dialogue about their critical and creative work to family, school and community audiences. These

moments make visible for students and family the exchange value of their experience and the saleable media-related skills that the students have developed, and also publicly reify the student's new identity and future possibilities as artist and documentary filmmaker. However, this transaction between producer and audience also releases the use value in their work – the political and social meaning it carries for the well-being of the larger community, and often the particular community organisations and causes that were documented in their film. In this sense, the students' future possible self is as youth leader, working with a moral agency towards the greater good of their community.

In the next section, we explore two cases of critical literacy programs for youth that develop their identities through community documentary production, one rural and southern (the Appalachian Media Institute) and one urban and northeastern (the Educational Video Center, of which one of the authors is executive director). The authors based their research on publications by staff and documentaries produced by youth from both organisations. In addition, interviews were conducted with instructional staff of EVC and with leadership of the Appalachian Media Institute, who were also former AMI youth participants. Interviews with students of both organisations also informed this research. Finally, there was a close collegial working knowledge of AMI including inter-visitation and collaboration on projects dating back to its founding 26 years ago, and EVC's 30 years ago.

These two cases serve to illuminate the power and potential of public spaces of action with deep roots in the local culture and community respectively in central Appalachian region and New York City. They provide authentic images and stories of a counter-hegemonic praxis that brings a critical lens to the causes and consequences of neoliberal policies including exploitative land ownership, degraded environmental conditions, poor-quality housing, gentrification and public health. By creating and screening their own locally produced stories, youth in rural communities as well as in urban ones develop a greater connection and awareness that others are experiencing similar struggles, and through the process form more critically literate identities.

### **CASE 1: APPALACHIAN MEDIA INSTITUTE (AMI)**

The Appalachian Media Institute serves youth from the central Appalachian mountain region, primarily from southeastern Kentucky. Its mission is to lend a voice to rural Appalachian youth through peer-led media training and production. Established in 1988, it is a program of Appalshop, a larger cultural, educational and multimedia arts organization, whose mission is to develop effective ways of using media to address the complex issues facing central Appalachia. Appalshop was established in 1969 through federal War on Poverty workforce development funding, since Appalachian Kentucky has one of the greatest concentrations of poverty of any region in the country; roughly 17% of the residents live in poverty and youth are disproportionately affected. Appalachian youth grow up in communities with an average high-school completion rate of 68% and an average college completion rate of 7% (O'Doherty, Smith, Spangler, Williams, & Richards-Schuster, 2013, p. 4).

AMI's eight-week Summer Documentary Institute brings together between 6 and 12 youth each summer as paid interns, to learn the video production process in addition to how media affect public opinion and civic engagement. A second program, the

Media Lab, consists of two, 10-week after-school, media production programs (in the fall and spring semesters) where high-school students earn stipends using their media art to foster social issue activism in partnership with local community organisations. At least half the participants come from families whose annual income is less than \$22,000 and nearly all, if they attend college, are the first in their families to do so. The program serves diverse groups of youth, not just those predisposed to youth leadership and activism, including some valedictorians and some youth on parole and everything in between (Richards-Schuster & O'Doherty, 2012, pp. 79-80).

These young people create a fifteen-minute video documentary about three issues of most importance to their community, culminating in a public screening of these three videos. As a program of the larger organisation of Appalshop, the AMI youth become enculturated into its broader community of practice by observing and learning from its veteran filmmakers, screening classic films from its library to view counter-narrative models of Appalachian self-representation and the learn about the power of media for cultural activism. Over the years, AMI youth have created documentaries on a range of topics including domestic violence, oxycontin drug addiction, youth community activism, and the environmental damage of coal extraction. (B. Spangler [AMI Director], personal communication, November 14, 2013; Barrett, S., 2014). They often partner with community advocacy organisations such as the STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, and the Highlander Research and Education Center.

The wealth gap in Appalachia is evident in the contrast between the great richness of natural resources and those who own the multinational corporations that exploit them on the one hand, and the high unemployment and chronic poverty of those who live in the surrounding communities on the other. Harlan County, Kentucky, for example, has produced over one billion tons of coal in the past century, yet today is one of the poorest counties in the nation, as most coal jobs have been lost due to mechanisation and the transition from coal to natural gas-based economy (Atlas, 2013; A. Smith [Appalshop Institutional Development Director], personal communication, November 14, 2013). The political participation gap in the region is similarly linked to the economic power of the coal companies. Activists have identified the energy industries' control of the "region's infrastructure – its towns, stores, schools, doctors, churches, media, and local and state politicians" (O'Doherty et al., 2013, p. 4) and lack of community investment as intentionally designed "to separate Appalachian people from the opportunities and the tools necessary to participate in governing their communities..." (Atlas, 2013, p. 3).

The huge outmigration from the Appalachian region, particularly of the younger generation looking for work and college elsewhere, has led to the closure and consolidation of schools, and cuts in arts programs (A. Smith, personal communication, November 14, 2013). Appalachia is a place with a great narrative tradition, an oral culture of storytelling and traditional folktales, as well as a rich history of union organising in the coalfields (Atlas, 2013; Gaventa, 1980; Tyner, 1998). AMI has also made the celebration of local culture, and the call to stay home and make change there, an imperative of its work. As part of its self-described mission, AMI provides youth with an avenue to explore the traditions, history and issues of their communities and develops positive attachments to their communities, cultures and the region. It also aims to build the confidence levels and creative

capacity of Central Appalachian youth, to position them as initiators of dialogue and social action around crucial community issues, and to make rural voices heard by national audiences (see <http://www.appalshop.org/ami/programs/>). The following is drawn from two student documentaries that bear witness to local issues, one of which focuses on student identity and activism.

AMI supports its youth participants in developing identities as producers of counter-narratives that challenge the dominant, narrative and often-negative stereotypes of rural Appalachian people in the media. They come to express their deep affection for, and see value in their Appalachian community and heritage, and at the same time can pose critical questions about it. As one AMI student explained: “[F]or the longest time, I never really cared a lot about this place. It could blow off the map, and I wouldn’t care. And [in AMI, through the video-making process] I learned to see this place for what it really is. It’s my home” (in Richards-Schuster & O’Doherty, 2012, p. 83). Natasha, a former AMI student and current AMI trainer, stated:

I was taught...something...was wrong with me because I was from eastern Kentucky. I was taught I couldn’t be as good as anyone else....So the program empowered me, helped me learn that not only could I do things, but that I could change things. It was intense and scary to ask critical questions about my home, and things about how the answers affected my family. But by doing that I came to see that so much was possible. It’s an amazing thing now to be helping a younger generation learn about their own potential, their own communities, and start to realise that if things are going to get better around here, were going to be the ones who have to make the changes. (as cited in Richards-Schuster & O’Doherty, 2012, p. 87)

Expanding participation in AMI’s community of practice from student to trainer is one way to build the students’ sense of agency and identity. In addition, AMI uses its documentary storytelling to move young people from a stronger connection to their home community to developing an identity as youth leaders and activists. A strong example of this is evident in their documentary, *Reaching for Higher Ground: Youth Activism in the Mountains* (2000). It tells stories of youth activism and civic engagement including guerilla video footage of a youth-led protest at the state capitol demanding that regulation authorities stop a mining permit that would lead to the contamination of the community’s last remaining source of well water. Bearing witness to their conditions of deprivation, as noted above, is an important step, as one young activist explained in the film, “It’s all the water we have left ‘cause they have mined the other ones. When they mine this seam, our water is gone. We’re gonna have no more source of water.” And another displays the identity shift moving from silence to action as he described his and others’ protest, “It would have been majorly different if one of us had walked in compared to the 34 of us that went. Because when 34 kids walk in, and they’re mad, and there’s 4 adults up front, the kids are gonna do more talking....We know there’s other ways to get water up there. And other things they can do besides mining the last well.”

The Kentucky mountain community’s struggles for safe and healthy sources of water underscore AMI’s dual scope of work, applying what can be described as both a critical and a place-based pedagogy (Kerkham & Comber, 2013). Armed with an understanding of the economic and political power relations of the coal industry in their lives, as well as the ecological damage that it has wrought to their homes, community, and rural sense of place, AMI student producers come to believe in more



efficacious possible selves – that they can begin to make a transformative difference in the world.

AMI also uses the final product, through public screenings of the documentary stories themselves, to connect community members who may feel disconnected, suffering in isolation. As Gaventa observed, “Much as communities in the past have been disenfranchised of their right to vote or dispossessed of their land, so rural communities ... are ‘disconnected’ from one another in the communications process” (1980, p. 221). An example of AMI working to build connections across rural communities is the widely screened and disseminated documentary *The True Cost of Coal* (2007), which tells tragic personal stories of community members losing land that was destroyed by coal companies, and losing fathers and husbands who were killed in preventable mining accidents. “Through sharing their media productions, youth participants also create opportunities for their friends, families, neighbours and others across the region to re-imagine their own identities and relationships to Appalachia and recast their ideas about what is possible” (Richards-Schuster & O’Doherty, 2012, p. 89).

## **CASE 2: EDUCATIONAL VIDEO CENTER (EVC)**

Established in 1984, Educational Video Centre (EVC) is a New York City-based youth media organization, that teaches documentary video as a means to develop the critical media literacy and civic engagement skills of young people, while nurturing their commitment to social change. EVC provides professional development for teachers to integrate student media production in their classes, and provides intensive after-school documentary workshops at its facilities. It draws its student participants from schools for new immigrant English language learners and from “second chance” transfer high schools for struggling learners throughout the city. Students earn academic credit over their semester-long documentary projects and are assessed on the skills they learn through the process. The high-school completion rate in New York City is about 60% in four years and about 70% in six years (NYSED, 2013, Slide 10), comparable to that of Appalachia’s rate of 68%. In this, the largest and most segregated school system in the nation (Kucsera, 2014), the graduation rate for black students is 20% lower than that of whites and the graduation rate for Hispanic students is 22% lower than that of whites (NYSED, 2013, Slide 33). About one-fifth of New York City residents live in poverty, about the same proportion as in Appalachia. In the city, the rates differ by race and ethnicity, with 14% of whites living in poverty compared to 23% of blacks, 26% of Hispanics (any race), and 29% of Asians (Center for Economic Opportunity, 2014).

Over the years EVC students have turned their cameras on themselves and their communities, bearing witness to a range of social and political problems including: substandard housing, gentrification and homelessness; youth and juvenile justice, police violence, and stop and frisk policies; inequitable schools; and gender discrimination and sexual assault. Through partnership with advocates and organisers both in the making of their documentary and through its dissemination as a tool for community organising and activism, students deepen their understanding of the complex problems involved, and build a sense of efficacy to participate in changing them. Through public screenings and discussions, EVC youth use their art to create public squares on the streets, in classrooms, and community organisations and

develop identities as politically engaged youth leaders and media artists (Goodman, 2012). As an EVC student who had created animated sequences for her documentary on gentrification described her increased agentive identity:

At the screening, I had a person come to me and say that the work I did was amazing. And that I should really focus on an art career... Oh, my God, a stranger told me that! That made me feel really proud of myself. In just a few seconds, people got to know me. And that was something that made me feel that I can actually be successful, that I can actually be someone – important. (Educational Video Center, 2011)

The social and economic conditions of New York City cannot be considered a mono-economy like the coal-dominated Appalachian region once was. But comparisons can be made as far as the loss of hundreds of thousands of well-paying, stable, blue-collar jobs that low income and minority families could find a generation ago in New York City's once vibrant manufacturing industries; added jobs were in the areas of the business service sector and the financial industries (Deutsche & Ryan, 1987; Moody, 2007). "Serial displacement" – the repeated dispersal of low-income communities of colour by environmental processes such as violence, segregation, redlining, urban renewal, planned shrinkages, gentrification, and the foreclosure crisis – has created structural inequities through destroying social networks and capital and forcing communities to involuntarily move out and start over (Fullilove, 2013).

The structural inequities in New York City are all connected. As urban education sociologist Noguera describes it, these gaps are compounded across generations and across spheres of influence and add to the sense of being locked out of opportunities without a safety net – opportunities and a safety net that exist for more privileged residents of the city and country (P. Noguera, personal communication, March 17, 2014). While EVC youth documentary projects have covered a broad range of youth and community topics, the students have over the decades repeatedly returned to these problems of substandard housing conditions and the impoverishment of New York City's low-income communities of colour. The following is drawn from three such housing related student documentaries, each of which bears witness to injustice, engages students in partnerships with activists that access "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) from the community, and sees them develop more critical and agentive student identities.

EVC's pedagogy has from its earliest classes facilitated students in the Freirean "naming" of their world, examining their material conditions and the systems of power and privilege that create them. In *2371 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue: An East Harlem Story* (EVC, 1986), Millie Reyes and her classmates document conditions in her rat-infested apartment without heat or hot water, where we watch her aunt heat water on the stove in order to give her baby a warm bath (Charbonneau, 2011). Through their research, the students discover that the building has over 95 housing code violations, write a petition, and lead the tenants on a march to the landlord's office to read it in person. After screening their rough footage for a staffer at the community advocacy organisation "City Limits," she gives the students economic context for the poor housing conditions they documented. While this is a dramatic example of students growing into new agentive identities where they find their voice as empowered leaders in their community (Millie literally was the voice for her building, since the

other tenants spoke little or no English), there are many other albeit less dramatic cases.

Twenty-five years later and some 30 blocks north of Millie's apartment, in the documentary *Breathing Easy*, Raelene Holmes-Andrews keeps a video diary in which she speaks of the black mould that has spread in her apartment and her family's struggles with asthma. Though she acknowledges that her environment is unhealthy and speaks of the mould as a "silent killer", she realises that she did not think to question it before the documentary project, and she doesn't know what to do about it since the housing authorities do not respond to her mother's complaints. Only through the students' partnership with community activists from the West Harlem Environmental Action (WEACT) and documenting a visit to her home by a WEACT health advocate examining and documenting the mould infestation, does she believe that change in her living conditions is possible. She and her classmates learn more about how the struggles for environmental justice and economic justice are connected from their research findings that as African American women, they represent 37% of the half a million residents who live in NYC public housing, one of the last options for affordable housing in the city. They also learn that toxic mould can lead to permanent respiratory illness, and that children living in NYC public housing are nearly three times as likely to suffer from asthma as those in private family homes (Educational Video Center, 2013). Her mother joins a class action lawsuit against the public housing authority. When asked what she learned from her EVC experience, Raelene explained, "I learned that anything is possible. And that wherever you stand at in life, you can make a difference" (Goodman & Cocca, 2013). After the project ended, Raelene joined WEACT, and WEACT continues to screen her documentary as part of their organising efforts (O. Newman [WEACT Director of Environmental Health], personal communication, November 14, 2014).

In *As the Sun Comes Up, the Bricks Fall Down* (EVC, 2010), Efrain Torres revisits the apartment building where he grew up, explaining how landlord harassment and increases in rent forced his family out of their Brooklyn neighbourhood that was being gentrified. "I lived there for 15 years. And I had to move out because the conditions in my apartment were unlivable. We often had roaches, waterbugs and mice coming out of the holes in floors and walls. But the last straw was the carbon monoxide. Every winter when the heaters were on, we had to open up all the windows just to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning." His mother explained that it wasn't until Efrain explained what his EVC documentary was about that she began to understand what the word "gentrification" really meant and came to realise that she had in fact been struggling against it for some time. In addition, the students interviewed housing rights activists and organisers of anti-gentrification campaigns. As student Angelica Perez described the impact working on this project had on her:

EVC is a place where students can not only learn about film-making, but they can also learn about their community, become more aware. And therefore once they learn about their community they become more engaged...I was able to engage in this community and I was able to learn about the difficulties that they were having and the problems that they were facing...It made me want to become more educated, made me want to actually do something about it. (A. Perez, personal communication, October 24, 2014)

## **BREAKING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE: BUILDING IDENTITIES OF CULTURAL ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

In programs such as EVC and AMI, over time, youth build a sense of confidence and self-efficacy needed to speak up. At AMI, explained former AMI student and current Appalshop Institutional Development Director Smith, “At the end of any lab, or summer institute, it’s pretty amazing that when they talk about what [youth participants] learned the most, it’s always, ‘Well, I was just really shy. And now I feel I can talk.’...It’s always, ‘I didn’t think anybody would listen to me, and they do’” (personal communication, November 14, 2013). Raelene described how she changed through her EVC experience:

I am a person now....I got to see that I matter. And that it was okay to open my mouth and speak my opinion. In school it wasn’t like that. In school you say the wrong thing, you get suspended. I don’t know how I gained the strength, but [at EVC] I went up to the biggest guy I could see on the street, and I asked him if I could do an interview with him. And after that my shyness went away. I was no longer non-social and I got used to it. (personal communication, October 29, 2014)

Former AMI student and current AMI Director Ben Spangler added:

When you’re taught your whole life – to just do what you’re told. All of that. And then somebody asks you what you really think. And you start exploring all these different issues. And then the kids say, “That’s really messed up. We want to do a project that’s addressing these things.” It makes those people very angry. (personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Through the process of documentary inquiry, the students build bridges to strengthen solidarity with other community members experiencing similar injustices as they learn about organisations and leaders in the community working to overcome those injustices. EVC Youth Documentary Workshop co-director Tanya Jackson explained how her student, Raelene, became a member of West Harlem Environmental Action:

The young people in the community may or may not even know that they [community organisations] exist.... [She was] pretty apathetic that this issue that she was living with for so long could be addressed. And so through the making of the project she started to feel some hope that she didn’t have before. And started to realise that, you know, it’s not ok for her to think that it’s ok for her to live like this. Which is a big paradigm shift. (personal communication, November 14, 2013)

However, both urban and rural youth from poor communities face the same challenge of breaking through a culture of silence – of developing the confidence, knowledge, experience and the language to make their ideas known and voices heard on the pressing issues in their lives. We have noted that the impoverished not only tend to participate less in political action, but also to feel as if such action will have no effect. According to Gaventa, such feelings are not “irrational” but have been “instilled historically through repeated experiences of defeat” (1980, p. 254).

There are both challenges and risks that go along with speaking up and talking back to institutional power in an urban or rural environment, whether it is to a police officer, boss or landlord. For New York City youth, a culture of silence for youth is about differentials of power and also about language and knowledge. For many new

immigrant teens, English is a second or even a third language. Risks of deportation loom large for urban undocumented youth and their families. In a rural, mono-economy “company town,” silence can be a strategy for survival. As Smith described it, “For us, there’s always been a system of economic development that has depended on one employer, mostly absentee corporations and landholders coming in and giving the only jobs. There’s a town that literally the sidewalks the lights, the church, the hospital, the school – everything was owned by one company. So there’s been a generational – you do this, you do that, and you don’t talk back. Because there’d be repercussions for everyone, not just an individual” (personal communication, November 14, 2013).

Another challenge in engaging urban youth in these activist organisations is that young people often don’t know they even exist. In the Appalachian area, observe Smith and Spangler, there are community arts and activist groups, but they are few and far between. As a consequence of the outmigration, schools are being consolidated and funding has been cut for these groups. The bar for participation is higher and it takes greater efficacy to initiate individual action without outside organisational support, or to join in an organisation and attend meetings when things are at earlier stages of development. If there is already momentum for public action, a groundswell of mass activity in the local community, then it is easier for youth to take on activist identities.

Educators can support the development of student efficacy and activist identities in school and after-school settings by framing their community as the curriculum of study and space of action. This transformative pedagogy requires educators to guide students through community inquiries rich with teachable moments that privilege action, reflection and expanded participation over covering standardised content. It requires the building of communities of practice where students feel safe and supported enough to break through historically and politically constructed cultures of silence, to document and create art that questions and bears witness to the hidden and often taken-for-granted conditions of health and poverty in their home and community, and to propose strategies for addressing them. As AMI’s Smith says:

There’s a lot to be done. And we’re the ones to do it. And so we are just getting off the ground. We’ve talked about public education. Juvenile justice. Clean water....this is an infrastructure problem. We don’t have sewer systems in the ways that we need them. And so as young people, if want to stay here and raise our families here, we have to talk about the infrastructure we need. And we have to push for it. ...to stay here, and be an active part of the community. (personal communication, November 14, 2013)

## CONCLUSION

Youth participants in both AMI and EVC are forming more agentive and critically literate identities, while producing powerful counter-narratives that speak out about the injustices plaguing their communities. Critical literacy is interconnected with social inquiry, self-representation, and a sense of self-identity, which is in turn interconnected with political efficacy. Once they have developed self-confident identities as cultural activists, as agents of change working at the intersection of art and social justice, young people can find the words and images to name their world as

it is, and how it could be otherwise. This moving from silence to voice is a transgressive literacy, where story-telling is itself a radical act, whether it is telling about daily life in tenements without heat or hot water, or infested with toxic mould, or with contaminated well water, or deadly working conditions in the local mines. It requires educators to support and guide students in the ways noted above, and to develop partnerships between students and local grassroots activists so youth can access their community's "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). They will then be that much more prepared to explore, analyse, and critically "read" the interconnections between their personal and family experiences and the more faceless neoliberal political, economic and historical forces that have such a devastating impact on their health and wellbeing – whether public housing bureaucracy or absentee corporate mine-owners. Spaces of action, that broadly disseminate students' stories, documentaries and other forms of artistic expression, enable students to further develop their identities as teachers and leaders as they create new knowledge and inspire public dialogue and action to counter the impact of poverty in their community.

Both organisations are striving to connect their youth participants to further opportunities for participation in movements for change, but must address differing challenges. The future of rural and urban communities of practice that work at intersection of arts and activism depends on there being a healthy ecosystem of critical literacy educators, schools and sister youth-serving organisations to nurture and sustain them. It means creating diverse models of learner-centred, transformative public spaces of action across rural and urban communities, where students learn how power operates and how to use it themselves, and where, acting in solidarity with their students, adults scaffold skills and experiences for young people to grow into leadership themselves.

Through students' art, social journalism and counter-narrative critiques, they challenge the neoliberal dominant narrative that imposes market values and rationality on all institutions and activities. Engaged in the democratic civic life of their community and rooted in the history, social and cultural conditions of their place, with adults as allies in solidarity with them, this next generation of young leaders can conjure new identities of possible selves, and new worlds with more humane, compassionate and equitable conditions of life.

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