

Making Foster Youths' Lives and Everyday Literacies Visible Through Film

In this column, we review two short films by Yasmin Mistry featuring former foster youths who share memories of navigating the foster care system. Mistry takes care to resist portraits of victimhood in favor of narratives of survival, resistance, and future possibilities. Embedded in these visual stories are examples of young people accessing their literacy practices to communicate, gain information, and advocate for themselves. With the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* audience in mind, we review both films and include thoughts from the filmmaker about her motivations for pursuing the stories of former foster youths and her educational goals for these films. We hope to again emphasize the need for teachers to develop practices of adopting multiple stances and vantage points for listening to and with youths. We end this review with links to the films, accompanying study guides, and the larger Foster Care Film project.

The Hidden Terrains of Learning and Education Beyond the School Day

According to the most recent data available, there were approximately 415,000 children in foster care in September 2014 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016), but that number is not static. That is, the number of children and youths who entered or exited care during that same fiscal year period exceeds the total number in care at the time the snapshot of data was taken for the report above. This shifting statistic reflects the changing nature of which and how many children are considered to be in care at any given moment. The current accounting of foster youths also increases the likelihood that the growing demographic diversity described in recent academic and news publications (e.g., Banks, 2008; Layton, 2015) may also include children and youths with varying degrees of involvement by social service institutions. These services can range from the occasional presence of a social worker overseeing

aspects of students' lives to complete supervision by the child welfare system. Schools, however, are largely underprepared to effectively advocate for and support youths who experience unstable access to housing and family permanency.

As educators of adolescents and as researchers inquiring into the lives of adolescents, we are keenly aware that a great deal of valuable knowledge and opportunities for learning are cultivated in informal learning environments that should not be ignored in schools. Young people's everyday, out-of-school lives are replete with demonstrations of their literacy practices, including participation in continually expanding communicative landscapes that involve composing abbreviated messages and nonverbal semiotic forms, audiovisual artifacts, and storytelling for authentic purposes (Alvermann, 2010; Burnett & Merchant, 2014; Vasudevan & Wissman, 2011).

We also know that classroom pedagogy can overlook the affordances of youth practices in favor of curricular efficiency. Teachers may feel pressure to push youths to address the curriculum, regardless of how much they may desire for the curriculum to meet their students, who perhaps identify as gamers, storytellers, painters, dancers, readers, and more. In our review, we call on readers to recognize those contours of youths' lives that may remain far removed from pedagogical and curricular considerations and yet are full of stories and hold the promise and potential of young people's everyday literacies.

Feeling Wanted:

No Home, but "a Foundation in Love"

Feeling Wanted is the first in a series of short films by Yasmin Mistry (2014) that focus on youths in foster care. In the film, Charell, a young woman in her 20s, recounts several experiences from the years she spent in the foster care system. Charell recalls her moves from one foster home to the next and the dissonance and lack

of control over where she lived. As a young adult, when the smallest glimpses of choice appeared, she grabbed them, like the decision to apply to boarding school or a study abroad program in London, England. At the time of the interview, Charell described herself as having “a successful career in PR [public relations] and events” and as someone who learned how to leverage her knowledge of the foster care system, family members, and her own sense of self to attend to her well-being.

Charell’s earliest memory is of living with her great-grandmother, whom she loved and from whom she received “a foundation in love.” Charell was first placed in foster care when her great-grandmother became ill. She went “from living with [her] great-grandmother, where there was lots of love and support,” to living with “strangers, and I was in their home.” She recalls her childhood as one of fear, loneliness, and shame: “You don’t want to admit you don’t have a permanent home, you don’t have a permanent place to be.” (See Figure 1.)

Charell “never actually started and finished a school year in one school until fifth grade,” and yet she goes on to say, “School was always a place where I felt safe. School was always a place where I felt rewarded.” Her

story raises questions for educators who want desperately to reach students and have a positive impact on their lives within the limitations of school hours, and yet whose efforts are thwarted by institutional forces, such as foster care, that are out of their control.

My Identity: Seeking Structure and Control

In *My Identity*, Mistry (2016) demonstrates the confluence of religion, race, and foster care as factors shaping a young woman’s identity, sense of family and kinship, experience of home, and future trajectory. This film tells the story of Ashley, a young woman who identifies as white and Choctaw and describes being placed into foster care at the age of 8. Like many foster children, Ashley and her brother were vulnerable to being moved without much warning at the directive of a social worker or a judge. As an adult, she expresses loss when recalling the time spent apart from her younger brother: “I didn’t really understand those decisions as a kid, but as an adult, I kind of wish that I had my brother.”

After her mother passed away from complications with alcoholism, Ashley was moved again and went to

Figure 1
Screenshots From *Feeling Wanted*^a



^aMistry, Y. (Producer & Director). (2014). *Feeling wanted* [Motion Picture]. USA: idesyn creative.

Figure 2
Screenshots From *My Identity*^a



^aMistry, Y. (Producer & Director). (2016). *My identity* [Motion Picture]. USA: idesygn creative.

live with cousins who practiced Sufism, a mystical form of Islam. Ashley's reflections on her decision to convert to Islam provide an educational focal point in this film. Throughout the film, she wears a headscarf, and she describes her desire for the structure that Islam provided as an antidote to her "chaotic" childhood in and out of foster care and various forms of kinship care. (See Figure 2.)

Ashley's reflection on her time in foster care echoes Charell's concern about where and with whom she belonged. Similarly, Ashley describes feeling like she had to hide those concerns in school from her classmates and teachers. As with Charell's story, the film also portrays several moments of self-directed education born out of the need for survival, cultivating relationships, rewriting futures, and becoming disentangled from the institutional supervision of foster care.

Reflections From the Filmmaker

Throughout both films, Mistry weaves together paintings, old photographs, and graphic art to animate memories or underscore revelations shared by the former foster youths. (To access the films and learn more

about Mistry and the Foster Care Film & Community Engagement Project, see Table 1.) Images of nature offset video of Charell and Ashley, respectively, sharing their stories of institutional navigations. Multimodal and multimedia storytelling techniques also communicate different layers of meaning about the foster care system, about the moments and forms of learning that forge the identities of youths, about children and youths who experience vastly different home lives, about the role of social institutions in attending to the well-being of young people, and about adolescents who serve as the canaries in the coal mine for assessing how well the nation's social service institutions (of which school is one) are meeting their stated goals.

Mistry initially hoped that *Feeling Wanted* would be used in social work classrooms, and she has partnered with social work schools and child welfare agencies to screen the film with current and future social workers in class and in trainings. She hopes to inform their everyday practices with a more nuanced understanding of the experiences that former foster youths carry with them. Mistry is also finding audiences among faculty and students in other academic and professional communities

Table 1
Access the Films and Learn More About the Filmmaker

Foster Care Film & Community Engagement Project: Educational license DVDs include study guides and DVD extras (videos and articles), as well as a public screening license.

- *Feeling Wanted*: <http://fostercarefilm.com/feeling-wanted-dvd> (\$99.99)
- *My Identity*: <http://fostercarefilm.com/my-identity-dvd> (coming soon)

Kanopy: Streaming films include study guides.

- *Feeling Wanted*: <https://www.kanopystreaming.com/product/feeling-wanted-story-about-foster-care>
- *My Identity*: <https://www.kanopystreaming.com/product/my-identity-american-teenager-converts-isl>

VHX: Both films, along with educator tool kits, a study guide, related articles, and additional videos, are available for purchase online: <http://fostercarefilm.vhx.tv/>.

Learn more about Yasmin Mistry and the Foster Care Film & Community Engagement Project at <http://www.fostercarefilm.com>.

who are affected by underlying issues that are touched on by the film in addition to foster care, including incarceration, unemployment, addiction, and poverty.

According to Mistry, *My Identity* is a very different story. She describes the film as being “about a girl who identifies as Native American and then goes looking for structure...and finds structure in the Islamic community.” She notes that the topic is “relevant to what’s happening now culturally and politically, lots of anti-Muslim sentiment,” through its positive portrayal of the Islamic community. Potential audiences for the film may include “race and religion classrooms, political studies, [and] current events [discussions].” Even though the focus is foster care and kinship care, says Mistry, there are “a lot of potentially different readings...[and] ways to use the films” to spark discussion, reflection, inquiry, and research across a wide variety of learning settings.

Lifelong Learning and Everyday Literacy Pedagogy

For literacy educators, there are several potential connections between the experiences of Charell and Ashley depicted on film and those of students. First, the films underscore the need to attend to and recognize that the lives of youths are both complex and comprehensible. The films illustrate that young people’s communities and kinship networks may look unfamiliar but that strength and support can be found in unexpected places, such as reconnecting with distant family members, knowledge about one’s roots, communication with birth parents, and digital communities. Knowing this can help educators create classroom environments that are more responsive to the stories that young people carry

with them daily, and in doing so, strengthen these young people’s networks of support. Finally, the stories of both young women are rich with examples of their learning and literacies outside of school: learning about and making the decision to change religious affiliation or seeking out information to take control of one’s schooling by applying to boarding school; engaging in consistent self-preservation among peers and teachers; and pursuing schooling beyond high school. Literacy, in these examples, is embedded in the everyday interactions and circumstances in which young people participate.

Our own research and teaching experiences with current and former foster youths in whose lives the presence of a single caring adult—a vice principal, a counselor, a judge, a foster parent, and a mentor—had significant impacts echoes the lessons held in the stories of Charell and Ashley by reinforcing the importance of quotidian actions that can profoundly shape a life. These individuals helped foster youths advocate for themselves in schools, helped them complete homework assignments, offered periodic reminders of what educational and life possibilities lay ahead, and were ready with a warm hug, a front door key, and other acts of caring. We believe that working to understand foster youths’ varied and nonstandard circumstances, before reaching and acting on conclusions, can allow educators to play positive roles outside of their formalized curricular titles to support the educational access and flourishing of adolescents who are negotiating the tricky and tenuous terrain of foster care.

REFERENCES

- Alvermann, D.E. (Ed.). (2010). *Adolescents’ online literacies: Connecting classrooms, digital media, and popular culture*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Banks, J. (2008). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher*, 37(3), 129–139. doi:10.3102/0013189X08317501

Burnett, C., & Merchant, G. (2014). Points of view: Reconceptualising literacies through an exploration of adult and child interactions in a virtual world. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 37(1), 36–50. doi:10.1111/jrir.12006

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Foster care statistics 2014*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

Layton, L. (2015, January 16). Majority of U.S. public school students are in poverty. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/majority-of-us-public-school-students-are-in-poverty/2015/01/15/df7171d0-9ce9-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html

Mistry, Y. (Producer & Director). (2014). *Feeling wanted* [Motion Picture]. USA: idesygn creative.

Mistry, Y. (Producer & Director). (2016). *My identity* [Motion Picture]. USA: idesygn creative.

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, NY: Erlbaum.

The department editors welcome reader comments.



LALITHA VASUDEVAN is an associate professor of technology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA; e-mail lmv2102@tc.columbia.edu.



KRISTINE RODRIGUEZ KERR is an academic director and clinical assistant professor in the School of Professional Studies at New York University, NY, USA; e-mail kristine.kerr@nyu.edu.

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION RESOURCE CATALOG

Back to School 2016

Explore our professional development resources and research-based publications full of tips and strategies for educators.

INTERNATIONAL
LITERACY
ASSOCIATION

BROWSE ONLINE: literacyworldwide.org/catalog

ILA
MEMBERS
**SAVE
20%**