“The People I Let Help Me”

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What We (don’t) Know About the Work of Support in Youth Programming

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An Auto/Ethnography

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**Introduction**

I think I was 15 when I met Josh. It was a rainy spring Friday night, and I was the only new member who’d shown up (late) to an informational meeting for the LGBTQ youth leadership committee I would go on to be a part of for the remainder of my time in high school. Josh worked at the organization, an LGBTQ youth advocacy non profit, that ran the committee. We did a lot of things on the youth committee, organize events and camps for queer youth and allies, advocate for policy change to make our schools safe, things like that. But, whatever it was we were doing, though Josh supported us.

He listened when we complained about our peers’ rigid expectations of our sexualities, our teachers’ dismissiveness of our frustrations, and our all-out fury at the systems that had created these dynamics in the first place. He helped us say the things we wanted to say and get access to the people we wanted to say them to. He was patient with us when we messed up, he was kind when things were hard, and firm when something needed to change. He never dumbed things down or flattened them out. He kept neckties in his office specifically for role playing an important upcoming meeting, and played the part of a Chicago Public Schools bigwig quite convincingly. At that point, he was just about the only adult I knew who could say “butch lesbian” out loud, seriously, or in passing, but always with compassion. Very quickly, he became very special to me.

Josh taught me most of what I know about supporting youth leaders. What it looks like to keep power and privilege in mind every step of the way, and what it feels like when its working. But none of this is to say it was easy. As my years on the youth committee went on, the organization expanded and Josh’s job got bigger. I could tell that his days were fuller than they used to be and he was tired at 5:30 on Fridays when our meetings began. He started dropping
balls: double booking, forgetting workshop materials for a conference in another state, snapping
in moments of stress, and just not being present like he used to be. When things like this
happened, he would say something along the lines of: “I’m sorry, it’s my job to support you, I’ll
do better” but I could tell there was more to it.

He wouldn’t talk about what was hard about his job almost the same way he wouldn’t
talk about the good things. Josh and I spent a long time together over the years. There were
weekly meetings and events, sure, but there were roadtrips, too, and meals in far away places,
and long talks at picnic tables on August afternoons during our yearly youth activist camp. We
came to be close, but in an unnamable and unbalanced way. He knew exactly who I was and
what to say to make me feel powerful, and when I tried to tell him how much it, he meant, he
would dodge, saying things like: “my job is to support you, not the other way around.”

On one of those August afternoons at camp, a group of us sat around a table, I think
making signs or something, chatting. I can’t remember what brought it up, but I told everyone
about a saying I had heard about a triangle whose points were “kind,” “necessary,” and “true,”
meaning that anything you say should be two out of three. Immediately Josh said “I want to get a
tattoo of that!” I had forgotten about it until a couple of months later when he asked me to write
it out for the tattoo artist. I sketched it quickly on a slip of scratch paper and thought nothing
more of it. A few weeks later he showed me the finished product, not an artistic rendering, but a
direct copy of my sketch, my handwriting permanently etched on his arm.

I don’t know if he did that on purpose. I think it’s a little hard to miss the significance. I
know it feels kind of comically symbolic to me. See, I was always trying to tell him, like in
capital letters: I CARE ABOUT YOU, I SEE YOU, I UNDERSTAND WHEN THINGS ARE
HARD. But I never did have the words, I think. This relationship was both intensely familiar and
strange, outside of any kind of weird closeness I had known with a teacher, or a Rabbi, or even a friend. It straddled years and was confined by boundaries, and all of that is well and good, but it was also special and is as yet unnamed.

Coming to FAM

I was 20 when I first started volunteering at FAM, I’ll be 22 by the time I finish this project. It began the way that many things do for me: intense curiosity and a compulsion to describe. I came to FAM through a connection made for me by a Hampshire College staff person, looking for more opportunities to work directly with youth as a part of my studies. FAM Youth Leadership Project is a youth program run through a local non profit that is also the site of an intergenerational housing community, seeking to ensure that foster and adoptive youth and their families are rooted in family and community along with the elderly. FAM serves folks 14-24 who have been affected by foster care and adoption, using weekly meetings to build community, empowerment, and life skills through a variety of reflective, service, creative, and recreation activities.

My first night at FAM was a memorable one. When I walked in, Sara, the director of the FAM program came to greet me immediately, grasping my hands and telling me quickly and earnestly: “we’re so happy you’re here!” Things would continue in that fashion. As the weeks went on I would be constantly surprised, challenged, and gratified by getting to witness and support the work happening at FAM.

I watched the evolution of the part of the FAM program called Our Voices, throughout which youth write, compile, and perform an original piece about their experiences with foster care and adoption, supported by teaching artists from Growing Forest Theater. Strong bonds
formed among the youth and with the adults, as well. Affection, intimacy, vulnerability, and nuance pervaded the space in a way that was almost unnerving for me. The performance itself was beautiful and brave. This process was not without its struggles, though, especially given that it was a transition year for many of the staff and things looked different than they had in the past. I got to know those around me while I watched the way they interacted with each other and it became clear that something was going on here, something worth investigating.

Being at FAM, watching the Our Voices performance come together made me question a great deal of what I thought I knew about relationships between youth and adults in the context of support, advocacy, and performance. In my previous work experiences in the field, I had been taught that boundaries between youth and adults must be rigid, support should be unidirectional and not reciprocal, that intimacy and affection should be avoided, and that nothing should get in the way of giving young people the things they needed to succeed. Imagine my surprise when things during Our Voices rehearsals appeared to be a little bit messier than that. Youth and adults gave each other hugs, called each other things like “mama Sara,” or displayed their stress outwardly, even while holding space for one another. I noticed, too, that this kind of warmth and vulnerability was made more complicated by things outside of FAM, like having to pack up supplies and rush out of the church basement at exactly 7:30 so that the church employees could go home, leaving no time for staff to debrief or check in one on one with youth.

I had so many questions about how people did and thought about their work at FAM, whether making theatre about their own experiences, or supporting the young people in rehearsal and performance. I could see myself in a similar role as many of the staff in the near future and I wanted some insight - what was it like? What was hard? How did they manage everything? And, on a different level, being at FAM brought back memories of my own time as a participant in
youth programming and though there are many things that separate my experiences and those of folks at FAM, it made me think of the adults I knew and cared about a little more complexly. It made me think about Josh, and all of the things we hadn’t been able to talk about. I had things I wanted to know about people’s experiences as a part of this program; I wanted to know them for the person I had been and for the person I would become. I wanted a fuller, more honest understanding this kind of work as well as the things that make it hard. Further, I wanted to show the world that support for youth in these contexts matters.

The more I have come to know through this project, the more I have to say about this work. I’m still figuring out how, but I’m closer than I was when I started. The things I have witnessed, the conversations I have had throughout this process have been significant for my own development as a student, former youth leader, and future youth worker, yes, but I think there’s possibility for others in these pages, too. I’m hoping that this text can act as a reflection and a catalyst for those of us invested, in practice or in theory, in supporting youth in their activist and creative endeavors, as well as in their growth and healing.

This project argues that supporting relationships between youth and adults in youth programming are valuable and incredibly important, even when complicated by constraining institutions, by depicting and analyzing the sometimes invisible and unnamed nature of the work of support at FAM. It speaks to a broad audience, one I imagine united by a desire to understand support for youth, despite including people from a variety of different identities, backgrounds, fields, and positions. When I say “us” or “we,” I merely mean a readership whose collective responsibility lies in supporting youth fully.

If we are going to do work that supports young people in reflecting on their experiences, creating art, and making change, we need to investigate the world in which we exist. We need to
understand clearly, explicitly, and complexly what it is like to be involved in work that supports young people in their growth and creativity. We need to know what it feels like, what makes it hard, and what about it has not yet been named. This kind of knowledge allows us to better understand ourselves in this work, as well as the things about it that might need to change, whether in our control or out of it. For me, this learning comes from articulating what support means in youth programming, what constrains relationships and work in these contexts, and how that affects those involved.

Not only is a deeper understanding of support for youth crucial when it comes reflection and learning for youth work practice, demonstrating what work at FAM is like, what it means to those involved, and what’s at stake if it’s not supported is also an argument for valuing FAM and all it holds. This kind of portrayal, for those of us inside the work and outside of it, is crucial in a world that consistently devalues the perspectives and experiences youth, especially those otherwise marginalized, and the people, largely women, that work to support them.

* A Question of Value

My investigation of support at FAM has been predicated on the belief that this work is important. But I have undertaken this project with the knowledge that this is something I will need to prove. For reasons I will describe shortly, work with youth is consistently swept aside in our society. In order to explain the significance investigating the particularities of work with youth, I must identify what I am speaking back to. What follows is a brief interrogation of value and visibility in cultural constructions of work with youth, especially where gender and age are concerned.

This is visible in a variety of contexts. In allocating federal and state resources, child care, education, and youth programming are far from the top of the list of priorities for public
funding. Over the last decade, public funding for K-12 schools has fallen dramatically (Leachman et al. 2017), teachers are paid notoriously and increasingly low-wages (Abamu 2018), and recently the Trump administration cut programs that fund after school programming for 1.6 million children, most from low-income families (Peterson 2018). These examples of the devaluation of youth and the spaces they occupy are of course only fiscal, and money is not necessarily equal to value or importance. However, they can be understood as evidence of a structural disinvestment in young people, and as such, the programs, institutions, and people that support them.

Not only is the devaluation of youth and those who work with them a financial matter, it also lives in the cultural imagination, as demonstrated by many common-sense understandings and pop culture portrayals of youth and educators. I’m sure many of us have heard work in this field demeaned in popular culture with gendered idioms like, “those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach,” or statements likening teachers and youth work professionals to “babysitters” (as if the work of babysitters is not valuable, but that’s a whole ‘nother story). In her work on the lives of women teachers, Sari Knopp Biklen identifies this social devaluation by drawing on interviews with teachers to conclude that teaching is a profession lacking social status and power, which manifests when teaching is constructed as not professional, not serious, and not grown up due to its association with women (School Work 28-40). In American culture, the field of teaching is understood with a significant amount of disdain and disrespect, shortly, I will speak to the gendered implications of the ideas, for now suffice it to say that they are visible in the way that people talk about teachers and the work they do. While I think we see these dynamics most in cultural constructions of teaching, clearly work with youth in other settings are similarly devalued, if even more so because schools are the most predominate of these contexts.
In addition to the gendered nature of cultural understandings of teachers’ and youth workers’ status, their work with children and youth contributes to social devaluation, as well. In “Schoolteaching, Professionalism, and Gender” Biklen writes,

Workers often gain status by the status of the clients they serve. The president’s chauffeur, for example, gains prestige not from the intrinsic nature of his task - driving - but by the prestige of the rider in back. So too the lawyers of famous men and women accrue status by the prestige of their clients. Adult rather than pediatric physicians carry more status. Teachers, on the other hand, especially public elementary schoolteachers, rarely earn acclaim by their clients: children (19)

What Biklen elucidates here is that the field of education, and youth work by extension, is devalued not only by public perceptions of teachers and youth workers, but also by predominant understandings of young people. Broadly speaking, young people aren’t taken seriously as full members of society in a number of contexts. For example, youth under the age of 18 cannot vote even though many teenagers, if not most, are engaged in American politics in some way. But, the earnings of youth who work are still taxed by a government that does not represent them. This is large scale evidence of our society’s devaluation of youth perspectives, voices, and agency when it comes to electoral politics. Elections aren’t the only context in which this happens, either. Ruth Graham’s article in Slate sparked debate when she contended that adults should be embarrassed to read Young Adult literature because it’s less mature and less worthy of merit than fiction for adults (2014). This is evidence of the ways that perceptions of media for and about reflect cultural devaluation for young people’s experiences. More, we can take popular discourse surrounding youth as evidence for this devaluation more broadly. When we think about young people, disparaging, minimizing, and belittling associations often come to mind, sparked by popular portrayals of youth as self centered, shallow, and needlessly rebellious. Think TV shows like 90210, Gossip Girl, Degrassi, and Glee. Of course, it’s impossible to make generalizations
about the popular portrayals of all youth, as characters in these TV shows naturally have redeeming qualities, and because other layers of identity and experience compound stereotypes that are simply age-related. Still, it can be said that these portrayals and perceptions youth’s subjectivities are often somewhat flattened in the popular imagination, visible in the above examples, because they are devalued.

The above examples of the ways that youth, and the people that work with them are often disinvested in, demeaned, and belittled in popular culture and the economic allocation of funds allow us to understand their devaluation. I will now turn my attention to discussing what I believe contributes to this devaluation, and what its implications are for this project.

Starting in the 1970s, feminist scholars and activists began to draw attention to and agitate against gendered boundaries and organization of work. They drew on Marxist analysis of “social reproduction” to call attention to the labor women do in the form of housework and childcare, which nurtured and produced the labor force in the form of current workers (husbands) and future workers (children). Feminists argued that this labor was unpaid and therefore unrecognized under systems of capital. (Federici 2008)

Since this notion became a popularized part of feminist scholarship and activism, it has been extended to understand labor that occurs outside of the home, including childcare and education (Duffy 315-316). I would posit that work with youth in out of school programs falls into the category of labor devalued and unrecognized because of its similar associations with women and femininity. Work in youth programming is largely understood to be caring, nurturing, even mothering. Whether or not all professionals in this field are women (many of them are), gender plays a key role in how understandings of the work of support are constructed.
Of course, the idea that women’s work with youth and children is largely devalued is not necessarily novel. Surely, women in fields like education and childcare have always had conversations about the value of their work to the world. More, it’s plainly visible in cultural constructions of gender and work with children and youth. But, analyzing the way women’s labor, or labor understood to be women’s labor can help us conceptualize the role that gender plays in the way that support for youth is valued and visible. For me, the most useful part of a feminist analysis of labor is the assertion that, because women’s work is devalued, it is also unrecognized and made invisible. In a moment, I will return to these themes.

Additionally, issues of age also correspond to value accorded to work with youth, both in schools and other contexts. As a whole, devaluing of youth, especially adolescents, takes up a sort of common-sense space in cultural imagination, as I have described. Many common assumptions about youth constitute a dismissal of agency and trivialization of experience. For example, Nancy Lesko argues that “confident characterizations” of adolescence make up the foundations of scholarly and popular discourse on youth and their experiences (3). One such characterization is the assumption that youth are “controlled by hormones” and thus that their strong emotions, unpredictability, rebelliousness, and challenges to authority are natural and biological (Lesko 4). These discourses are probably familiar to many of us, and also highly visible in popular culture and media, through which teenagers are often understood as moody, irrational, immature, self-centered, and blindly defiant. I would extend this to argue that these assumptions provide a basis for young people’s experiences and feelings to be discounted and trivialized by the adults and systems with which they interact. This logic becomes a tactic for devaluing youth and their experiences, chalking expressions of emotion and frustration up to development, as opposed to seeing them in response to the world they live in.
More, youth are culturally devalued by systems of worth that rely on the notion of “futurity.” In their writing on rhetorics of “risk” and “resiliency” in scholarship on youth, Karen Rebecca Foster and Dale Spencer define futurity: “often, young people are considered future adults, or people-in-the-making, before dealing with them as persons now, in their own right” (128-129). This logic is familiar, bringing to mind the aphorism “children are the future,” as if they are not also the present. I believe that the dominance of narratives of futurity in scholarship and in cultural constructions of youth let us see the relative devaluation of young people and their experiences in our society.

Children and youth are thus constructed as less important members of society, both trivialized and dismissed for their present experiences and attitudes, and valued largely for their futurity, or what they might be able to become and produce as adults. It should be mentioned that for youth whose identities are otherwise marginalized, this devaluation is even more significant. For example, schools that serve largely youth of color are far less resourced than schools serving mostly white youth, regardless of class (White 2015). With these understandings of the ways that youth are perceived, especially with respect to their identities, we can see the ways that the institutions, programs, and people that support them are similarly devalued, and thus made invisible.

Taken together, devaluation of women’s labor in support for youth combines with a sort of dispossession of young people’s present lives, experiences, and voices to obscure from view the work of support. Bottom line: when work with youth is devalued, it goes uninvestigated and therefore erased. Largely, this work is undiscussed in scholarly and public arenas, unexamined with a close and compassionate eye, realities, details, and complexities of the programs and people that support young people.
As I have engaged in the field of education and youth programming, and more specifically in research for this project, I have often found myself thinking: “I don’t know if people know what it takes to do this work.” In answer to this query, my aim here is to make visible the invisible when it comes support for youth at FAM by defining support qualitatively, investigating its complexities, and exploring the ways support constrained by the institutions FAM exists under. These, I believe, are dimensions that current scholarship fails to address, the articulation of which is critical to valuing the work of support.

In researching this topic, I’ve found that there is a critical lack of research that helps us understand what it really means to support youth professionally. Most of the existing research on this subject deals with youth and adult relationships in schools or other institutional settings (Cornelius-White 2007; Davis 2003; Jennings and Greenberg 2009), and this is especially true for literature that focuses on the experiences of foster youth (Ahrens et al. 2008; Ahrens et al. 2011; Blakeslee and Keller 2016; Munson et al. 2010). The literature that deals with out of school time or community based programs largely focuses on measurement, identification, assessment, outcomes, and long term effects on health and education of youth and adult supporting or mentoring relationships (Jones and Perkins 2005; Jones and Perkins 2006; Spencer 2007). Even then, much of that literature does not explore these relationships in a US context, rather it’s based in European and UK settings where youth work is a codified field, instead of a diffuse network of different kinds of programs and institutions, like in the United States (Nolas 2014; Williamson 2011).

What we’re left with, then, is a dearth of knowledge that speaks to the context in which we live, and reflects the lived experience of supporting youth in professional contexts, which I believe is erased by a focus on outcomes for youth alone. Further, existing literature rarely
explores the institutional factors that constrain the work of support or the ways that it personally affects professionals doing this work. Obviously, these ways of knowing are crucial for practitioners seeking to support youth. Additionally, this research constitutes a revisioning of the system of value that erases feminized work with youth. I hope that this paper can begin some of the work of excavating the often invisible ways that support occurs in youth programming, as well as painting a more holistic picture of the sometimes difficult realities of the work of support.

Further, when this work goes unrecognized, it becomes harder to discuss. I’m interested in bringing us closer to a language that values work with youth in this context, that makes the invisible visible, that addresses the nuances and complexities in these relationships, that names what is intense and special, too, and that holds up when things get hard. Due to the devalued and unrecognized nature of youth work, as discussed above, supporting relationships that exist within these professional spaces between youth and adults, like the ones I am about to describe, are often illegible. They lie outside of the bounds of what we think intergenerational relationships can or are supposed to be. And though they do exist, I think they can be very hard to talk about. Are they friendships? Mentorships? Family? The words we have for supporting relationships between youth and adults that blur the lines between personal and professional are limited. At FAM these relationships exist, strong, intricate, and sometimes surprising, and they also exist inside a network of constraining institutions. I hope that a close, careful, and caring look at FAM can allow us to better describe and name our relationships to one another, and this world.

What follows is the result of a year’s investigation of supportive relationships among youth and adults at FAM and in rehearsal for Our Voices. In telling you about the things I’ve witnessed, experienced, and discussed with others in the FAM community, my aim is not to tell you a single story (Adichie, 2009) about foster care, about how youth and adults should or
shouldn’t relate to one another, or about the professional world of youth work. More, I’m writing to describe and depict something I feel is worth your attention, and to ask at every turn: what’s going on here? What can we learn from this? What’s at stake?

Overview of Structure of Paper

In order to explore and make visible the work of support at FAM, I have set out to investigate a number of relevant topics. First, because the topics at hand sit at the intersections of a variety of worlds, I explain some of the context that has been important for this project, including a description of the organizations involved in the project, a discussion of methods and positionality, as well as an exploration of the ways categories of “adult” and “youth” are deployed in this paper. The second chapter serves to define and describe support as it occurs at FAM using four categories of support: familial support, creative support, practical support, and critical support. In Chapter 2, I argue that defining support with nuance, and depicting its realities at FAM can help us value the work of support. Next, in Chapter 3, I investigate connection, describing some of the ways that affection, openness, and mutuality function in supporting relationships between youth and adults, and arguing that this exploration moves toward redefining how connection is regulated by distancing models of boundaries between youth and adults in professional contexts. Finally, the fourth chapter explores some of the ways that youth and adults at FAM experience institutional constraints like scarcity, the child welfare system, and organizational partnership on their work. I advocate for a language that accounts for the effects of these constraints and their origins, as well as toward institutional support for youth programming.
Chapter 1: Context

The Hometown foundation, an intergenerational housing community home to the FAM program, as well it’s subsidiary, Our Voices, sits at the foot of Mt. Tom, in its shadow, you might say. One day, driving over it I mentioned to the youth in my car how beautiful it is, a winding road climbing through trees offering a view of much of the valley. Matter-of-factly, one of them told me it’s not as pretty as it used to be – a few years ago, before I lived here, something called a micro-burst blew through and snapped trees in half all up the mountain. Evidence of what I think must have been but a brief moment in the natural history of this place persists in jagged tree trunks still sticking out from the earth, and in the memories of those who have been driving this way for as long as they can remember.

The first time I came to help out at the Hometown community itself, a couple months after I had started volunteering with the program, I thought I must have taken a wrong turn. The organization’s offices sit nestled among the roughly 60 houses that compose its intergenerational housing community, and so the sloped and winding road looked more to me like an entrance to a subdivision, less than a non-profit foundation. I was used to these kinds of organizations being housed in office buildings.

But there it rests, at the mouth of the loop of the neighborhood, an understated building and small parking lot, built in the style of the houses around it. The community center is home to offices, and resident mailboxes, at which a community member can often be seen stopping to pick up mail and chat with a neighbor. But, the community room takes up most of the space. It’s large and welcoming, with high ceilings, large round tables, and a corner reserved for the younger community members – a bright rug for sitting on, tiny tables and chairs, a picture book library, boxes full of stuffed animals and toys, and a closet full of every art supply you could
imagine. Double doors, glass-paned with green trim, line both long walls of the room, leading to the foyer on one side and, on the other, opening up onto a large green space.

It is outside the community center that my most vivid memories of this place take shape. The lawn sprawls for yards, green as though there was never a drought here. The playground, almost always occupied, yields fun for all ages. A mini soccer goal, a picnic table, and a wooden gazebo sit on the edges of the field, though I have most often seen them climbed on by the older youth, to the dismay of an adult or two. Most important in this scene, though, is the sky.

In the shadow of Mt. Tom, trees are scattered about only on the outskirts of the neighborhood, and none old enough to block the view. I am struck by it most at dusk, as the mountain’s shadow creeps closer and the stars come out (they are brighter here, I think). I remember a late spring evening that followed a water balloon fight, pushing a staff member’s four-year-old on the swings as the mosquitoes started to bite. Or, one of the last warm nights this October, the clouds starting to spit little raindrops and the dark slowly overtaking the youths’ faces until it was time to go inside.

Hometown is home to the stories I’m about to tell you, and, figuratively or literally, to many of the people who play significant roles in them. I’m telling you about what it’s like to be at Hometown in preparation for discussing what Hometown and its programs do, and the larger context that informs Hometown’s significance with respect to the child welfare system. Obviously, the place I have described is one rooted firmly in community and togetherness, or as Marla, the Hometown community facilitator describes it: “creating a we” (Interview). In order to start to investigate at FAM and the support that exists there, some knowledge about the organizations, people, and systems that inform its work is necessary. A vivid description of this place is just the first step. This chapter discusses some contextual information that relates to this
research. As an introduction to the various components of this study, this chapter is not
ehaustive, but should serve to ground the reader in the world this research has sprung out of.
First, in order to understand what Hometown and its community answer to, I will quickly
describe how the Massachusetts child welfare system functions, and how it can affect the
families it touches. Next, I will explain what Hometown, FAM, and Our Voices are, as well as
discuss how they interact with one another. Finally, I will attend to some specific contextual
matters of this project, discussing my methods and positionality, and defining how the terms of
“youth” and “adult” will be used in this project as defined by the context in which FAM exists.

More About the Contextual World - Foster Care, Hometown, FAM, and Our Voices

I came to Our Voices as a volunteer through an interest in youth theatre and performance,
but with admittedly little contextual knowledge about the larger FAM program, the Hometown
Foundation as its umbrella organization, and foster care in general. It took awhile for me to be
able to see the larger picture of how the pieces of this programming fit together. Hometown’s
intergenerational housing community, its youth leadership program, FAM, and the arts elective
portion of that program, Our Voices, work directly in response to the child welfare system,
answering to some of its effects, and filling in gaps it leaves behind in the lives of family and
youth involved with it. When I began volunteering at FAM, I knew very little about how foster
care and adoption function in our country, and in Massachusetts in particular. I imagine some
readers might be in a similar position, so before I describe the organizations and programs of
interest that serve those populations, I’ll first briefly give some context on the child welfare
system as a whole so that we can understand what these organizations seek to support.
Child welfare departments are state-administered agencies that oversee affairs related to child abuse and neglect, as well as foster care and adoption. In Massachusetts, the child welfare agency is the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The scope of DCF involves making determinations about the safety of children in homes throughout the state, and taking a variety of steps to insure their safety. DCF also oversees the care of youth whose parents surrender custody, or are no longer alive. Through DCF, child abuse and neglect can be reported and social workers are dispatched to assess whether or not children should remain in their homes. If a child is removed from their home, or if they don’t have living parents, DCF will then place them in foster placements with family (kinship care), foster parents (non-kinship care), or in a residential facility. These are also referred to as “residential programs,” or simply “programs,” and serve a variety of needs of youth in foster care, some more clinically inclined than others (Child Welfare Information Gateway).

After children are removed, a social worker evaluates the needs of biological families and provides supports toward reunifying parents and children. These often look like anger management or parenting classes, drug rehabilitation, or welfare assistance. Though reunification of biological parents is the basic goal for all those separated by foster care, it isn’t always possible. Case managers work with parents to form what is called a “permanency plan,” outlining steps to achieve a permanent living situation for youth in foster care. For some youth, this permanency plan does involve reunification with biological parents. However, many youth are adopted from foster care, and some youth remain in out of home care for years, moving from home to home frequently over the course of that time up until they age out, leaving the system at 18 or, extending care until 21. Adolescents in foster care whose permanency plan involves
"independent living," or leaving foster care without being adopted or reuniting with biological parents, are called “transition age.” (Child Welfare Information Gateway)

Though removing youth from their biological families is sometimes in their interest, the foster care apparatus can also be imperfect. In our society, the child welfare system functions to keep youth and families safe, but it is also often an engine of fragmentation of families, difficulty, and oppression, sometimes intensely so. Literature and anecdotes of former and current foster youth prove that involvement in the child welfare system is often linked with trauma and hardship, both from abuse and neglect predating foster care, and sustained in care (Samuels 2009). Regardless of the reason for involvement with the child welfare system, separation of biological families and placement with foster families and/or in residential programs are very often difficult experiences for those affected.

Not only can removal from home and placement in foster care be traumatic for youth, I feel it’s important to mention that the child welfare system also represents a form of social control over poor and, often, Black and brown parents. In his book, Don Lash deploys a marxist analysis of “disproportionality” or the over representation of Black and brown children and youth in care. We know that poverty and involvement with the child welfare system are linked for many reasons, especially when it comes to the ways that poor families are regulated and surveilled by the public assistance apparatuses they interact with (Lash 2017). Lash and others argue that this phenomena is a product of racialized poverty in which Black and brown parents are more likely to be blamed for being unable to care for their children in ways that the state deems appropriate. Lash writes, “[a]n economic order that consigns 40 percent of Black children to poverty will necessarily overrepresent Black children in foster care” (49).
I tell you this less as an all-out indictment of the child welfare system and more to paint a picture of the system to which Hometown, FAM, and Our Voices programming, and thus, this study respond. I have come to understand from researching the topic, but most importantly, from youth at FAM, that involvement with the child welfare system is incredibly hard and painful, more often than not. On an individual and societal level, the child welfare system often fractures families, and marginalizes those with whom it interacts, even while attempting to ensure their safety.

The Hometown Foundation seeks to repair some of this through its mission: “every child rooted in family and community” (Hometown Foundation). Founded in 2006, Hometown is an intergenerational housing community home to foster and adoptive families as well as retired people, numbering over 100 residents in total (MacQuarrie 2015). The community aims to support and care for its members, using its intergenerational nature to meet one another’s needs. Retired community members often babysit their neighbors’ children, and older kids help shovel snow in the winter. Additionally, supported by a variety of administrative, clinical, and program staff, Hometown provides different services and programming for its residents, including monthly community teas, drop-in homework time, discussions, and workshops. Staff attend to foster and adoptive children’s clinical needs, and help them achieve educational and professional goals through group and one-on-one support. For example, since its founding, none of the children who have lived at Hometown have dropped out of school, and all who have applied for college have been accepted (MacQuarrie 2015). Though these statistics are not necessarily the only markers of success for youth or the Hometown community, they do speak to the high investment that the community makes in foster and adoptive youth.
It’s under this umbrella that FAM sits. As a group for youth both affiliated with the Hometown Community and not, FAM Youth Leadership Project offers a space for those ages 14-24 who have experienced foster care and adoption to come together. Through games, activities, field trips, service projects, and workshops, youth are able to form relationships and share their stories.

The membership of FAM varies from year to year, often shifting even over the course of the season. There is limited data on its demographics, however, as of late February, staff estimated that of the 18 youth participating at the time (many of whom have since stopped coming), 4 were in foster homes, 9 were in residential care, an unidentified number were adopted or living independently, and 2 of these youth lived in the Hometown community. At the time, 13 identified as “female,” and 5 identified as “male,” and 5 identified as LGBTQ. No data on the racial identities of FAM youth was available, but I would estimate that 60 or 70 percent of youth are youth of color, whose specific ethnic identities I am unsure of, and others are white. Of the six staff people that work directly with the FAM program on a regular basis (including teaching artists), 3 identify as women, 2 identify as men, and one identifies as non binary. Though I am not certain as to how they identify, an additional two staff, that I am aware of, have vocally disclosed that they are LGBTQ. Half of these staff members are people of color, and half are white.

The FAM program works with these youth through three pillars: change, teach, and build community (refca.net), and operates through three facets: Our Connections, a casual, social space with activities, field trips, and service projects; Our Council, a space for participants to make decisions about FAM programming; and Our Voices, a performance group co-facilitated by teaching artists from Growing Forest Theater, a local arts non-profit.
Founded in 1976, Growing Forest Theater is an arts integration organization that seeks to engage, enhance, and inspire learning through artistic process and performance. Growing Forest teaching artists do residencies in schools, working with students to perform plays based on curricular themes, work with teachers to build strategies for arts integration, as well as perform educational theatre, and collaborate with other community organizations to use integrate arts into youth development and social service programming.

The Our Voices strand of FAM emerged five years ago when a mutual benefactor suggested that FAM and Growing Forest collaborate on creating a performance that would enable youth to share their stories creatively, as is one of the missions of the group (YouthReach Grant Application). Since then, Sam and Oscar, two teaching artists from Growing Forest and Hometown staff have collaborated to support youth in writing, compiling, and performing an original piece based on their experiences with foster care and adoption.

Our Voices is just one part of FAM programming, but plays a significant role in the shape of the year at FAM. The following is a picture of the Our Voices calendar for the year as of mid February, laid out visually:
The FAM and Our Voices calendar looks slightly different every year and often changes as things progress, but in general, FAM meets every Wednesday for dinner and programming, with additional Our Council meetings on alternate weeks. This year, throughout the fall, one Wednesday a month was devoted to Our Voices rehearsal for ensemble building and content generating. The rest of the meetings were Our Connections, with more casual, social activities as well as a handful of service and field trips. In the spring, weekly meetings became Our Voices rehearsals, leading up to performances in late April. Our Council meetings and other activities sometimes occurred at other times throughout the week.

This project originally emerged from my own interests in theatre, and as such, with a focus on the Our Voices portion of FAM programming. However, as the project evolved, it became clear that supporting relationships existed in and spanned both Our Voices and broader FAM programming, though each context created specific meaning. As such, my fieldwork addresses all of FAM programming, in addition to speaking to the unique work that occurs in Our Voices rehearsals. My analysis focuses on FAM broadly, while understanding that Our Voices makes up a key part of that space.

Methods and Positionality

In order to further introduce this project, this section will detail my research methods as well as discuss some of the ways that my positionality has been a consideration along the way. When I first began work on this project, I had already been volunteering at FAM for about six months. The methodology for this project grew out of what I had already observed about the space, and the questions I knew I wanted to ask.
I began the project in the spring of 2017 by discussing my questions and goals with staff at Hometown, and getting approval from the organization to conduct observational and interview research during the following school year. Over the next couple of months, I further developed my project and sought approval from Hampshire College’s Institutional Review Board.

From October 2017 through March 2018, I observed FAM meetings for my research along with carrying out my responsibilities as a volunteer. During these meetings, I took very limited notes, mostly recording the order of activities and a few interactions that seemed important as they happened. Following these meetings, I typed up detailed fieldnotes recording my observations from the night, and reactions and thoughts as they evolved. Throughout this process, my priority was fulfilling my role as a volunteer, and so, in practice, I leaned more toward “participant” than “observer.”

Over the course of this time, I also conducted interviews with 4 youth and 5 adults involved in the FAM community. These interviews lasted between six minutes and an hour and ten minutes, and were conducted in participant offices, communal space at Hometown, a local cafe, and in one case, a participant’s home. Interviews focused on the ways that participants understood FAM as a space, their relationships within it, support at FAM, and the challenges they dealt with as members of the FAM community. Due to my other academic commitments, and the developing nature of my research questions, the bulk of these interviews occurred between January and April. I conducted interviews and observations while writing simultaneously, each of these processes informing one another.

In writing this paper, I have aimed to use this observational and interview data to depict and describe support at FAM as accurately as possible. Due to my own sensibilities as a student and artist, I have approached this project from a creative point of view as well as an academic
one. In many ways, I have experienced FAM in the form of stories, and I come to writing them as a storyteller. As such, portions of this paper move toward creative portrayals of support at FAM, and may read less academic in tone. Additionally, I have sought to make this writing as accessible to all audiences as possible. Some of the sources I engage with are scholarly, and so, to an extent, adopting this language has been somewhat unavoidable. However, where possible, I have tried to keep my language conversational by making stylistic choices like using contractions, and using untraditional sentence structures. Finally, I have chosen to refer to observational anecdotes in the past tense, but discuss interviews in the present tense. This choice is both stylistic, and serves to honor that study participants are analyzers of their own experiences in the same way that I am, therefore giving their voices similar weight to my own. I hope that my writing style serves to accurately portray support at FAM as I have experienced it, and in such a way that all audiences can find an entry point.

As I have mentioned, my relationship to my field site and therefore, participants in this project, pre-existed its development. I knew going in that this would mean that my presence at FAM was primarily and intrinsically personal, and that could not be separate from my participation as a researcher. Many critical ethnographers have discussed the impact of personal relationships and experiences on their research, and maintain that research is “coexperienced,” that the line between the “Self” and the “Other” is not so distinct, and the researcher cannot truly be objective or distanced (Lassiter 2005). It is safe to say, this has been the case for me, and I feel that it’s important to name here. As someone who is involved in support at FAM, the experiences and relationships I am studying have also been my own, and I bring these into this writing knowing that I cannot look at them from a distance. However, I believe this closeness
also creates possibility in what it allows me to see, and what knowledge study participants are comfortable sharing with me.

In addition to my relationships at FAM, identity and experience have also played a role in my positionality. As a young, white, middle class, lesbian who has not experienced the child welfare system firsthand, my perspectives are informed by my experiences. In his chapter on ethnography, identity, and knowledge production, Samer Shehata argues that the researcher’s identity is inherently productive, and that subjective experiences stemming from identity allow us to learn about social worlds (Shehata 2006). I, too, believe that identity is productive, both in the possibility for connection it creates, as well as the potentially restrictive dynamics inherent when identities and experiences aren’t shared.

For example, age, sexuality, and gender offer me a personal lens through which to engage with these issues when they come up, when it comes to things I have also experienced, in particular. Conversely, there are many people at FAM with whom I do not share experiences, especially when it comes to race, class, and the child welfare system. In this way whiteness, class privilege, and family background play a role in what I am able to see, discuss, and analyze. This project is necessarily different than it would be if it had been conducted by someone who shared those identities with many of the people at FAM.

In light of these dynamics, I have sought to be my most mindful in observing, discussing, and writing about experiences I have not shared and identities I don’t hold. For me, this looks like relying on others’ expertise about their lives, avoiding collapsing difference, checking assumptions about other people’s experiences, and working toward reflexivity in writing and analysis.
Defining “Youth” and “Adults”

This project seeks to understand supporting relationships between youth and adults in programming like FAM, where age is important but complex. In order to explore this topic, a sense of who is a part of these relationships is key. By way of introducing the world of FAM, I must first define, as well as trouble, what categories of “adult” and “youth” actually are in this context. In this section, I use experiences navigating my own liminal age status as a way to interrogate what these words mean and how they hold up.

Hometown bills FAM as a youth leadership project, serving those aged 14-24. Its staff and programs emphasize things like “youth voice” to involve youth in decision making processes for the program. Hometown staff, residential program staff, and volunteers are grouped into the larger category of “adults,” even in their various roles and ages. The language of “youth” and “adults” abounds but their definitions, though still somewhat muddled, took a long time to become clearer to me.

When I first started volunteering at FAM, 14-24 struck me as an odd age-range. I was reminded of attending an LGBTQ youth program at 14 that served a similar age grouping and sitting through a highly uncomfortable sex-ed presentation with a couple of 21 year olds who seemed to me to have more in common with the adult presenters than myself in terms of age. Didn’t 24 year olds and 14 year olds have vastly different experiences of the world? What did it mean to group them together in the same category of “youth?” But more pressingly, and with a little discomfort, I was unsure of how I fit into these categories given that, at the time, I was only 20 years old myself. And so I proceeded, ready to let others define me at FAM but still holding on to my own understanding of myself as an adult.
When I was in high school, I found what I now know to be called “youth organizing” in the form of an LGBTQ safe schools organization. Previously having been called things like “student,” “teen,” and even “kid” by adults in my various communities at school and at synagogue, the word “youth” felt like something that fit. It was powerful, even political, and it felt like something I owned, rather than a title bestowed upon me by others. Because the organization served those in K-12 schools, “youth,” for me, ended upon graduation from high school. This rather rigid definition evolved from the framework of school-based organizing where one’s age and schooling status correlated to where one fit within institutional power, yes, but also from a certain degree of resentment of the privileges brought by legal adulthood. Additionally, I observed young adults in my life who held tight to those privileges at the expense of those just a few years younger than them. I went into college having decided that I had become an adult, and that my time as a youth was behind me. The more time I spent at FAM, though, the more this definition would shift.

Just as K-12 schools served as the backdrop for my definition of “youth,” so does the child welfare system serve as one for definitions of “youth” at FAM. In Massachusetts, state care for those in foster care traditionally ends at 18, though can be extended until 21 if a young person is in school, a training program, has a job, or has a disability that prevents them from doing any of the above. Federally funded, state-administered “independent living programs” seek to serve these “transition age youth” who are ending their time in foster care without supports others of the same age might traditionally have. Transition age youth often leave state care without a safety net of parents or biological family to help with rent, tuition, cost of living, or to support them in learning life skills that 18-21 year olds generally must. Though this is not true for all transition age youth, as many have communities of support in chosen or birth families, there still
exists a need for a certain, specialized kind of support, one that independent living programs do not always provide in a sustained or consistent manner.

As such, FAM serves 18-24 year olds in order to provide services, community, and support to a population without the same safety net available to many young adults who haven’t been involved with the child welfare system. The definition of youth becomes more flexible given that the child welfare system, to a degree, “adultifies” the youth it attempts to serve, often standing between youth and a “conventional” childhood. In their article on self reliance and survival in youth exiting care, Samuels and Pryce write: “[the] need to be fully mature was not only tied to experiencing early conferrals of independence or autonomy. Youth also noted how their childhoods and early adulthoods were marked by realities they associated with being in foster care” (1203). Experiences in care mean that youth might deal with issues associated with adulthood, therefore being constructed as adults earlier than their peers who have not been in care. Though one might typically consider 18-24 year olds adults, the context of foster care means that folks in this age range are defined a little differently. At FAM, the category of youth is extended to accommodate those rendered in need of a specific kind of support and community because of their involvement, either past or present, with the child welfare system.

As my time at FAM went on, I began to wrestle with who I was when it came to these categories of “adult” and “youth.” I didn’t often bring up my age, knowing that there was at least one FAM participant who was a year older than me, and perhaps fearing it might diminish whatever sort of authority I thought I was supposed to have. I also started to pay attention to how the language of these categories is used. A few Hometown staff often refer to participants as “the teens” and “the teenagers” alongside “youth” even though more than a few are 20 or older. At the same time, most of the adults seem to understand me as an adult, grouping me with others
much older than me, and involving me in discussions about youth that seemed to be private. I began to wonder, if not age, what the distinction was between me and the youth given how close in age many of us were.

Early in the year, I attended a national foster youth organizing conference. While my role was not clearly defined, I was asked to accompany one of the youth leaders who was flying to the conference early so that she would not have to fly alone, and so I understood myself to be there to support her. Similarly to FAM, those who called themselves “youth” at the conference tended to be between the ages of 14 and 24, sometimes even a bit older. All of the youth participants were either currently in state care or foster care alums. Many of those who identified as adult supporters were foster care alums themselves, and those who weren’t were quite a bit older than me. It became clear that I was pretty much the only person there in my age group who had not experienced foster care to some degree. Quickly, I dropped the word “adult” from my introduction, and simply said: “I’m Emma, I’m with FAM, I’m a supporter” when asked. What was it that made me an adult, or not, in this situation? Surely not having experienced foster care isn’t what separates me from others close in age. But then again, I wasn’t there for the same reasons and couldn’t claim the same expertise as those I had been asked there to support.

Not long before the conference, Jace, a veteran member of FAM and 19 years old, and I had a brief conversation. It came up that I was, at the time, 21. “What?” Jace asked, “so you’re not an intern?” referencing the few young adults Hometown employs as interns on a somewhat transitory basis who work with the organization more broadly. “No,” I answered, “I’m a volunteer.” I expected some indignance and questioning, as is generally his style, something along the lines of: “how come you get to be in charge if you’re not that much older?” But he asked, “why aren’t you just part of the program, then?” This was a good question, “well, I don’t
share some of the experiences you guys do.” He thought about this and said, “that’s okay, we’ve had members like that before. One or two actually, you could be the third!” I smiled, surprised at his reaction, and told him I liked supporting them better, to which he remarked that I could help write the show and perform in it if I wanted. I told him that I’m more of a backstage person, anyway, and the conversation ended there.

Here, Jace’s discovery of my proximity in age and his insistence that it could allow me to create with the youth instead of supporting them let me see one of the ways in which categories of adult and youth are constructed at FAM. Jace didn’t ask about where I fell in these categories, didn’t question any sort of authority I might have (which is minimal, anyway), and, in the following months, didn’t really change his behavior toward me, still coming to me with questions and for support with his writing and other interactions. More, it seemed to him an opportunity for me create. Perhaps the fixation with where I fit into certain categories was more my own than anyone else’s.

Embedded in this exchange, however, is the assumption that something about my identity or experience allows me to support Jace instead of the other way around, even though we are very close in age. I have come to think about this more in terms of my purpose at FAM than our similar or different needs. Where Jace comes to build community and make change with others who share his experiences in foster care, I do not share those experiences, and come to FAM instead seeking to support youth in this context and learn from them. In this way, the question of who is supported and who is the supporter is somewhat defined by how and why we access the space. However, implicit in this conversation is the idea that something about my educational and life experiences gives me distance and skills, read: privilege, enough to support, while Jace is more in need of that support. I don’t have an answer as to whether this is right or wrong, or if
that makes me an adult or not. More, I think it’s useful to question assumptions about what makes someone capable of acting as a supporter in this context. Is it age, education, training, identity, experience, something else?

A final anecdote served to expand my notions of categories of adult and youth even further. In early winter, the group took a trip to a local bowling alley. An older one that only offered what I learned was called “candlepin bowling” characterized by smaller pins and balls, and no automated ball return or scoring functions. The bowling alley was of a very particular vintage, with surfaces covered in maroon carpeting and wood-imitation laminate. Cases with bowling trophies lined the walls, with gleaming marbled bowling balls and 99 cent bags of chips available for purchase behind the counter alongside rentals of well-worn bowling shoes. Bumpers had to be put up with a special metal tool, and scoring was done by hand on a convoluted grid with dull golf pencils. We split into teams and the games began with zeal.

As we neared the halfway point in our first game, an argument broke out between two of the youth about whose scoring was correct. Quickly, it escalated to shouting and I found myself in the middle. Both were shouting over each other, Lexi telling Lavender let her speak, and Lavender saying that if Lexi continued to talk to her like that, she would hit her. After a couple moments of this and some urging from me, Lexi walked away and Lavender returned to the scoring, both upset but winding down.

Since I met Lavender, it has been clear that she has played an important role at FAM for a long time. At 23, she is one of the oldest members. Ger institutional memory predates that of most staff members and she acts as a mentor to many of the youth. As such, she is frequently given more responsibilities, and privy to conversations younger youth may not be. Her advice,
when she gives it, is practical, candid, and humorous but not without empathy. Many of the youth who have known her for a long time call her “mama bear.”

At the bowling alley, however, she struggled to maintain this sense of authority and mentorship with Lexi, having clearly pushed each others’ buttons. Later, upon having cooled off a little, Lavender and I talked about it. Between bowling turns we analyzed the disagreement a bit. Who had gotten mad and why, how it had gotten so heated so quickly, and so on. Lavender defended her anger, saying Lexi shouldn’t have questioned her scoring or spoken to her like she had. After some back and forth she said definitively, “you know, you shouldn’t even talk to people who are older than you that way!” and, referring to the director of the program, “it’s not like I’m gonna bitch Sara out like that ‘cause she’s older than me and I respect her!” Quickly it was someone’s turn to bowl, but afterwards we returned to the topic at hand and I asked, “don’t you think it’s also older people’s responsibility to support younger people in staying calm when they’re having a hard time?” This question went unanswered as the game went on.

I tell you this not to illustrate this particular disagreement as especially important, but to draw out conceptions of age and responsibility. Lavender plays an important role in the group as an older member of FAM, but also exhibits things like anger and frustration much the same as younger members. When this happens, adults step in to mediate and process. Though respected and recognized for her experience, Lavender is not left alone to deal with interactions that may be difficult. And neither is she, or anyone else for that matter, punished for their anger.

Of course, when disagreements escalate between youth and adults, these conflicts are also addressed by other staff. I think the key difference here lies in the purpose of the space. One of the main goals of FAM is to support youth in forming relationships, and this includes dealing with conflict. In this way, mediating conflict between youth is part of the work of FAM. When
conflict occurs between youth and adults, the goal of de-escalating and resolving these disagreements lies in supporting the purpose of the space. For example, later in the year, Lavender and Oscar, one of the teaching artists, had a disagreement that led to a conversation in which Lavender lost her temper, and yelled at Oscar for a sustained amount of time. Another staff member was there to mediate, and Oscar excused himself when it was clear that his presence was no longer serving a purpose. Where this interaction may not have been acceptable between peers, and would have perhaps lead to serious consequences in other contexts, at FAM Lavender had support in dealing with her anger, even if it meant Oscar absorbed it momentarily. Later, with the help of other staff, Lavender and Oscar were able to talk about the original conflict, as well as to discuss why Lavender’s tone was not a constructive way to address the issue at hand. Because the purpose of FAM is to support youth, Lavender’s needs were prioritized in that moment, even though it was difficult for Oscar. As such, we can understand that the category of youth at FAM is sometimes defined more by who the space holds, and who holds the space, than by age.

Here, I think, lies an important distinction when it comes to the categories of “youth” and “adult.” Lavender is unique, perhaps, in that she straddles those categories more than others. There are moments when her actions might be characterized as more “adult,” but in difficult moments she has the same support and care at her disposal as a 14 year old FAM member might, despite individualized expectations. Moreover, were Lavender an employee at Hometown and serving in a professional supporting role for the youth, this kind of anger would be less acceptable. Though Lavender may sometimes serve a similar function to Sara, for example, in giving advice or listening to other youth, she has room to lose her temper in a way that Sara, in her professional capacity, cannot.
From all of this, I’ve begun to carve out more useful ways of understanding youth and adulthood at FAM, even if only for myself. A youth conference where “youth” meant something new, 14-24 years old, reminded me that the notion of who is young and who is an adult will always be constructed in the image of the system it responds to, by the world in which it exists. Jace taught me that categories of “youth” and “adult” are, in fact, not always the most useful kind of characterization for understanding people’s relationships to one another. Finally, Lavender taught me that these categories aren’t immutable, consistent, or completely separate from one another. They are moment to moment negotiations of responsibility, capacity, and need. In some moments, for example, Lavender is able to play the role of a caring adult, and in some she needs one herself, and that’s okay.

As I have stated, the waters of this subject are muddy. I don’t necessarily think that who belongs in any category, as real as they are, at any given moment in time can be clear. I know I certainly float between them. However, the language of “youth” and “adult” are prominent ways that people categorize themselves at FAM. Similarly, age and professional capacity are sites of institutional power when it comes to our society broadly and youth programming specifically. As such, I know that these categories can’t be thrown out completely.

So, for the purpose of this paper, I’ll use these rough categories of “youth” and “adult” to describe members of the FAM community. I do this primarily for the sake of clarity, and consistency, and because those are how many FAM community members refer to themselves and others. Though these terms are imperfect, sometimes we need categories to help us understand the world, even if complexly. Moving forward, I’ll refer generally to current FAM program participants as “youth,” and those who come in a professional or assisting capacity (like
Hometown staff, residential program staff, teaching artists, and volunteers) as “adults” knowing that these are flawed and contextual categories.
Chapter 2: Defining Support

This year, Valentine’s Day fell on a Wednesday and so rehearsal for Our Voices did, too. The night started off as it normally does. A couple of the youth who had arrived early and I set about getting chicken alfredo in the oven, rearranging tables so everyone could eat together, putting out “appreciation bags” for youth to write each other nice notes, and setting up chairs in a circle on the rug at one end of the community room. Sara, the director of the FAM program, wasn’t feeling well, in fact she had been sick for some weeks now, and wasn’t much better. “I won’t be able to do much tonight but sit!” she would say and I would reply “that’s totally fine!” knowing she might still be inclined to work herself further toward exhaustion.

With most of our setup done, Lavender, a veteran FAM member, and I headed back into the conference room for a short interview. When we returned, close to starting time for the night’s rehearsal, many more youth had arrived, including Jordan and Maddie. With some time to spare for catching up, Sara gave Maddie a backpack she had filled with some basic necessities. Canned food, a new toothbrush, some warm socks, and so on, as Maddie and Jordan’s financial and living situations had been unstable. They seemed distracted, a little overwhelmed but I chalked it up to something external. As the teaching artists arrived and five o’clock came around, it was time to gather in a circle and rehearsal began.

Over the course of the night it became clear that something was wrong. Jordan was withdrawn during dinner, especially after Sara announced who had been named a Youth Leader, a special, stipended position for veteran members, and he was not chosen. Even afterwards, Maddie was distracted, leaving the stage several times during rehearsal to talk to Jordan, who sat with his head down at a table. When she was on stage rehearsing, Maddie was obviously upset, at one point starting to tear up for no clear reason. As the night went on, scenes were run,
movement sequences choreographed, Sara left for a few minutes to try to make it to an Ash Wednesday service, and Maddie and Jordan slowly stopped participating. When their absence became obvious and at the urging of one of the frustrated teaching artists, I walked back toward the offices to see where they’d gone and ask them to come back.

Maddie sat on the floor in the hall, phone in hand and Jordan paced. Jordan told one of the FAM staff, Dominic, who sat at his desk printing a script for another youth, the story of what had happened earlier that night, and when he noticed I was there, he told me, too.

Jordan had been driving out of Hometown onto the road when he had been pulled over for driving with his high beams on, he had a headlight out. When he asked the officer if that was illegal, the officer got belligerent, threatening to arrest him for questioning an officer. He ran Jordan’s license only to find that it was, unbeknownst to Jordan, suspended. He had a few outstanding tickets he hadn’t been able to pay but had to needed to drive to work and school. “I’m going to tow your car” the officer told him, and Jordan, panicking, called Sara. From what I understand, Sara, tired and sick as she was, walked out to the road and intervened. She talked to the police officer, convinced him to tow the car back to Hometown and not to an impound lot, and paid the fee. It wasn’t clear if Jordan or Maddie could drive the car now, or what would happen if they couldn’t get to work and school.

Back on the floor of the hallway, Jordan looked at me when I asked if he would go back in to rehearsal and said, “no, Emma, we’re not going back in! We lost everything!” Sara came back from her service, debriefed quickly with the teaching artists who had been leading rehearsal while this was going on, unknowingly, and then she and Maddie and Jordan put their heads together and figured out what was next.
When rehearsal ended, we all ran out the door trying to get youth home on time, or to parents waiting to meet in parking lots off of I-91 to make the rest of the drive up to Greenfield, or for some, to homes and families of their own. I watched Sara pile youth, including Maddie and Jordan, into her minivan, and discover it was low on antifreeze. Quickly, she refilled it, slammed the hood down and screeched out of the parking lot, waving at me as she went. I found one of the youth, Danielle sitting on a retaining wall outside in the cold, crying. We sat together for a long time but she didn’t say why, Valentine’s Day related, Dominic and I thought. It took some cajoling from the two of us to get her to grab her things and get in my car so I could take her and her sister the short ways home.

This night, though not quite a typical FAM meeting, is a pretty accurate portrayal of what support looks like at FAM and in Our Voices. It’s making dinner, it’s a bag full of canned goods, it’s rehearsal for an original show devised from youths’ experiences with foster care and adoption, it’s sitting outside with someone while they cry, it’s giving someone a ride home, it’s stepping in to keep someone’s car from getting towed. It’s creative, it’s familial, it’s practical, and it’s critical.

At its most basic level, FAM creates a space for youth who have been involved in foster care and adoption to connect, and through Our Voices, also to process, perform, and share their stories. On a day to day basis, though, FAM and Our Voices also serve as a home, a family, a safety net, and a springboard. These, and many, many, many other things, are what FAM has to hold at any given moment. My intention, here, is to depict and describe the ways, varied and sometimes unexpected, that support looks at FAM in order to further our understanding of what support can be and mean, and by way of making visible realities of these relationships that are often invisible.
“Support is Like a Family” - Emotional Support as Familial at FAM

“It’s like a family.” Lavender, at 23, the oldest member of FAM, says decisively when I ask her what support at FAM means to her. “Support is like a family. With me, with everybody, this place is their their safe place, their way of getting out of a bad situation, getting out of the foster care system and just being able to vent their experiences. That is something that helps us, personally” (Interview). Lavender’s words here represent a typical understand of FAM among youth and adults. FAM is family, and families are supportive. In this section, I’ll describe what familial support looks like. This is a type of support I think can be thought of as a kind of emotional support grounded in community, as well as defined by the child welfare system, and is a striking feature at FAM.

Lexi, a longtime FAM member, responds “it’s also a family to me” when I ask her what FAM means to her. She continues: “we do so much together, the way we act around each other is like a family, FAM family” (Interview). The environment at FAM is familial at its core, many of the youth who have been a part of FAM for some time have a natural ease with each other, and are up to date on each other’s lives, but that’s only a little of what family means at FAM.

When I ask Indigo, another of the youth, what FAM means to her, she says,

It’s just a good place to rely on people, cause especially being in the system you don’t always have those people that you can go to... And the feeling of family and things like that. And it’s just a safe environment to be in and talk about what you need to talk about without going to therapy.

So it’s different than therapy in some way?
Yeah, yeah. Sometimes it’s like group therapy but other times it’s not. It’s more like hanging out with a family at dinnertime and talking about your day and things like that. (Interview)

There is comfort in family for Indigo, a kind of support that’s not forced like therapy can be, but still allows her to feel safe and be open. Familial support at FAM can mean things are more
relaxed, but also still substantive in that there is space to discuss important things as if with family, and with regularity. It’s significant, too, she says, given her experiences in foster care, where this comfort and safety is sometimes inconsistent or altogether absent.

When I ask Sara, the FAM program director how she came to Hometown, she tells me this:

I came to Hometown because I had a personal desire to support young people who hadn’t had family support, or who didn’t have family support as they become an adult. I spent from 16 to 23 without a family, and so a lot of them are going through the same thing, for one reason or another, uhm, and I wanted to be there for them for that and it’s really fulfilling. I’m getting to do that for a lot of them and sometimes it’s a success, and sometimes it’s a challenge, but at least I can be there and tell them the things that would have helped me (Interview).

Sara’s commitment to supporting young people comes from a place of knowing what it’s like to go without the support of one’s family as a young person and in becoming an adult. The work she does is about being family support when someone doesn’t have family to consistently or reliably support them. It’s clear that support at FAM needs to be familial in order to meet the youths’ specific needs.

Among those at FAM, a language and ethic of family is also common. Many of the youth call Sara “mama Sara,” or use “grandpa” for a longtime volunteer who’s in his eighties. Sometimes Lavender calls me her sister. Beneath nicknames, though, is the ideal of a “FAM family.” When I ask Lavender about the specific ways that people at FAM support each other she says,

Well we’re all there, you know, we all lean on each other, uhm, especially if we’re feeling down, we try to figure it out. Yeah we have our fights, that’s what families do. But in the end we still love each other, we still care for each other, regardless of our issues and we try to leave everything outside of the door. And you know be present and with our FAM family. (Interview)
What Lavender speaks to is a commitment to being “there” for each other at FAM. This means asking for help, working toward solving each others’ problems, talking through emotions, holding each other close when disagreements happen (and they do), and “just listening and not being judgmental” (Lavender Interview). Familial support at FAM creates a space that invites talking about experiences and feelings, and holds space for processing them, which necessitates a commitment to listening.

Similarly, when I ask teaching artist, Oscar, how he understands himself as a part of support at FAM, he responds, “I think the way I support most is by listening. I think that what people do a lot of, and I know I do a lot of, is talk. Uhm, well a lot of times, I find that the youth just wanna be heard.” Listening plays a vital role in familial support for youth at FAM. I’ve seen this in practice during day-to-day conversations, as well group activities where facilitators open up space for youth to talk about the things going on in their lives and others respond with affirmation, commentary, and advice when asked.

Given, also, that things at FAM are not always perfectly peaceful, listening comes in handy. One of the youth, Jace, tells me: “if you have a problem, there’s always someone you can talk to. And as much as we may make fun of each other a lot, it’s because, yeah, we’re youth, we do that, there’s always at least someone that, and usually just about anybody, that will sit there and talk to you and help you figure it out” (Interview). When conflicts arise within the group, or youth come in needing to talk, finding someone who will listen is a primary way of finding support, grounded in the idea of family.

It’s not just the adults who create this kind of space, either. Not only does familial supporting mean holding others’ emotions, it’s also a support of giving. Knowingly, I ask Lavender about how she, too, is a supportive person. She says:
I’m called mama bear!
Yeah! Do you wanna tell me a bit about that?
Well, I’ve been here the longest, and I’m actually the oldest of the group. I don’t know how they came across it honestly, uhm, but I am, like, the protector of them. I protect them, like, they’re my kids, because they can’t speak up for themselves, I try to speak up for them, I try to encourage them, I try to, you know, give them a little push in the right direction… I, you know, I help people open up about themselves to other people. And some people are really shy so I try to be that person to really open them up and it really progresses. And I think that’s why they call me mama bear because I’m just a protective person (Interview).

Lavender plays a special role as a vocal and outspoken peer support for other youth at FAM. Here, she draws attention to an important aspect of familial support when she discusses why others call her “mama bear.” It’s not so much that Lavender does or can always protect others from things in their lives that might harm them, but that her intentions are protective. As a quality of familial support, Lavender’s protectiveness is tantamount to fierce care and belief in others, which youth understand as motherly. In this way, Lavender’s role as a support for others at FAM is familial in its magnitude, as well as its intention. At FAM, people feel strongly about one another, support each other in the same manner, and name it as family.

In the same way that familial support means that youth are welcome to bring their emotions with them to FAM, it also means that FAM becomes an emotional place. During an interview, Sara tells me about a recent service trip:

You know we were at the soup kitchen over the weekend and one of the youth was crying in a corner and the director came over and was like “what’s going on? Was she hurt? Did somebody do something?” and I was like, “no that just happens sometimes when they get to be around us, give her a minute” and he was like “okay…” And then I could see him kind of questioning, like, “are these kids stable, like are they okay to be here” and I said “you know we offer a therapeutic supportive environment for kids that have experienced trauma and don’t live at home, and when you don’t have a safe family to come to and this is your family…” (Sara Interview)

She trails off, then, addressing me, asks, “you know how do you feel when you finally get to see your mom after six months? ‘oh I’m relieved and maybe I’m just gonna go lay in my bed for a
while just to be home!’ right?” Struck by how accurately she’s described the relief of getting home to family after a long time away, I say, “exactly!” She goes on: “that’s how they feel when they come to us and so it’s like, ‘oh nobody’s gonna get mad or ask me what’s going on. I can just sit here and cry for a minute’ is what we do for them” (Interview).

Here, Sara describes the ways that FAM has to hold emotions, and sometimes, emotional outbursts that youth can’t process in other places where they don’t feel safe. Sara explains, ‘cause as long as they don’t feel safe they stay in that fight or flight mode and they put on a front of being, like, solid and fine and everything’s okay. But when they get into a safe place, they end up breaking down and so we’ll have behaviors here, because it’s a safe place, that they won’t do other places. A lot of crying, a lot of needing to be alone, a lot of walking away (Sara, Interview).

What Sara describes is possible because FAM is a place of familial support. Strong emotions often characterize FAM because youth are supported in a familial manner, making it home for many, as safe as something can be. Jace, too, tells me that FAM is significant in this way for him, saying: “I don’t trust that many people, so the fact that I let anyone help me is kind of surprising in general” (Interview). As such, FAM becomes a place of support in the same way that family is for many (at least ideally), a place to be completely one’s self, totally vulnerable, to feel things fully, and to trust that things are as safe as they can be.

It should be mentioned, though, that the closeness of family also comes with its difficulties. Indigo alludes to this, saying: “We have our times, just like all families do!” (Interview). To this effect, Jace says, “there are always gonna be fights between people, there’s always going to be the problem of one person is having a bad day and someone else doesn’t get that, so that there’s gonna be a problem with them, but at the same time, we’ll always figure it out” (Interview). In close quarters and close relationships, conflicts, disagreements, and misunderstandings happen, but resolving these issues is also a part of being family. Lexi, one of
the youth, and I are talking about the role of staff at FAM when she says, “if something goes wrong they’re there to, like, mediate it, if someone’s upset they’re either there, or another youth or young adult is there to help the other family member” (Interview). Like Lexi says, things go wrong at FAM sometimes, but when support for these moments is familial, it means that there is a safety net made up of family members.

The kind of attention to youth’s personal and emotional lives I have described can be understood as familial given the ways that folks at FAM talk about what they mean to one another. The concept of a FAM family is an incredibly strong defining metaphor for the work that folks do for each other in the space, and it’s one I hear often when people talk about what FAM means to them. It is space to feel and to share, to hold and to give, to listen and to be.

I hope to have depicted how meaningful having somewhere to call “family” can be for many of the youth who may or may not have family that can fully hold them emotionally. Even for those for whom family is incredibly complicated, FAM is its own special version of family. Familial support can be a source of incredible safety and empowerment for youth who call FAM home.

Additionally, I have aimed to have teased apart exactly what we mean when we say that a space or a group of people are “family” and to have used the concept of emotional support to define some of the things I have seen at FAM as familial support. I’ve described the ways that familial support is necessitates an unconditional kind of emotional support, is characterized by strong care, as well as a space open to feeling in all of its forms. I draw your attention to this kind of support to highlight what it is that FAM has to be for the youth it serves. Sometimes, I think, definitions of support erase the intricacies of supportive relationships, labeling something as supportive without actually painting a picture of what that means. This is true, too, when we say
something is “like a family.” FAM offers us a lens through which to understand family and strong emotional support as tied to each other, thereby defining support.

Obviously, there is a lot that families do for one another that FAM can’t necessarily, due to the fact that, in addition to being a space of familial support, it’s also a structured program for youth. However, I think that understanding support as familial when it’s out of the context of biological, nuclear, or “traditional” family allows us to better conceptualize what folks who are disconnected from aforementioned types of families might need from a space. More broadly, asking questions about familial support can help us to expand ideas about what a supportive space can be, and lead us toward a language that might help us name what adults and youth in supportive relationships are to one another. When supporting relationships exist between and across professional roles as well as generations, as with youth and adults who have caring relationships with one another, even when an adult is acting in a professional supporting capacity, finding words to name that relationship can be difficult. Is it a friendship? A mentorship? A teacher-student relationship? I will explore these boundary dilemmas in the third chapter of this piece, but I mention here that the idea of “family” grants us another set of tools with which to name supporting relationships across generations, as it functions at FAM.

“Getting My Words Out There” - Creative Support in Our Voices

Familial support at FAM, as previously discussed, serves as a foundation for supporting relationships in that space. These relationships come into play in other specific ways where the creative programming at FAM, Our Voices, is concerned. Lavender, as a founding member, tells me a little bit about how FAM and Our Voices got started:

There was a whole bunch of people together in a group and we decided that we wanted to start up a group for kids who were in foster care, or who have been
adopted, or who, you know, who’ve been through the system.... And then once we
did that, our group started progressing and about three years later it really started.
*Yeah? And is that when Our Voices started or after that?*
That was about a year and a half later
*Okay, so do you wanna tell me about that?*
Uhm, what do you want to know?
*Like, what do you remember of it getting started? How was it? What was it like?*
Well, uh our, one of our directors, he introduced the coordinators of Our Voices…
and they then, uhm, you know, got us interested in performing and getting us to
speak our stories, you know, and do ‘em here, privately, but, you know, really put
ourselves out there and share our stories with the world (Lavender, Interview)

Now, some years later, Our Voices has become a major part of the work FAM does. Although
the calendar shifts from year to year, from about January to April, Wednesday nights are spent
solely rehearsing the Our Voices performance. Over the course of this time, youth brainstorm
and write their experiences, and choose the stories they want to tell to an audience. The teaching
artists, Sam and Oscar, facilitate this process by planning writing and devising activities, pulling
the youth’s pieces together around a theme, and directing the youth in their final performance.

The Our Voices writing, rehearsal, and performance process makes space for youth to be
open and creative about difficult experiences with the child welfare system, thereby processing
and growing from them. I believe that this important work that FAM does is creative support,
and that investigating it can help us better understand the variety of ways that support for youth
can look.

In midwinter, teaching artist, Sam, led a devising activity inspired by one of the youth’s
writing. Though he wasn’t there to share, Sam talked about a piece he had shown her about
finding solace in nature after suffering a loss. We gathered in a circle on the floor, and Sam
spread out pictures of forests, sky, flames, grass and sun, and snow on bare branches. In the
middle of the circle she set a rock, a large conch shell, a lantern, and a clear bowl of water. When
asked about a time she found comfort in nature, Indigo picked up the bowl of water. She talked
about being having a difficult time, and running into the woods to sit by a stream, burning leaves and dropping them into the water to be swept away, finding relief in watching them go. When it was Alexis’ turn, she held the conch shell while she told the group about walking on the beach on Coney Island with her parents, feeling peaceful, a long time ago.

After all stories were told, Sam split the youth into four groups, each of which chose a type of nature and, with help from the teaching artists, created a movement sequence that embodied emotions related to a stream, the ocean, fire, and the moon. Over the course of the next several meetings, these movement sequences were built upon to create a longer, connected movement piece called *I Need to Take a Walk* about the ways that nature has offered the youth solace, comfort, and safety over the course of their lives.

This is just one of the ways that creation at Our Voices happens. Often, it looks a little more traditional, with a group discussion about the youth’s stories and experiences around a theme, some writing activities, and editing to follow. Regularly, youth bring in pieces they have written at home to be shared with the group and integrated into the production. Last year’s show included scenes like, *Letters to Past and Future Self* during which youth spoke words of encouragement to their younger and older selves into mirrors held by the ensemble, *Dear DCF*, which the youth wrote using the thoughts and feelings they had about their experiences with DCF, including the ways they needed DCF to change to better support them, and *Glory* a dance about people in the youths’ lives who had affected them positively and negatively.

Indigo, when asked how she got involved with Our Voices, tells me:

I got to know about it from a caseworker I had. He also heard it from another caseworker, and he said, “oh you should go check it out, they have a performance coming on,” and I was like “okay, I’ll go check it out.” And I really liked the way it was, and how it seemed to be all together, and I liked the idea of sharing my story and getting my words out there (Interview)
Indigo was attracted to Our Voices because it would give her a platform to talk about her experiences in foster care, and in her way. Though it is only her second year with Our Voices, Indigo has a clear artistic voice that she doesn’t hesitate to make clear, suggesting staging and dialogue changes in rehearsal, and approaching teaching artists independently to discuss her thoughts. Her writing style speaks for itself, too, leaning toward the abstract, with powerful images and plays on words. In one piece, titled *To FAM With Love*, she writes, of herself, I think: “She has the soul that’s filled with love but a mind full of thoughts trying to wage war with their battlefield on her vocal cords.” At Our Voices, Indigo has the space to tell her stories using her own words, and people to listen and help shape those stories; this is creative support.

When I ask how her time at Our Voices has affected her, she says, “I think it’s made me more willing to tell the things that I don’t really talk about, like the piece that I’ve written… is about a situation that I lightly brought up in a group [discussion] that we had and [Sam] ran with it.” She laughs at how her comment turned into the basis for *I Need to Take a Walk*, “I’m like, ‘fuck!’” Then, she goes on to explain her piece:

I was with my biological brother for a while, for the second time, and I had been having a really hard time, it was the first time I had started self injuring and things like that, and, uhm, then I discovered fire! And I started playing around with fire a lot. But I feel like all the people saw when I was playing with that was, like, they thought I was going down a different path. What was actually happening is I was taking how I felt and putting it into something else and then destroying that other thing instead of myself, uhm, and I got labeled as a fire starter instead of somebody actually paying attention to the issue I was trying to deal with. So I’m writing about that. (Interview)

This is a story I have not heard in full until she tells me during our interview. The day she told it in rehearsal, mentioned above, it was in much broader terms, and has turned into a poetic monologue since. It’s clear to me that this story is a difficult one, but also one that feels necessary for her to tell on her own terms. Even though she wasn’t expecting Sam to “run with
it,” the creative support Indigo has found at Our Voices allowed her to revisit a moment in which she was not heard by those who were supposed to support her, instead labeled as a fire starter by DCF workers.

Indigo’s experience of creative support has also allowed her stories to evolve over time. After she tells me this story, she adds, “I just feel more comfortable in the second year talking about things like that [instead of] just the light things I talked about and shared about last year” (Interview). Creative support for the youth’s stories also means that their engagement with storytelling and performance deepens over time, allowing them to grow as artists, and telling increasingly pressing stories about their lives.

When I ask teaching artist Sam to tell me about how she envisions her relationship to the youth she works with, she says excitedly:

I see myself as like an artistic sounding board. You know what’s so exciting right now is that... like Lexi, every time I see her, she’s like: “I have this new idea,” you know? And she’ll tell me, like, she’s, it’s either, like, a video or a song, or she has this idea for her art piece that she wants to put in the exhibit, and so it’s really exciting, that part. You know I really feel like I can be an artistic mentor and... I really relish that experience and also because it’s taken a lot of time and fortitude to get some of them to trust me, so at this point now that they do, you know, it’s extremely rewarding. (Sam, Interview)

What Sam points to, here, is the way that her relationships to the youth as creative thinkers and makers is a foundation of creative support that occurs through Our Voices. Throughout the writing process, teaching artists work with youth as individual makers to conceive and craft ideas for the performance, as well as to nurture their passions and skills. As I’ve stated, creative support at Our Voices occurs through the sharing, listening, and performing of youth’s stories as a means of reflection, processing, and healing. Of course, support also occurs within this process, in the interactions between youth and adults as they write, and put together the performance.
Sam’s description of her creative relationship to the youth and Indigo’s observations about her experiences with writing and performing her stories in Our Voices play a key role in understanding specifically how creative support happens. Many youth come to FAM with stories to tell about their experiences in foster care, but needing a space to develop them and a platform to share them. As Indigo describes, these stories often take root in deeply difficult experiences that are equally difficult to discuss, and the pieces that take shape from them evolve over time, allowing their tellers to grow and heal alongside.

Creating these pieces, though incredibly exciting for all, can also be somewhat contentious. Youth and teaching artists alike come to the work with their own artistic sensibilities and comfort levels, and these are sometimes at odds. Indigo, for all her passion about her writing, has some misgivings about the nature scene to which it is attached. She explains, “my piece really isn’t about that, but it touches upon a part of it, of why I was [burning things], cause it’s the nature scene,” and then, with a smirk, says, “I fucking hate that thing!” “I think your piece is beautiful!” I tell her, and she says, “thank you, but it has nothing to do with what I was assigned to write about” (Interview). I don’t hesitate to share Indigo’s feelings on the piece with you as she has made them no secret to the group at large, specifically saying that she feels the nature piece is too “dance-y” and bringing these thoughts with the teaching artists. As I will discuss at length later, artistic choices around youth’s stories sometimes becomes a site of conflict as collaborators discuss how the stories should be told. Though a natural part of the artistic process, this conflict is a dynamic of creative support that I feel is important to mention because it reveals the ways in which creative support is also artistic negotiation. Regardless of the form artistic creation takes at Our Voices, it is always and actively focused around youth telling their stories, especially the hard ones.
In addition to describing the manner in which creative support occurs, I feel it’s also important to discuss the ways that it impacts youth who participate in creating and performing in the Our Voices show. When Lavender and I talk about how participation in Our Voices has affected her, and others, she says “it’s also opened us up, and especially me, up to compassion, to, uh, even listening, and understanding, and help, with guidance, you know, etcetera” (Interview). Creating Our Voices is collaborative in many ways, and constitutes a community effort to tell and perform important and difficult stories. As such, it means that you’ve have the chance to grow as ensemble members, and open themselves up to support, guidance, and kindness from those they collaborate with. For youth who have so often be forced to be independent as foster youth (Samuels 2008), this collaboration and its effect on the young people is a significant step toward healing, and finding community.

When I sit down to interview Jace, he makes me promise not to ask him how Our Voices has changed him. Jace’s insistence is an ongoing self deprecation, a conversation we’ve had several times in the last few months, sometimes joking, sometimes not. Lately, he has maintained that over the course of his time doing Our Voices, he has remained mostly the same, and hasn’t grown. I’ve known him for long enough to see that it’s more complicated than that. When we reach the end of our interview, I ask him if there is anything else about FAM he would like to mention, and then I tease him: “since I’m not allowed to ask you how FAM and Our Voices have affected you!” He heaves a big sigh, cracks an even bigger smile and, giving in, says: “oookay, well, FAM was a big factor in helping me get over my stage fright. I’m still working on this, but I can actually get on stage now!” (Interview) This comment may seem like no big deal, but knowing Jace, this admission of pride in himself and his accomplishments is no small feat. Not only has Jace willed himself to get on stage where in the past he refused, but he has become one
of the most vocal members of the ensemble, contributing large chunks of writing that serve to steer the content of the show. It wasn’t always this way for Jace, and everyone knows it, including him, whether or not he will admit it. In many ways, Jace embodies the power of creative support to shape youth’s confidence and capacity to advocate for themselves. It has taken him some time to be able to perform his own story (and this has to do with more than just stage fright, mind you), but he has taken ownership over the act of creating, and the space in which it occurs.

Along these lines, Sara, the FAM program director, speaks to the effect telling your story can have,

It’s a really powerful way for the youth to get in touch with what they’ve experienced and the stories that they wanna tell. Telling your narrative is a powerful therapeutic tool. Like, to be able to write out your story, whatever it is, just the way you remember it, then think about it, and then maybe write it out differently the next time, maybe the story has completely changed. But to be able to just go through it from beginning to end helps you to process through what’s happened and can change the way you feel about what happened. (Interview)

Sara, (who I will mention comes to this work by way of the fields of education and social work, instead of theatre and dance, like the teaching artists) recognizes the value that telling your story has for understanding your story. Creative support can, in addition to supporting young people in being open and confident, serve to help everyone learn about what they’ve experienced, and from a variety of perspectives.

When I ask Sam about the ways that support happens at Our Voices, she, too, has a lot to say about the value of performing one’s story:

I think [Our Voices is] a place of support in that it’s a listening environment for youth to just get their stories out and to try to translate their experiences through art. Art just has this incredible healing capacity, you know, to be able to act something out, or to dance it out, or to draw it out is a way for the brain and the psyche to process that experience and kind of claim it... you know, process it... what skills am I getting out of this even though this was a hardship? What does
this mean about my identity that I’ve lived through this?... It discharges the, uhm, emotion in a way that makes experiences more processable as well, and I just find that, you know, particularly movement, but also acting out the stories, is just very transformative. But what was the question? A place of support. So that’s supportive I think, because it gives them a way to process their experiences and, uhm, and really take ownership of them in a way that is very positive and empowering. (Sam, Interview)

Art offers a way to honor, process, and grow from difficult experiences. and these are valuable dimensions of what youth seek from the program. Because Our Voices provides a space dedicated to exactly that, as well as teaching artists to facilitate the process, Our Voices is a place of creative support.

I argue that the demonstrated and various impacts that development, rehearsal, and performance of Our Voices have on its ensemble allow us to better define support in Our Voices space as inherently a creative exercise. Artistic process and creation involved in telling one’s story can be, itself, understood as support.

But, creative support doesn’t necessarily mean that creative production is the only goal. “[I’ve learned] what it means to balance, like, performative outcomes with emotional outcomes,” says Sam, “you know cause at the end of the day, like, who cares if the performance sucks. You know what I mean? I mean I care, because obviously I care, like deeply! But it’s not the most important thing, you know? What’s most important is like the emotional wellbeing of the youth” (Interview). In this way creative support means that the creation itself, though valuable to all involved, is more of a means to an end. The kinds of creative support I have described above occur in artistic process, with attention to youth’s emotional wellbeing, and in search of healing, reflection, and growth instead of a professionally polished performance. Though, this is a tension often felt in Our Voices rehearsals, especially as the performance date draws near. But, the work of creative support occurs in the making, not the made.
I tell you all of this because it has become clear to me that the process of telling and expressing stories creatively is central to the work of Our Voices and FAM. Youth often describe the ways their time with Our Voices has affected them, giving them a space to tell their stories, to heal, and to grow. For youth whose experiences with foster care and adoption are stigmatized, this platform to tell stories is especially significant.

As such, I think understanding the work that occurs in conceiving and creating Our Voices as its own kind of support can help us honor that work. One might say that support for youth’s experiences can be a part of any context, not just creative ones. And though this is true, folks like Lavender, Jace, Indigo, and Sam show us that there’s something really special about the way you tell your story. As much as Our Voices is about getting youths’ stories out there, it’s also about supporting them in crafting those stories into performance. The creative dimension of support at Our Voices is an intention, not a byproduct.

Neither is Our Voices the only program in which youth use writing and performance to tell their stories. Worldwide, this model is accepted within arts education communities, replicated in many community programs. However, that doesn’t mean these sorts of programs are well understood by the public at large. Our Voices offers a way into investigating how youth theatre programs can function as support for the youth they serve.

In our country, systemic and cultural support for the arts is limited. We can see this in public funding for art making (Greenberger, 2018), the vulnerable place art programs have in schools, especially low-income ones (Yee, 2014), as well as, in general, American attitudes toward art and artists. Too often, artists and arts educators need to fight for their work to be recognized by funders, peers, and the public as a valid way of knowing, being, and working. For these reasons, I feel it’s significant to name the support that occurs in the writing and rehearsal
process for Our Voices as specifically creative, as well as to describe its effects. This, I think, constitutes making visible the value of arts programming when it comes to supporting youth.

“You’re Just a Support, Waiting for Them” - Practical Support at FAM

When I ask Drew, the former life skills coordinator, to describe what, being an “adult supporter,” a title they gave themselves, meant to them, they explain, “like helping people figure out what they wanted to be doing and then like how I could help them get there. So, uhm, there wasn’t really an ego or agenda in it, it was just like, what do you need from me? Like, I’m here, my job is to like help you do what you wanna do.” (Drew Interview, 2017). Here, Drew describes a support that is oriented around the practical needs and goals of the youth, one that is without expectation. I have chosen to identify support as particularly practical in order to get at the vital ways that youth get help with the day-to-day, and long term choices and events in their lives, especially as they move into adulthood, often unsupported by the child welfare system.

At a meeting one evening, while making breakfast-for-dinner in the crowded kitchen, I overheard Sara telling Elisa, a high school senior, about a foster care alum she had met who worked for Disney. Elisa remarked that she’d love to do the same, and when Sara pressed her, Elisa explained that she wanted to live in California. Surprised, Sara asked, “but I thought you wanted to go to UMass? You said that was the thing you wanted most in the world.” Laughing, Elisa said, “yeah it is, but I mean… California! I don’t want seasons. It’s cold!” Sara responded, “well, I can’t help you get where you want to be unless you make decisions!” To this, Elisa replied “well my mom told me I could get in-state tuition at UMass and it would be too expensive in California.” Sara asked, “well, but what would you want if money wasn’t an issue?” and Elisa said, “but money is an issue.” Sara protested, “but we can get you a scholarship and
then it will cost the same no matter where you go, in state or in California!” They went back and forth like that for a bit, Elisa smiling all the while, Sara doggedly pursuing the topic until Elisa wandered off to do something else.

With Elisa, Sara’s involvement in her college plans is more than just the standard interrogation: “what are your plans after graduation?” or “where do you want to go to college?” high school seniors are often met with when talking to adults. Sara’s investment is long term, keeping track of where Elisa wants to be after graduation, even when it changes. And, her offers of assistance correspond to Elisa’s desires, not to her own prescribed ideas of what Elisa should want. This attention to the individual needs and goals of youth shapes a large part of the work Sara does, officially and unofficially.

This exchange between Sara and Elisa marks a familiar pattern at FAM, especially when it comes to Sara. At almost every meeting, Sara can be seen checking in with specific youth about school and work, searching for housing options for youth experiencing homelessness, bringing print-outs of job postings to share with youth who are looking, discussing her experience in the military with a youth interested in enlisting, or maybe just offering homework help.

In an interview one winter day, she tells me: “some of them need help filling out a job application or need a reference for their job application, and so I’ve had half a dozen come in here and sit on my iPad and fill out an application and use me as a reference” (Interview). Sara can be an adult with experience and expertise to help youth get access to and accomplish the things they need to. Practical support in this context might also just mean providing a chair and internet access. More often, this kind of practical support requires specificity and long term attention.
These moments are just some examples of the ways, either successfully or not, in which day-to-day support at FAM is practical, oriented around meeting needs for the future, taking important steps, and accomplishing goals. This sort of support also takes place through more structured activities. After dinner has been made, eaten, and cleaned up, many FAM meetings begin with a journal prompt, time to write, and space to share. Lots of these prompts revolve around reflection and the future, things like: “where were you a year ago? Imagine where you’d like to be a year from now,” and “what are some of your goals for the next year?”

In response to one such journal prompt, Xavier, one of the youth, shared that he wanted to do better in school. When asked to expand, he responded that he wanted to improve in history. It was a lively group that day, and there was a lot of talking, others agreeing that history was hard or warmly making fun of him. Sara asked if the group had suggestions for things that Xavier could do to improve in history and many shouted out things like watching documentaries and videos. Sara asked him if he could do that (I think already knowing the answer) and Xavier responded that in his program (where he lives) he couldn’t have any access to technology. Sara looked at the group and said very frankly, “you know, I just think it’s criminal to do that, in this day and age.” She went on to say that she planned to speak to the staff at his program to see if there was any way for him to watch educational videos for school.

This moment offers a couple of ideas worth exploring. Activities like these journal prompts both place emphasis on goal setting and planning for the future (the implications of which I’ll return to shortly), as well as providing a dedicated space for youth to articulate their goals and receive affirmations and support in reaching them. Xavier might not have come directly to Sara, the other adults, or any of his peers to ask for help in history. Perhaps he would have mentioned struggling if he was failing history, or if his performance in school had
interfered with his ability to attend FAM, as residential programs sometimes treat FAM like a reward or punishment, preventing youth from attending if they are having behavioral issues or not meeting the program’s expectations for performance in school. However, this structured activity offered Xavier with an opportunity to discuss his needs and get support from adults and peers in meeting them.

In addition to providing a space to discuss needs, this kind of support also takes the shape of advocacy. In Xavier’s program, use of any technology (computers, phones, mp3 players, etc.) is prohibited. In order to help Xavier in school, Sara promised to communicate with the program to see if exceptions could be made. I don’t know what came of this, if Xavier is able to use technology for educational purposes, or if Sara wasn’t able to make change for him, but what’s clear is that support for youth at FAM can also mean advocating on their behalves. It’s not that youth are unable to ask for the things they need, more often than not they do, but the child welfare system and all of its branches (like residential programs) can be a large, bureaucratic force to contend with. Hometown staff spend a great deal of time communicating with residential programs, foster parents, and other caregivers to help youth get to FAM and get the things they need. As such, the support youth receive in meeting their needs must often go beyond one-on-one interactions, and touch others involved in the lives of FAM youth.

When I ask Lexi how she came to FAM she laughs:

I went to a meeting, a foster care review meeting, told me about it and I was like “no!” because it sounded like a more of, the way they were saying it, sounded like more of a support group and, like, a support group as in staff there just telling you what to do, and I was like “nope!” And then I think a year later I went to another foster care review, and a different lady suggested it and the way they said it I was like “yeah!” and my grandma was like “you didn’t say that last time” and I was like “but it didn’t sound like this!” (Interview)
Though she is telling a separate story, Lexi’s comment explains a key part of practical support. At FAM staff aren’t there to tell youth what to do. For many of the youth, who have existed under the control of various adults throughout their time as foster youth, this would be a huge problem. But at FAM, youth take the lead both in terms of FAM programming (“they put rules in place but yet we are setting the activities we do. The rules, most of the rules are made by us and stuff like that” Lexi tells me), and in terms of what they need from staff in the form of practical support.

Sara describes one such way that practical support functions based on what the youth need and want from the adults who support them:

One of the young people qualifies for food stamps and wants to go apply for them. So we printed out a copy of the application, and she filled it out, and we set an appointment for when we could go there. But when it came time to go there she backed out and she was like ‘no I’m not ready to do this.’ And I was like ‘okay.’ I have to just let it go and let her come back around when she is ready to go, she’ll either come to me and ask for a ride or she’ll find another ride to get there. But until she’s ready to do it, I can’t go pick her up and drag her, I have to just let her make that decision (Interview, Sara).

Here, Sara names a limitation: practical support can’t take place unless someone is ready to be supported in that way. The young person Sara describes would benefit from applying for food stamps, and Sara is able to help her apply. But, when it comes down to it, it’s just not what that young person feels is right for her in that moment for whatever reason. This exemplifies the way that, even in practical support, youth are still in charge of making decisions about their lives. To this effect, Sara adds,

If you’re going to run a youth program that is youth led you have to have that as a core value, you have to see them being in charge of their own life, them being in charge of their own meetings as the goal. Yes you have other things you have to get done, but until they’re ready to do it or until the idea comes from them, you’re just a support, waiting for them. (Interview)
FAM is called a youth leadership project, and moment to moment, I think this looks different, as some activities are, indeed, adult initiated and led. But I think Sara’s words here help to illuminate an important part of practical support on an individual-to-individual basis: youth are in the lead.

In other ways, too, practical support presents a challenge. As you might imagine, this kind of support requires an incredible expenditure of time and attention. For staff, keeping track of where youth are in their lives and what they might need is a significant endeavor, and sometimes constitutes going “above and beyond” their job descriptions to make connections and provide resources for youth. By nature, the work of practical support requires time, focus, and attention. These observations will become more prescient in Chapter 4, when I discuss the way time functions at FAM.

Regardless, folks at FAM work together to meet youth’s needs, achieve their goals, and move towards the things they want for themselves. When these things are achieved support means celebration, too. One evening in the fall, Alexis bounced in and rather quickly pulled out her report card and thrust it into Sara’s hands. “Hey!” Sara exclaimed immediately, “great work!” Promptly, the report card was passed around from person to person, Sara proudly telling everyone: “those grades are up from last quarter!” and Alexis was soundly congratulated by all. This isn’t an unfamiliar sight, either. From standardized test scores, to graded quizzes, to diplomas, and so on, youth bring their achievements in to share. Come May and June, carpools to graduations will be organized, and FAM youth will act as a cheering section for their peers.

Celebrating youth’s achievements warmly and publicly also plays a role in the practical support they receive. FAM becomes a place where youth get support for the practical needs in their lives by discussing and articulating their goals, receiving support in achieving those goals,
and being celebrated once they do. This kind of support is incredibly significant given the backgrounds of many of the youth who come to the space.

It would be too simple to say that those who have experienced foster care lack support from peers or adults when it comes to practical matters, or aren’t able to set and achieve goals on their own. In reality, the networks of support that foster youth and former foster youth have access to are complex and unique in their own ways. However, it can be said that experiences in foster care are often characterized by instability, ambiguity, self-reliance, and complex relationships to biological and found family (Munson et. al. 2010, Samuels 2009, Samuels 2008). Folks involved with the child welfare system may not always have someone who can (for whatever reason) consistently check in with them about their needs and goals, a space to think through them, people who can offer practical and tangible support outside the bounds of what the foster care system has to offer, or a community to celebrate achievements with, not to mention having someone to follow the youth’s lead in all of these matters. Practical support at FAM is thus particularly meaningful.

As such, FAM has the potential to offer support in a way that answers to the gaps left behind when someone is touched by the child welfare system. As I’ve described, transitional services for youth leaving foster care often leave something to be desired when it comes to getting youth the things they need, and supporting them in being independent. At FAM, youth can access a less formal, bureaucratic kind of practical support. A kind of support that can be rare, but is undoubtedly necessary.
At FAM, practical support means that the everyday needs and goals of youth are attended to. But, as with Maddie and Jordan and their struggles with money and transportation, sometimes these needs are critical. There are many reasons that youth at FAM can be and are in crisis. Many struggle with finding and keeping jobs with limited access to transportation. Securing safe, stable, and affordable housing if birth, foster, or adoptive families can’t offer it is another significant challenge for many. Regardless of the reasons, many youth, like Maddie and Jordan, actively communicate about their crises with staff, especially Sara. In turn, adults at FAM work within the extent of their capabilities to help make sure youth are safe and stable, offering what I’ll call critical support.

The week before Valentine’s Day, Wednesday was a snow day. When I called Sara that afternoon to check if FAM would be cancelled she said yes, and told me that though she had been sick in bed all week and it was snowing hard and fast, she was out delivering food and warm clothes to Maddie and Jordan. We talked some about their living arrangements, what they might need in the future, and what Sara was working on to support them. “I’m gonna go home and look for apartments in their price range” she told me, and she would also research what kinds of public assistance they could apply for.

I was struck by Sara in this moment, as I am often. She was going to incredible lengths to make sure that youth had enough to eat, and was moving toward finding them a place to live where things would be safer while quite sick, in the snow. Many other youth programs that aren’t strictly clinical, like FAM, might consider getting food to youth on a snow day out of the realm of support that can be offered. But for many, FAM is family, and a primary source of care and
safety so it makes sense that adults who hold that space would also be present in a crisis, in a snowstorm.

Obviously, critical support for youth when it comes to legal issues as with Jordan and his car, or immediate needs like food is an extremely important part of the work that FAM does, either as an official function or one born out of closeness between adults and youth in crisis. But, in addition to serving a practical and emergent purpose, critical support also creates a particular kind of relationship between youth and adults.

In order to receive critical support, youth must first be open about the things going on in their lives. I think FAM invites this in many ways. When I ask Indigo what support at FAM means to her, she says decisively: “not judging” and continues:

The way I look, and how I present myself, and things like that, I’ve been judged for that a lot, from foster parents, youth, adults in my life that I thought I could trust. But here at FAM and Our Voices, and just being around the people here is so comforting. And you can tell when somebody’s judging you, or doesn’t accept you without them saying it, and I’ve never felt that here, and that’s why I come back. (Interview)

Though Indigo speaks to a certain sort of judgement here, I feel it’s an important topic to highlight when thinking about critical support. Other youth echo Indigo’s sentiment in interviews, mentioning specifically that support at FAM is non judgmental. When it comes to critical support, a lack of judgment at FAM becomes particularly relevant. Needing help in a crisis is vulnerable, and if youth felt judged by adults at FAM, they would not be open about their struggles or seek their support. More, sometimes youth find themselves in a crisis because of decisions they’ve made for themselves, and it would be easy for them to feel shame prohibiting them from accessing support. But, the job of FAM staff is not to judge, and to help youth find safety and security while helping them learn.
In addition to navigating judgment, people giving critical support also become deeply involved in the lives of youth. When I ask Sara what her job is like, she says:

It’s an emotional roller coaster, cause sometimes you get a call in the middle of the night and you’re like “oh my god what’s happening?” and it’s them telling you that they passed a test that was really hard. And sometimes you get a call in the middle of the night telling you that they’re sleeping on a park bench and need somewhere to go and so you never know what’s gonna happen when you answer the phone, any time of day or night, and they do call or text any time of day or night (Interview).

Being the person that young people go to, either in celebration or in crisis, means that Sara is sort of always on call, by choice or not. She’s close to the highs and lows in their lives and there for some of their most difficult moments. As such, critical support means that adults at FAM often have significant, deep, and around the clock involvement in the lives of the youth they work with.

Though this kind of support is clearly immeasurably valuable, I can see how it weighs on adults, especially when critical support impossible to give, and sometimes it is. Sam, one of the teaching artists, and I meet for an interview a couple of days after Valentine’s Day, the events of the day’s meeting still fresh for us both. Like Sara, I ask Sam what her job is like. When I press, she says, “I mean it’s challenging it’s, like, really, kind of emotionally engrossing. You know, Wednesday night we had this issue with a youth” she takes a deep breath, voice shaking just a bit, “so I just can’t stop thinking about it,” another pause. Neither can I, I think. She goes on, “and I’m very worried about him and,” she speaks slowly, eyes welling with tears “uh, I don’t really have… a way to… help.” Quickly, Sam wipes her eyes, I apologize. “Aaah,” she smiles, “it’s okay. No it’s just, close to the bone” (Interview). I agree, tell her my own story about crying in public recently, we laugh and we keep talking. But, I’m left with the effects of critical support on us all.
Though Sam, by virtue of her role as a teaching artist, is less directly involved with the crises of youth at FAM, they are obviously potent to experience by association. Because FAM is a space of critical support where youth are open about their crises, it means that everyone is involved in their lives in a deeper and often times more taxing way. This isn’t bad, I think, it just is.

Here, I feel it’s important to illuminate the ways that youth receive critical support, as well as what it’s like to give critical support, and what a space like FAM becomes when this kind of support is such a pivotal part of the experience. Critical support is crucial to life and survival at FAM. It also means that people are involved in each others’ lives in a more in-depth way than they might otherwise be and profoundly affected by what one another might be going through at any given moment.

Throughout my time as a young person in supporting relationships with adults, as well as in the transition to the other side of these relationships, I have always been able to see adults be personally affected by their work with youth, especially in proximity to crises. Rarely, though, have I seen these adults name and reflect on what they’re feeling as a result of giving critical support. Like Sam says, and others allude to, this work is emotionally engrossing. My intention here is not only to name and describe the practice of critical support, but to illustrate its effects on all involved. I do this in the hopes that my analysis might bring some of us closer to acknowledging and working through the ways we are impacted by the work of critical support and the closeness it creates.
Discussion

The types of support I have outlined above are by no means the only way of understanding support for youth at FAM. Merely, they are some lenses through which to look at support in this context. These ways of being, familial, creative, practical, and critical, live inside of those at FAM, and constitute what I mean when I say that people are in supporting relationships. Young people who come to FAM often need a lot in terms of a space to call theirs, people to listen, help getting where they want to go, and someone to step in when things get rough. The exchange of support in these ways creates close relationships of support that make space for young people to grow, heal, and enact change.

It should be mentioned here that I have largely worked to understand how adults offer support to youth they work with because I am interested in the complexities of support in professional capacities. That said, it should be obvious that youth can and do support one another, and this plays an equal role in the space that FAM holds for youth. There’s an interplay between youth and adults in this way, where adults model supportive behavior and youth also participate in creating a supportive space.

In my time at FAM, the many and varied ways that support looks have gone from surprising and confusing to logical and necessary. I understand now why people use the words they use for each other, why stories are so important, and why caring can be a round the clock gig. It makes more sense, now, that relationships of support look the way they look: complicated, close, and intense. I see very clearly how valuable and important the work of support at FAM is, and I earnestly hope you do, too.

I have also come to be able to name exactly how much care, effort, and time goes into the work of support. At FAM, adults work consistently and sometimes tirelessly to meet youth’s
needs, being consistent and available. In many ways, this is the work. However, as I have demonstrated, at FAM, and in other youth programs like it, staff go out of their way, and outside of their job descriptions to support youth in a variety of ways. The culture of “going above and beyond” is a reality. My investigation of these issues, then, calls for a culture of support for the supporters that answers to this reality. In chapter four of this paper, I will investigate constraints on this work, calling into question current institutional support for the staff and programs that serve youth. The depictions I have laid out in this chapter will come to bear then.

In defining different types of support at FAM, in attempting to describe all that FAM holds, and in identifying a culture of going above and beyond, I hope to have also made visible some of the invisible ways that support is experienced. In the introduction, I discussed how and why young people and those who support them are not highly valued in American culture and institutions. Here I will note again that the devaluing of these people and this work means that the experience of it is often erased from public knowledge, its realities obscured from view. It is not considered important to know about things that are not considered important.

In addition to the relative un-recognition of the field of support for youth, the specific kinds of labor entailed in supporting youth are also unrecognized. Because so many of the people who do this work are women, and the work of support is so emotional in nature, there is another layer of invisibility. Arlie Hochschild’s notion of “emotional labor” has come to signify the work that women do to hold emotions of those they interact with in personal and professional capacities (Hochschild 2012). This concept is useful here to point out that many of the ways that adults, especially women, support youth, constitute emotional labor. That is, support is, in part, a function of feelings and emotions. This is, of course, not to say that emotional labor in support for youth is wrong or that women should not perform it, just that this work is very much
gendered. Emotional labor is an inherent quality in what is asked of those who play supporting roles. Hochschild argues that the emotional nature of work women do is often extra, unpaid, and unrecognized. I would contend that this applies to the work of support in a somewhat natural and obscured fashion - of course this work is emotional, we think. However, when something seems natural, it can also be taken for granted. So, though not all adult supporters are women, I hope that this project serves to name and describe women’s work, especially where emotional labor is concerned, in order to value it.

As I’ve said, we often talk about support as if we have a common definition of it. In reality, support is far more complex and situational, and its effects multidirectional. More, it’s defined often by the systems to which it responds, like the child welfare system. Without detailed investigations of what constitutes support for youth and what it means to those involved, according these relationships and those who participate in them with the respect and value they deserve is quite difficult. By exploring and discussing these experiences and the ways they are understood within supportive communities for youth, I hope to present them as knowledge to be valued and learned from. In many ways, programs for youth can be limited in the support they provide (more on that in chapter four), and so is FAM. But, in a way, support at FAM is also incredibly dynamic, intense, and contextual. I believe there’s power to acknowledging and articulating what happens at FAM as well as in asking: what does support look like when it’s working? How can we practice more of meaningful support? What’s the cost when we do? And what’s at stake if we don’t?
Chapter 3: Connection in Supporting Relationships

While in DC for a youth organizing conference, our group of five had a day to sightsee. We had done a lot of walking to get to the Air and Space Museum, and it was, one of the youth, Tom’s favorite museum so off he went to explore. Another of the youth, Jace, wandered away eventually, toward the space shuttles, but Indigo, Sara, the FAM program director, and I decided some time outside might do us more good than the museum could. Outside on the National Mall, Indigo bought herself cheese fries from a nearby vendor and doctored them with hot sauce and salt packets, and we sat on the grass. It was warm for October, and I leaned against a tree, listening as Sara and Indigo chatted idly. Indigo, always quick with humor, cracked a joke. I don’t remember what it was, but when I laughed, Sara said, “it’s so good to see you smile!” Taken aback, I asked, “do I not smile a lot?” “Not really!” said Indigo and Sara added, “you’re very… contemplative.”

I’ve thought about this moment quite a bit since then, on the drive home, long after we left DC. Sara and Indigo held up a mirror for me, and I was surprised when I didn’t recognize myself. It’s not that I don’t think about how people perceive me at FAM, it just tends to take the shape of questions like: Am I being helpful? To whom? How am I affecting the space around me? How can I make more space for others with my presence? These are the kinds of questions I learned to ask from the adults I worked with as a young person, as well as past trainings in professional contexts. In many ways, I was taught that one important part of supporting youth is, in a few words, not making things about myself.

In this way, Sara and Indigo showed me that the self I brought to FAM, a self I had thought was fairly neutral, made an impression regardless. I didn’t realize that I seemed serious at FAM (in general I consider myself a pretty smiley person). Though this seriousness wasn’t an
intentional choice, more a byproduct of trying not to draw attention to my own feelings and experiences, I came to see that it had an effect. I began to wonder how much of my “self” I should be bringing to FAM, and what it meant when, as described above, others brought more of their selves than I did.

As a participant in youth programming, many of the adults I worked with felt somewhat removed, Josh, who I discussed in the introduction, especially. The peeks I got of him and his life outside of our program were rare, though these instances increased over the time that I knew him. When he did talk about his life or feelings, or allowed me to express my care for him, it was exciting, almost because it felt illicit. He was explicitly clear with us that he felt that boundaries between youth and adults were important. This meant that when youth and adults were affectionate with one another, it was risky. When adults disclosed their own feelings or experiences, it took away space from the young person in the relationship. And if youth sought to care for adults in any way, that was a breach of boundaries in some way. I grew to think of adults as separated from the young people they worked with along some sort of undefined line, relationships limited by the fact that one of us was the other one’s job. My initial ideas about how adults should participate in spaces for youth, I realized, bore a resemblance to case workers and DCF employees that many of the youth had come into contact with over the course of their time in care.

In “Rethinking Boundaries: Ethical Dilemmas in the Social Worker-Client Relationship,” Christine Dietz and Joanne Thompson draw on Miriam Greenspan’s work to define traditional models of relationships between social workers and clients as predicated on “the distance model.” This model is an approach to social work rooted in empiricist and positivist approaches that mandates social worker-client relationships be characterized by distance and void of any sort
of connection, mutuality, or openness in order for these relationships to be safe and therapeutic (3). Additionally Dietz and Thompson write that this model has also been extended to define supervisor-trainee and teacher-student relationships (4), imperatives toward distance thus existing outside of purely therapeutic professional relationships. The distance model, which we can understand as a primary model for the work of DCF case workers, thus regulates the social worker’s (or in this case, the adult’s) self as it comes into play in the work of support.

When I came to FAM I began to see that things were a little more complex. Adults were often affectionate with youth, as well as open and vulnerable about their experiences and emotions in ways I had not seen before in a professional context. It didn’t appear to interfere with their ability to support youth, and it also seemed to build something very unique between youth and adults, a kind of mutuality and reciprocity that completely defied my expectations. In short, when adults brought their selves to supporting youth, it allowed for connection, a key part of relationships at FAM. My working idea had been that a youth-focused program should be a space for a youth to bring their selves, and in order for this to be so, adults must keep their selves to, well, themselves. But, it appeared this idea, unknowingly in accordance with the “distance model” might be a little faulty.

What I grew to see was that connection between youth and adults was an integral part of support as it functions at FAM, and a constant navigation of what youth and adults are to one another. More, this connection and closeness constituted realities of supporting relationships that are often hard to describe, especially in contrast with a more removed and disconnected child welfare system, and when cultural anxieties around appropriate boundaries abound. In keeping with this project’s intention to make visible invisible complexities of the work of support, I hope
that this chapter can be an excavation of some of the unnamed and intangible ways that people connect with each other as a part of supporting relationships between youth and adults.

So, in addition to simply describing what support looks like at FAM, I feel it’s important to explore some of the ways that youth and adults navigate the relationships that exist therein when it comes to affection, openness, and mutuality as forms of connection. These are particularly important in the context of young people’s interactions with the child welfare system, which requires its workers to be somewhat disconnected from the youth and families they work with. As such, I think FAM offers us a way of complicating expectations about how much of their selves adults should bring to their work with youth, and opening up possibilities for meaningful support.

“Sometimes People Need Hugs” - Affection in Supporting Relationships

One of the things that I noticed first when I started volunteering at FAM was the close and affectionate way that people were with one another. Among youth and adults, consensual physical touch was a normal part of the way people interacted, and people used words like “love” for one another regularly. As I’ve mentioned, this was something that I’d always been taught, explicitly and implicitly, was to be avoided in order to maintain boundaries. Certainly, affection like what I’ve seen at FAM was unusual in the context of DCF, where codes of conduct and ethical expectations for case workers and residential facilities are incredibly strict in accordance with the distance model of youth and adult relationships. But, this affection didn’t seem to be strange or out of place to anyone else, in fact, folks sought affection from each other actively. The longer I spent at FAM, the more clear it became that affection among all members of the community was an important part of the support that happened there. So, I wondered, what
did affection in supporting relationships mean to those involved? And what did it tell us about what youth and adults are to one another in supporting relationships?

Drew, the former Life Skills Coordinator, speaks to these questions when they tell me: “I used to work at camps where they had rules where, it’s like, you’re never allowed to be alone in a room with a child. And Hometown didn’t have rules like that... [it’s] a space where they’re like, no sometimes people need hugs and, like, that’s okay and healing as long as, you know, everyone’s consenting and things like that” (Interview). What Drew points to here is the ways that Hometown’s norms run somewhat counter to more extreme, distanced restrictions around physical touch and affection, especially those in child welfare contexts. But, at FAM, hugs are valuable sources of care and comfort for youth, and aren’t restricted in the same ways that they are in other spaces like residential programs, schools, or clinical settings.

The way that affection works at FAM is unique in this way, I think, largely because of the multiple contexts in which FAM exists. At a basic level, the FAM program is a part of a living community. Most of the youth who are a part of the program don’t live at Hometown, but some do, and the staff regularly navigate between community matters and programmatic matters. Most of us probably interact differently with our neighbors than we do with our coworkers. At Hometown, the line between those categories isn’t always distinct, so it makes sense that norms around closeness and affection might be a little looser.

Additionally, for a lot of youth who are in foster homes or residential programs, affection might be a little harder to come by on a regular basis. This is not to say that youth in care don’t have affectionate or loving relationships, just that these are often not supported or nurtured on an institutional level. So, for many youth, FAM might be one of the only spaces where they are
consistently told that they are loved, and receive hugs or other types of physical affection. In this way, FAM must be a place of affectionate support for youth who need it.

Jasmine, for example, has been a FAM member for a some time now, but continues to be extremely quiet. She’s withdrawn in one on one interactions most of the time, almost never speaks in a large group, even when asked, and hasn’t performed in Our Voices. Sometimes it seems like Jasmine is aloof, or shy, or simply not present. But, when Alice, an older volunteer, is there, I see a different side of her. Alice used to come to FAM every week until she changed jobs last spring. Since then, she comes when she can. One evening in the fall, Alice joined us for dinner and she and I sat together at the table. We caught up, talked about the recent elections in Northampton, and Jasmine came over to join us. Jasmine leaned into Alice while we chatted, and Alice just held her, arms wrapped around her, rubbing her back every so often.

This moment reveals a lot about affection at FAM. Often, as with Jasmine and Alice, it’s normal and casual, but also specific and important. Jasmine doesn’t talk about herself and what’s going on in her life very often in the way that many other youth at FAM do. When she does let herself be supported by adults, it’s often without words, and thus, physical. In this way, physical affection plays an important role in the way that support looks at FAM. In other contexts more characterized by the distance model, it might be considered inappropriate or risky for an adult to hold a young person like that, but at FAM it’s part of the package.

When it comes to verbal affection at FAM, things look very similarly. Youth and adults alike express love for each other quite consistently and using many different words. In a lot of ways, care and support mean love in this space. This might be surprising in contrast with the ways that the child welfare system demands that social workers operate in a removed way from the families and youth they work with. In social work ethics, affection, both verbal and physical
is a touchy subject due to professional anxieties about what such affection might imply about the appropriateness of a social worker’s relationship to the youth and families with which they work, and the power dynamics implied (Dietz and Thompson 2004). But when people are so deeply involved in one another’s lives like they are at FAM, love among them can become a reality. The expression of love and care between youth and adults is merely an acknowledgement of relationships that exist. And, let’s be honest, care between social workers and young people in the child welfare system probably exists, too, just without being named.

Though norms around affection are a little looser at Hometown, it doesn’t mean that adults don’t think about how their care and affection might be perceived, and its consequences. When I ask teaching artist Sam how gender issues play into her work, she tells me about her considerations when it comes to how her care for youth can be interpreted:

   It’s different, because it’s not a classroom where you, like, have this separation. We’re people in each other’s lives and I’ve known them for years so, like, it’s interesting interplay between, like, care for a child or a young person, uhm, and being their teacher, you know?
   Yeah and so there’s a difference?
   Oh of course, yeah I mean, if you know a child in a different context outside of work then you have more freedom about how you can relate to them, but when you know, it’s all, liability and stuff like that, so you just have to be extremely careful.
   Yes
   And you know, Hometown is more like a huggy place, so... But in general, only the girls will hug me so it’s, like, it’s fine. So gender plays into that. And then in terms of, I feel, like anxious just talking about all of that cause, but you know…

(IInterview)

I tell her I know, because I do. Affection and care for young people, especially where gender is concerned, is a touchy subject. Clearly, Sam is nervous about how she’s coming across even as she’s expressing what she worries about when it comes to protecting herself and others from accusations of inappropriate behavior. Later, we’ll clarify what she means, but what stands out to me about this conversation is the tension present.
Apprehension about the intent and effect of affection between youth and adults is a field-wide conversation, and it stems from many places. But at the root, often, is the concern that it might be evidence of inappropriate romantic or sexual feelings between youth and adults (Dietz and Thompson 2004). Unfortunately, we do live in a world where adults working in professional capacities with children act exploitatively, and so it’s a precaution that must be and is taken in training youth workers and setting up spaces for meaningful connection.

But, for Sam, hugs and care for young people also make sense given the Hometown norms and the duration of her relationship to many of them. Even just talking to me, thought, she’s concerned about how it comes across, knowing there’s risk for everyone involved when it comes to how her care might be perceived. This, I think, shows us an important complexity of affection in support for youth. Professionals working with youth in this way can be pulled between types of support they know are valuable, and worries about how this kind of care might be perceived as inappropriate. Even though Hometown exists outside of and sometimes in opposition to the child welfare system, adults navigating connection through affection still must contend with some similar anxieties about the implications of that affection.

One evening one of the youth, Alexis, came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. I was a little surprised, we hadn’t known each other that long, and my instinct was to worm my way out of her embrace, thinking, should we really be touching this way? But before I did, I quickly considered what it might feel like for Alexis if I rejected her physical affection. Not so great, I imagined. So I let her hug me, patted her arm, and let her decide when she was done. This, I think, illustrates the potential consequences when the value of affection as support and the ways professionals are trained to interact with youth are at odds. When we are
uncomfortable with affection, we run the risk of cutting off meaningful opportunities for connection and care for young people to protect ourselves from liability.

I hope to have explored some of the ways that adult expressions of affection for youth at FAM functions to strengthen and affirm connection in supporting relationships. Expressions of affection, both physical and verbal, are a natural and significant part of the supporting environment that FAM becomes for youth who access it. When adults bring their selves to supporting youth, care, affection, and love are a reality, and an acknowledgement of that is somewhat natural at Hometown. That said, it is also a contested site, and adults must navigate the potential negative implications of genuine care as a part of their work. That is one complexity of affection in supporting relationships, and sometimes it is incredibly difficult to talk about. For this reason, I feel it is important to fully discuss the ways that affection functions at FAM, and constitutes a valuable and productive part of support.

Additionally, with the knowledge that relationships between adults like DCF case workers and the youth they work with are rarely affectionate, understanding the role of affection at FAM feels doubly important. For many reasons, including codes of conduct and ethics (Dietz and Thompson 2004), and constraints on their time and workload (Barrett and Greene 2017), case workers end up being somewhat removed from the youth they are supporting, while simultaneously wielding a significant amount of power over their lives. More, for some youth, caseworkers can be some of the only consistent adults present during periods of instability, and so when affection is lacking from those relationships, there is a critical gap in the kind of support that can exist. As such, I believe understanding affection at FAM as a kind of response to distanced relationships between youth and adults as created by the child welfare system can help
us question emotional distance as a norm between youth and adults, as well as further value programs like FAM that provide safe spaces for meaningful affection and connection.

“It’s Okay to Cry in Front of Kids” - Adult Openness in Supporting Relationships

After raking leaves for a service project one chilly night, the group, larger than usual, went out for wings. We sat at a long table, and the restaurant was dark and loud but one of the youth, Indigo, turned to Dominic, the relatively new Youth Development Coordinator, and, smirking, said, “[Dominic], I wasn’t able to be there for your interview, so tell me about yourself!” Dominic laughed, and calmly said, “uh, well, what do you want to know?” Indigo smiled, “tell me your story. Who are you? What are you about? How did you find out about this job?”

“Actually,” Dominic said, “my wife found out about this job for me. I was working in juvie, and, you know, it’s really poorly run. Of course I have all these ideas about how I could run it better if I were in charge, but who knows! But anyway, my wife showed me the job description, and I was adopted when I was really young so I’ve always been ‘ra ra adoption’ so… here I am.” “Is this job really different than juvie?” Indigo asked. Dominic nodded, “oh yeah, big time.”

When Indigo asked if he was in touch with his birth family, Dominic described the contact he’d had with his birth mom, who lives in Florida with his two brothers, one younger and one older. Indigo asked, “but, you’re the only one who was adopted?” Dominic answered yes and said, “I guess when I was born my mom just didn’t feel like she had it together enough and it just wasn’t gonna work with two kids, but by the time my younger brother was born she did have it together I guess.” Indigo asked, “so… do you feel, like, salty about that or anything?” Dominic
smiled, saying he had when he was younger, but not so much anymore. In her way, with a little smile, Indigo said, “meeting my birth father was the worst thing I ever did,” and described some very hurtful things he had said to her. Dominic nodded and said, “you know, I think it’s really natural to want to connect with birth parents, but a lot of the time, it’s not meant to be. I mean a lot of the time there’s a reason people aren’t together and maybe it’s better off that way.”

This exchange, at once intense and casual, demonstrates a special dynamic at FAM. Indigo, curious about Dominic’s background and experiences, asked him direct and personal questions. Where some other staff person might give more superficial answers and shut down when things became a little more specific and vulnerable, Dominic remained calm and open. He told Indigo both about his (shared) experiences with adoption, as well as describing some of the ways he felt about his birth family.

In an interview, Lavender, one of the more senior members of FAM, articulates the ways that adult openness has been meaningful for her. She tells me about the hiring process for Sara, the current FAM program director: “I can talk to Sara about anything, the only reason why I’m really comfortable with Sara is because when we first interviewed, cause we were looking for a new director, uhm, there were other contenders,” with her usual sardonic humor, Lavender quickly describes the ways that the other three candidates for the position didn’t fit the bill for her. Then she says, “and then I saw Sara and I was like ‘hmmm there’s something odd about this one.’ But she, you know, told us how she was in the foster care system for a little bit herself and you know, she was really forthcoming about herself and honest and she had her opinions and I was like, ‘this is the one for me’” (Interview).

Sara’s openness and its implications for Lavender’s trust in her reflects the dynamics at play in the above exchange between Dominic and Indigo. Not only did the conversation give
Indigo a chance to get to know someone with whom, as a part of FAM and Our Voices activities, she is regularly vulnerable, it also provided she and Dominic with a point of connection and opened up a space for Indigo to share something about her own relationships with her birth family, in this case quite fraught. In this way, like with Sara, Dominic’s openness and willingness to share vulnerable parts of his experiences created a something: a unique kind of support built on connection and trust, not just Dominic’s official capacity as a FAM staff person.

Though the above example may seem somewhat typical for youth and adults with shared experiences, openness and vulnerability between adults and youth also exists when it is not initiated by a youth’s questions about an adult’s history. In an early Our Voices activity, Oscar, one of the teaching artists, asked youth to get into pairs and spend three minutes telling their partner about themselves and their lives. Afterwards, each person reported out to the group about what their partner had said and a volunteer acted as a scribe, typing up what youth said.

Some of the youth talked about their partners’ likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests, as well as their experiences in the foster care system and with biological and foster families. Though the instructions had been broad, the activity became emotionally intense as more and more youth shared their partners’ stories. When it came for Oscar and his partner Lexi, one of the youth, to speak, they both talked about some difficult things their partner had shared. Oscar related some of Lexi’s experiences in foster care, about which she is usually very open, and Lexi talked about what Oscar had told her about his childhood, having grown up as the child of a single mom, with whom his relationship was now difficult. As Lexi spoke, Oscar became visibly emotional, gazing straight ahead, breathing unsteadily. Eventually, his gaze softened, and he continued to facilitate.
This moment feels notable to me for a number of reasons. Throughout my time with Our Voices, this was the first time I have seen Oscar participate in an activity in this way, volunteering bits of his own experiences and becoming emotionally vulnerable. I couldn’t tell you what Lexi and Oscar’s conversation consisted of, or why he chose to share in this way, but the effect it had on the room was clear. Where there was potential to remain removed from the emotional quality of some of the stories youth shared, the tone of Oscar’s story fit right in with theirs. I saw members of the group lean into the circle instead of away from it, no one remarked on Oscar’s story in a way they might not have responded to a peer, nothing bad happened, and the night went on.

Oscar’s vulnerability, both in his words and in his demeanor, had a democratizing effect on the group, he wasn’t above or outside of those sharing difficult stories, he was with them. This moment, I think, also shifted what Oscar was able to be for the youth. After all, the Our Voices space and performance rests on their vulnerability and openness. When Oscar participated in the same manner, he became more than a receptacle for the feelings and experiences of others. As many of us know, it’s really hard to be open about difficult things if those holding the space aren’t engaging on a similar level, it can start to feel a little like being consumed. Oscar’s was an act that balanced things out, just enough to matter.

This kind of openness and vulnerability doesn’t just happen during structured activities, or in response to youths’ questions. Adults’ “selves” are a significant part of the everyday, overall atmosphere at FAM and in Our Voices rehearsals. Largely, adults are open about their experiences and wear their emotions, even the difficult ones, as they might among other adults. Sometimes, in moments of stress, joy, or anticipation, adults say openly how they are feeling, or even cry if emotions are particularly strong. And, as I watch the youth experience the adults in
their lives more fully, learn more about them, I can’t help but think it serves a purpose even if it might also make us (me) uncomfortable.

On the long drive home from the conference mentioned above, Sara and I talked about formative experiences with teachers. We had both been students during a public school teachers’ strike, her in Salt Lake City, me in Chicago, many years apart. She told me about her second grade teacher around this time, whose vulnerability during and after the strike had made an impact on her. “She showed me that it’s okay to cry in front of kids.” Sara went on to say that when she first started at Hometown she took a group of youth on an overnight retreat and, broadly, that something bad happened during the night. “In the morning, when they told me what had happened I was so upset for them that I had to excuse myself for a minute. Later they told me ‘that’s when we knew you were for real.’” For Sara, letting herself cry in front of the youth, but taking a private moment to collect herself, meant that she was being honest and open about how she was affected by events in their lives. More, it showed the youth that she was genuinely connected to their difficulties, that she was “for real.”

At FAM and in Our Voices rehearsals, the melding of the personal and professional by way of adult openness and vulnerability, especially where shared experiences with youth are concerned, create opportunities for genuine connection, learning, and support, and most importantly, for youth to bring more of their selves to the space. It is by no means an easy or simple thing, after all, vulnerability is work, and, the question of what is useful for adults to share of themselves and what might be a derailment or even destructive is a significant one.

Another reason that I feel it’s important to explore and name the realities of openness and vulnerability as support at FAM has to do, again, with its context. As I’ve said, for many youth who have experienced foster care, a primary relationship with an adult functioning in a
professional capacity has been with a DCF case worker. These relationships, though often strained, work to serve the young person’s needs while in care and, as such, are not characterized by the kind of openness and vulnerability that adults embody at FAM. More, they are often defined more by a distance model of support than by openness. For example, in a magazine article on relationships, ethics, and boundaries for social workers in child welfare, the author identifies “worker freely shar[ing] and discuss[ing] his/her own personal experiences with the client” as a sign of a potential “violations in the worker/client relationship” (Handon 2009). Though this statement exists within a long list of others, many much more clear or severe boundary violations, I believe that it is an example of the expectation that social workers in the child welfare remain distant from the people they work with, youth in particular. I hope to have shown, though, that at FAM, when adults freely discuss their own personal experiences with young people, it doesn’t necessarily have to be destructive.

This kind of openness and vulnerability matters, and not just because it is productive, but also because it is a reality. At FAM and in Our Voices, it’s normal for adults to be emotional and open, in a limited way. There are, perhaps, other contexts, like schools and clinical settings, especially, where adult vulnerability and openness isn’t as expected, but it still happens. Think about a time, perhaps in the classroom, at a youth program, or maybe even at home, when you experienced something like what I have described. Maybe your teacher cried a bit, or a mentor told you something about themselves you hadn’t expected to hear, or you saw a parent in a new, more complex way. Maybe you were the teacher, mentor, or parent. It might have been surprising, you might have been uncomfortable or not known what to do. But, depending on the situation, that doesn’t necessarily mean it was wrong or inappropriate, just rare. We often expect those in supporting capacities like teachers, mentors, clergy, youth workers, parents, and so on to
be like rocks, unmoved and unaffected no matter what else is going on, maintaining a level of disconnectedness. When it comes down to it, people, no matter what their professional roles, experience emotions, sometimes visibly so. This is a reality but if we do not explore how youth and adults connect through openness and vulnerability, we run the risk of being unequipped to handle these moments, expected and unexpected, when they happen.

At FAM and in Our Voices, there are many ways in which adult vulnerability and openness create possibility for connection and support, as well as embracing the reality that everyone experiences emotions regardless of their age and role. For me, it’s important to understand these dynamics, especially when they speak back to larger systems that serve to disconnect youth and adults, in order to better support youth in being their full selves by being my own full self.

“You are Beautiful!” - Mutuality in Supporting Relationships

Before I came to FAM, I believed pretty strongly that adults’ vulnerability and openness as I have outlined above was tantamount to asking youth to support and care for adults. And, I thought, this was wrong. After some time spent getting to know the community, it became clear to me that many of the relationships among youth and adults were actually, in some way, built on mutual care. Though it made me uncomfortable at first, I came to see that this dynamic had an important place in the work that FAM and Our Voices do, as well as something to teach us about how we understand youth in these contexts.

For example, one evening in spring, Lavender and I were chatting during a break from rehearsal. Jokingly, she made a comment about my body relative to hers. Quickly, but gently, I asked her not to do so, saying, “I’m glad you feel confident enough to talk about your body so
openly, but I’d rather not talk about mine like that!” With great force she scolded me lovingly, telling me how I should be confident about my body, that self love was important, and vocally reminding me: “you are beautiful!” She promised to tell me every time she saw me until I believed it, too. Thus far, she has. As kind as these comments were, I have other sources for positivity and affirmation in my life that don’t necessarily come from a place in which I see my role as quasi professional. Still, I saw that Lavender’s comments came out of genuine care for me, and a desire for me to feel empowered. In many ways, Lavender was moving to do for me what I try to do for her. In this moment, it became clear that the connection in our relationship was built on mutuality in that Lavender cares for me as I do her, across our somewhat different roles at FAM.

Mutual care not only occurs in moment-to-moment interactions, but also plays a significant role in long term relationships between youth and adults at FAM. Sara and Indigo, for example, are very close, they have been since I met them. When I ask Indigo about “mama Sara,” the nickname she originated for Sara, a wide grin splits her face, she says:

There are a few people in my life that I call mama, I have a teacher at school that I also call mama. It’s just, when I started calling her mama Sara, I don’t know if you know about our past. She was looking to adopt, and I was up for adoption ever since I was seven, and she found me when I was like thirteen on a website, and was gonna adopt me, but then things in her life happened and it didn’t turn out to be that way, and then she found me here! We started the same year here together! It was crazy! She’s just such a mothering role, like… I feel like I’m gonna be a good mom like she is, and I don’t know, it just kind of slipped one day and it’s just stuck. (Interview)

Sara and Indigo are obviously special to each other, taking part in a relationship built on a shared history, a missed connection. These beginnings of knowing each other have stayed strong throughout their relationship. Indigo’s care for Sara is evident in the way she talks how they found each other, and how she’ll grow to be caring in the same way as Sara. Indigo’s most recent
school portrait hangs in Sara’s office. At a recent meeting, I watched as Indigo consistently reminded Sara, who wasn’t feeling well, to take a break, sit down, and drink water. On our trip to DC, Sara brought along an elastic flower headband that belongs to her daughter because she knew Indigo would be excited to wear it (she was). There are many ways that Sara cares for Indigo, but in her way, Indigo offers support to Sara as well. The two of them regularly discuss things going on in Indigo’s life, and Indigo inquires about Sara’s family, too. It’s clear, as well, from the way that they talk to each other that Sara has told Indigo about other details in her personal life, like her childhood experiences in foster care and her divorce.

Over time, Indigo and Sara have developed a relationship that is both shaped by Sara’s support for Indigo, and mutual care between them. There are, of course, limits. Sara has lots of sources for emotional support of her own outside of FAM and isn’t using Indigo to unload or discuss issues she needs help with. Simply, Sara is present and accepting of Indigo’s care for her, and reciprocates in the ways that she can.

For Drew, on the other hand, the role of openness and, in turn, mutuality with respect to their gender identity differs from other patterns of interaction at FAM. Drew, the former Life Skills Coordinator, is trans and uses they/them pronouns, meaning they do not identify as male or female, and use gender neutral words to refer to themself, asking others to do the same. When I ask them about how they experienced gender in their work, they say:

What’s interesting is, like, while most people read me as male, because I could be a little bit more flexible with my presentation [at Hometown], paint my nails, have long hair, those sorts of things, uhm, I noticed that for the young people it kind of expanded their concept of like what, to them, presenting as male can look like.

(Interview)

Drew’s openness in their gender presentation, and as such, about their identity, created space for youth to experiment in similar ways.
When it comes to asking those around them to use their pronouns, though, Drew works on being out to their colleagues and having adults use their correct pronouns but of the youth says, “I do not care what pronouns clients use for me and, like, don’t feel the need for them to be corrected... that’s not what they’re there for, and if that’s not the conversation that they need to be having then that’s, it’s not about me… so, like, I don’t bring it up” (Interview).

Of course, Drew doesn’t speak for every trans person in professional youth work or counseling contexts (to which they are also referring). For them, however, it’s most important that coworkers and other adults get their pronouns right, while that’s not a priority in their interactions with youth. In this way, Drew articulates that it’s not necessary for youth to care for them and support them by using they/them pronouns. Youth sometimes do, and though this happens it’s not an expectation, Drew doesn’t need or rely on it.

Drew’s point of view, I think, allows us to see an important limit when it comes to mutuality in supportive relationships between youth and adults at FAM. Youth can and do offer support, care, and affirmation to adults but that doesn’t mean those behaviors are expected of them. They become normal, embedded in the patterns of interaction, perhaps, but only insofar as youth are voluntary members of these relationships. After all, were youth required, either explicitly or implicitly, to consistently offer care and support to adults, FAM and Our Voices would cease to be a space for and about them, as is its purpose.

Obviously, FAM is a space designed specifically to support young people. The comparison to youth’s relationships to DCF workers makes itself here, as caseworkers also function in service of youth’s wellbeing, and don’t necessarily build connections that give rise to the kind of relationships characterized by mutual care, often remaining distanced. In many ways, this mutual care between youth and adults at FAM defies the underlying structure of the program
because it subverts the expectation that adults are the supporters of youth, alone. In this way, mutuality can be thought of as an unnamed dimension of supporting relationships. Though these expressions of mutuality from youth are not expected or depended upon, they are a reality of connection. Forming relationships of support means that people are tied closely together, even when those relationships straddle different roles at FAM.

So, I think we can learn from FAM and Our Voices that it’s clear that youth can and do move to support, care for, and affirm the adults they are in relationships with of their own accord. When they do, things are okay, everyone is safe, and people are growing. Though these kinds of relationship patterns surprised me at first, I have come to see, and to try to show you that they are a very crucial, natural part of support at FAM. From this I think we can see that understanding relationships of support as solely one-sided erases realities and possibilities of mutual care that exists in these relationships. Though it should not be an expectation, youth can and do offer support to the adults in their lives with whom they’ve formed meaningful connections.

To say that they can’t, won’t, or shouldn’t do so, I think, objectifies youth and their abilities to form and be a part of relationships. I hope that the depictions of the ways that relationships at FAM can and do run counter to expectations of youth in supporting relationships with adults offer us a way of questioning how assumptions about youths’ capacity to care and support reflect our assumptions about youth as a developmental category. And, in addition, complicate our understandings of these relationships of support as a whole. Perhaps shedding light on the nuance of these relationships can create more room to nurture appropriately mutual relationships of support.
Discussion

Both by nature and by intention, people in supporting relationships at FAM are connected, their relationships characterized by affection, openness, and mutuality. These qualities allow for youth and adults to know each other fully and take ownership of the space they share. By examining them here, I hope to have portrayed the ways that youth and adults navigate connection and move toward meaningful support in which everyone’s selves are welcomed.

Additionally, FAM constitutes an intense source of support for many of the youth who take part in its programming. Often, staff are involved in the youth’s lives in varied and significant ways as supporters in many capacities. I hope it’s clear that support as I have described it in the previous chapter necessitates this kind of connection between youth and adults. In order for youth and adults to be in truly generative supporting relationships like those at FAM, they must be connected, knowing each other in substantive but safe ways. More, these relationships that bring youth and adults together over their (often shared) experiences logically give rise to connection and mutual care. It is hard to remain disconnected at FAM. In this way, I believe that we can see how connection both constructs and is constructed by supporting relationships that are multifaceted, and contextualized by the shortcomings of the child welfare system in terms of the support it can provide.

I hope that the above investigation of affection, openness, and mutuality as means of connection in supporting relationships offers some clarity and texture to understandings of support at FAM. These ways of being are incredibly valuable, if complex and contested. I believe it’s important to explore these elements of supporting relationships because the human
dimensions of support in professional capacities often go somewhat unnamed in the way we talk about our relationships.

When I ask teaching artist, Oscar, how he imagines his relationship to the youth he works with he says,

You know, my first thought was “I’m their friend,” right? So that’s what came to my mind, I don’t truly believe that, you know. I have friends in my own world and in my own life and I know what those kind of relationships are, they’re not the same as I have with these youth, but I do feel like I’m a connecting point. I do feel like I’m someone I hope that they can feel comfortable talking to and someone that they can trust, and someone that they can share with, who knows I have their best interests at heart. And so that’s what I also do for my friends, I have their best interests at heart and I want them to do well, just like I want these youth to do well in anything that they do. (Interview)

What Oscar highlights here is that these relationships are important, and they resemble other personal relationships in the lives of professionals while simultaneously existing outside of those realms. Oscar’s relationships to the youth are a lot like friendships while also being different. Exactly what differentiates the two, though, is somewhat unclear. There’s something about supporting relationships that rely on connection that is just a little bit intangible, and somewhat unnamed. What exactly are we to each other? What does it mean to be connected in this way while still separated by our different roles?

Drew, former Life Skills Coordinator at Hometown, and I chat as we finish our interview. They ask how things are going this year, I tell them they are missed, the youth already having mentioned them a couple times as of October. When I ask if they’ve reached out to the youth, they tell me that their graduate program in clinical social work (through which they were placed at Hometown) actually prohibits them from maintaining relationships with people they’ve worked with. When I ask why, they explain that it’s simpler and less confusing for the youth, and also because it would be hard for them to keep in touch with everyone they have and will work
with, but it’s a difficult mandate to reconcile. They say, with some trepidation in their voice, “I still live locally and I’ve run into youth already, like, outside of FAM and outside of Hometown. So, it’s kind of weird, like, okay, I can say ‘hi’ to you on the street if you say ‘hi’ to me or, like, whatever, but I kind of have to ignore the connection that we’ve had,” they trail off, “like, I can’t,” they pause again, “I dunno, it’s weird” (Interview).

The connections formed between youth and adults in supporting relationships are real, even when one party is functioning in a professional capacity, even when that relationship is limited by time. Yet, in this case, an outside structure regulates how those relationships can live on. I believe this is an example of the ways that connection between youth and adults at FAM is a contested site, unrecognized and uninvestigated by the systems it exists under and answers to.

As I have discussed, many of the adults in professional supporting roles like caseworkers and social workers with whom FAM youth interact with as a part of the child welfare system are similarly limited in the ways they are able to connect with the youth they work with by specific professional boundaries dictated by their field. This means that meaningful affection, openness, and mutuality at FAM are particularly important to youth’s experience of support in stark contrast to other professional adults like social workers and case managers with whom youth interact. For this reason, I feel that examining connection at FAM demands an investigation of what might limit it, in this case, certain, institutionalized notions of boundaries between youth and adults most clearly visible through the lens of social work and case management in DCF. Understanding connection at FAM also offers us some tools with which to critique these more traditional understandings of boundaries often at play in these more disconnected relationships between youth and adults.
Miriam Greenspan, describes her idea of the distance model in her 1995 article “Out of Bounds,” writing, “distance is enshrined; connection is seen as inherently tainted and untrustworthy. The danger zone is thought to reside in any manner of person-to-person touching - physical, emotional, or spiritual - that might take place in the therapy relationship” (52). Obviously, connection at FAM defies the model Greenspan describes in many ways. I think we can see, though, from the above depictions of affection, openness, and mutuality in support at FAM, that the self is a highly valuable tool for connection and support. Thus, I think FAM can serve to somewhat trouble some of the boundaries that might serve to regulate these things, preserving the distance model in work of support with youth.

Though these boundaries provide some safety, protection, and caution, they also erase the possibilities for support produced when social workers and adults bring more of their full selves to their work with youth. In their article on ethics in counseling, Austin et al. describe and critique the ways in which the concept of “boundaries” is a metaphor for understanding what is and is not appropriate that is projected onto therapeutic relationships. Though relationships at FAM are not precisely counseling oriented, I believe some of the analysis is transferable. They write, “although the metaphor of boundaries conveys limits, it does not, however, help us explore the ethics of engagement, nor does it reveal that not attempting to connect with a patient can be unethical” (Austin et al., 85). Here, they argue that the boundary metaphor, like it is deployed in child welfare contexts, doesn’t account for the role that genuine connection plays in supporting growth and healing for clients, or in the case of FAM, youth. In this way, the authors argue that the boundary metaphor isn’t always useful for therapeutic relationships and by extension, I think, relationships of support.
Moreover, not only do boundaries limit possibilities for connection, they also do not serve to account for its realities in supporting relationships, Austin et al. write:

A problem with the use of the boundary metaphor to envision the dimensions of therapeutic relationships is that the concept of a solid, rigid limit does not convey the softness of reality. Therapy situations are complex, more obscure and murky than clear and straightforward, colored gray, not black and white (Austin et al., 83)

Of course, there are good reasons for boundaries, in this case in youth programming, around how adults should talk about and express their care for youth, how much space adults should take up, to what degree they should share about themselves, and how much care they should accept from the youth they work with. These sorts of expectations exist to constrain power, keep people safe, and serve the growth and healing of young people. But, my time at FAM has taught me that the realities of these relationships are far more intense, complex, and close than these guidelines, if applied unilaterally, might allow. Further so much of this connection as it relates to the work of support is unquantifiable, unnamed, and intangible because it has to do with the intimate ways we know each other in this work that exist in the grey area. Imposing strict lines and metaphors isn’t really useful for understanding and practicing support when we are entangled with each other’s lives in the ways I have described above.

If we extend our understanding of the boundary metaphor in counseling to a larger conception of what is appropriate in contexts of support, we can see that these notions are not well adapted to the complexity and ambiguity of reality. In this way, I hope to have depicted the ways that, as Austin et al. articulate, relationships of support at FAM sometimes live in a grey area, and transgress the metaphors we have at our disposal in search of greater connection, and creating possibility for more meaningful support. It’s not so much that FAM is the only space in which the realities of connection between youth and adults are complex, either. I am sure that,
Regardless of more strict boundaries deployed, for example, between case workers and foster youth, connection exists there, too. More, at FAM connection is so successful and substantive because it is named.

Here, I think, is another limitation of the distance model that can be problematized by understanding connection at FAM. Asking social workers and adults in professional supporting roles to maintain “professional distance” by separating the personal from professional in their work creates a failure of language. I think it’s clear from what I’ve described, as well as from experience for many, that separating one’s personal investment in relationships from one’s professional role is very difficult, if not impossible, both in contexts where we recognize this and in those where it goes unnamed. An adult might be supporting young people in a professional capacity, but be incredibly personally involved due to the nature of this work. This is one of the realities erased by rigid boundaries. Looking at connection at FAM teaches us that if we don’t name the personal dimensions of this work, we’ll only have professional language to discuss what we mean and are to one another as youth and adults in these relationships. Articulating connection as the personal and professional dimensions of this work can give us better tools to understand and discuss our relationships when they aren’t as clear cut as traditional expectations of professionalism in the work of support might dictate.

My hope is that the above analysis illustrates an important but rarely named dimension of support for youth, and helps us to continue to ask: what do adults and youth in this context mean to one another? Are there better metaphors for these incredibly complex relationships? What are the possibilities for meaningful support if we acknowledge the realities of care, love, and the self in our work? And, I hope that these questions can push us toward the uncomfortable: areas of
ambiguity and shades of grey in working relationships with youth, as well as to help us hold
closeness without turning away.
Chapter 4: Institutional Constraints on Support at FAM

Not too long ago, I stood in the kitchen of the community building with Sara, the director of the FAM program. Around us, youth were making themselves dinner (a leftovers night - quesadillas and fried eggs with tortilla chips and hummus on the side), catching up with each other, and filling the space with laughter and good-natured taunts as the evening’s programming began. Sara explained that Hometown had hosted visitors the day before, a group planning to start a housing community similar to Hometown in Albany, NY. Only theirs would be two or three times the size of Hometown and also create a space for developmentally disabled youth alongside foster and adoptive families and elderly folks. “How are they gonna pay for it?” I asked, to which Sara responded dryly, “well, their state is going to fund it.” We both laughed, a little bit of an “if only” embedded in the exchange. Then she said, “you know with social change, it’s always the people who do it first who have it the hardest! We have to figure out how to fund it, prove that it works and all that. And then the people who come after, they get the funding because now we know!”

I know where she’s coming from with this; it’s not so much resentment in her voice as an acknowledgment that this work is hard. This feeling is familiar, too. I remember what it was like to be a youth leader in a social change organization; with too little in the way of supplies and funding to do everything we imagined, and never enough time to talk about it when we couldn’t.

At FAM, both in my role as just a volunteer, predating this project, and in my capacity as a participant-observer, I’ve noticed the ways adults and youth are always running up against things like money, the child welfare system, and other organizations, prompting further investigation of the world in which FAM exist. And, it was these moments of tension, of difficulty, of “stuck-ness” that pushed me to ask the questions that make up this chapter in the
first place. In this chapter, I identify and discuss a number of institutional factors that constitute limits or constraints at FAM. This chapter explores the constraining effects of scarcity, the child welfare system, and organizational partnerships as they relate to each other, but also to a larger neoliberal system of inequality and devaluation of social services. For my purposes, neoliberalism can be understood as an economic and social system that sustains free-market capitalism by incentivizing characteristics like efficiency, privatization, and personal responsibility in our economy, programs and institutions, and in individuals (Duggan 2003).

These are systems imposed upon FAM, the interplay between which constitutes a matrix of obstacles with which members of the FAM community must contend. Individually, each of these constraints may not pose as much of an issue, but they build on and magnify one another, creating a situation worth investigating. Some of these constraints may seem obvious, even taken for granted, and some may come as a surprise. My aim here is to describe the realities of life and work at FAM, which I hope will allow us to better understand the context of work that supports youth, and how it might be better recognized and valued. The following is an attempt to explore how youth and adults at FAM experience and navigate institutional constraints on their work together, and how their relationships with one another are impacted.

**Scarcity as Institutional Constraint**

“Yeah, time and money,” says teaching artist Sam when I ask her about the challenges associated with Our Voices. “I mean that’s just how it is with non profits and the arts, it’s always time and money,” she continues (Interview). Here, Sam names something that many of us recognize from work in similar fields. Issues of funding and time, as a result, characterize conditions in fields like education, arts, social services, and activism and organizing. Youth
programming like FAM is no exception. The more you look, the more visible it becomes. But, when I talk to people at FAM, many echo Sam’s statement: “that’s just how it is.”

For me, this shows that people working under conditions of scarcity to do transformative and critical work with youth have become accustomed to making do. The conditions of the American economy are such that it is often a given that youth programs lack the proper funding, space, time, and supplies to do important work.

The more time I spend at FAM, the more necessary I feel it is to tease apart these dynamics. In order to move toward value and support for programs that support youth, it’s important to understand and name exactly where we stand, and what it might mean for everyone to have what they need when it comes to funding and resources for youth programming like FAM. As such, this section explores scarcity of funding, time, and space and is guided by the following questions: what does scarcity look like at FAM? What does scarcity create at FAM? And, if scarcity did not complicate the work of FAM, what might be possible?

“You Have to Have a Way to Keep the Lights On” – Funding as an Institutional Constraint

When I ask Marla, the Hometown Community Facilitator, about challenges in supporting the FAM program, she discusses many of the various things that she contends with in overseeing the structural aspects of the program. Then she says, “I think FAM is fairly unique in terms of what we do and so it’s attractive to fund and yet, you know, I think, there’s just not tons of funding, so you just need to keep at it. We need to have our organization always supporting that” (Interview). What Marla points to here is that FAM exists inside a larger world of scarcity, where funding for youth programming, especially where the arts are concerned, is little and competitive.
Funding questions form the base of many decisions about programming at FAM, which defines what the program can be based on what resources are available. Marla adds,

My fantasy would be that we have more funding and more full time staff and that would, you know, accelerate the program’s growth… it’s about funding, everything’s about funding to some degree cause you know you have to have a way to keep the lights on, right? (Interview)

There’s more to the story of FAM than funding, of course, but Marla’s words offer a window into the way scarcity functions. Funding presents a challenge because it is always a consideration in the ways that resources and supplies are managed. Additionally, without funding, (or more of it, as the case may be) FAM cannot grow.

Lavender, one of the youth, is frank with me: “I definitely would like more financial support with this group,” she says, when I ask her if there’s anything she would want to change to make FAM better. She says, “I think with more financial support we would be, with more backing I should say, we would be able to really put our stories out there, out there, you know?... I think it would be really cool to do it like statewide. Do it all over the country. It would be really cool” (Interview). Secure and sustainable funding, as opposed to a scarcity, would mean that youth at FAM would have a larger platform, and a chance to have their stories heard by more people, expanding possibilities for action and performance.

It’s important to mention here, though, that FAM is by no means destitute. Sara makes sure to tell me so: “finding the resources is challenging. I won’t say that’s hard, because generally anybody we talk to wants to support us in whatever way they can. The Easthampton Community Center helps us out with food a lot, they’ve helped us give free clothes to some of the youth that needed it” (Interview). Marla, too, highlights the importance of community partnerships as resources for FAM and Hometown as a whole. Though FAM is perhaps a minor
example of a youth program existing under scarcity, many youth programs function with far, far less. I think it still offers us some ways to understand scarcity. Even when managing resources is doable, it means that staff are constantly involved in a process of fashioning financial security and finding ways to make do.

Another way that staff at FAM do this is by raising money from private donors and grants. Though this is pretty normal for a nonprofit organization, I believe it’s worth examining exactly what it means to chase funding, and how it affects the support that FAM is able to hold. For example, the final Our Voices performance is largely attended by donors along with friends and family of the performers. In this way, the content of the performance is a little bit more high stakes than it might otherwise be. On the topic of the value of Our Voices, Sara remarks: “the other goal for [the performance] is to put on a show that’s impactful, that educates the public, increases awareness, encourages other people to participate in the program, and encourages donors and things like that to get involved, and volunteers. And it works!” (Interview). In addition to being an opportunity for youth to create, express, share stories, and heal, the Our Voices performance also serves as an occasion to showcase the work of FAM, and Growing Forest and Hometown more broadly.

This makes a lot of sense and it’s kind of a necessary part of relying on donations, but I’ve also seen showcasing add a level of voyeurism to the performance that might not otherwise be there. Donors don’t have to be well-informed on the issues facing youth in foster care to consume and respond to their stories. One of the youth, Indigo, is aware of this, she says,

We are writing and creating pieces on times that aren’t, that weren’t so easy, and that we’ve pushed down and pushed aside and didn’t want to deal with, and now we’re dealing with them and we’re dealing with them in front of other people that might not necessarily understand exactly how we feel. (Interview)
Lots of the people who attend Our Voices performances are incredibly well intentioned, and care for the ensemble members greatly. Still, misconceptions among audience members about foster care and the experiences of foster youth abound. I distinctly remember a moment from last year’s post-show Q&A session in which an audience member assured the performers that they would all “find forever families.” Clearly, a romanticized notion of adoption was reflected in this moment, and then projected upon to youth who might, in reality, not be guaranteed a “forever family,” or at least not in the way the audience member meant.

“That’s okay, not everybody’s gonna understand where you come from,” adds Indigo. Our Voices is fundamentally about spreading awareness about the youth’s stories and experiences with foster care and adoption, so coming into contact with some ignorance is part of the package. But, that doesn’t mean it’s easy. When compounded with an imperative for getting funding, this exposure to ignorance becomes a little less natural, and a little more constraining. Funding requires a sort of compromise of values, wherein youth are valued not only for just being themselves, but also for the ways their stories can influence potential donors. Youth are put in this position often without being offered context about who they are performing for and what that might mean.

On a more structural level, grants also produce a similar kind conflict. Currently, Our Voices is funded by a Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) grant called YouthReach. The grant is intended for Creative Youth Development programs that engage youth in artistic endeavors that help them grow and learn. This grant has allowed Our Voices to grow and expand in many ways, including funding extra positions. That said, grant funding in this manner also creates challenges of its own.
Not long ago, two of the MCC staff came for a visit to observe Our Voices rehearsal, in preparation to potentially continue funding the project. The day was planned carefully, extra volunteers were called in to help, staff were dressed up and on edge, and youth were instructed to be friendly, open, and conversational with the visitors. The evening began and ended with meetings, meaning that various staff were pulled in and out of rehearsal to talk to the funders. Over dinner, Youth Leaders Lavender and Indigo were asked to have one-on-one conversations with the visitors at the table, with less time to rest, connect with other youth, and even eat. Lavender had been sick, and not planning to come that evening at all, but after a call from Sara, she showed up, albeit a little disgruntled at being asked to come. After dinner, youth rehearsed and performed a couple of the scenes they had been working on for the first time in front of a new audience, even if it was small. Though this disruption was a one-time event at Our Voices, it’s evidence of the ways that the pressure of finding and securing grant funding affects those involved, and not just the adults, either. In the same way that youth’s voices are valued for their impact on individual donors, they are also used as proof or evaluation when it comes to grant funding. Though this seems to be a necessary part of finding financial security for nonprofit organizations, I also think it fails to reflect the values of FAM, where the space belongs to the youth and they are valued for just being. I do believe it makes a great deal of sense for the young people to be the experts on the programs that serve them. But without open conversations on the topic and consent from all parties involved, youth’s participation in public program evaluation walks a fine line between collaboration and youth being caught in the middle of a necessary struggle for funding.

In addition to the way youth voices must play a role in securing funding, grants like the MCC’s Youth Reach also require and reward a certain kind of articulation. The Our Voices grant
proposal is as one might expect. It gives a detailed description of the program description that speaks to what Our Voices is and does for young people, as well as a lengthy section on program evaluation that discusses the outcomes and results of participation in Our Voices. This is, of course, what’s needed for Our Voices to be proven to be worth funding.

But, Marla discusses, what FAM does isn’t always in line with the ways that funders want to see proof:

> We know that it’s really important to invest wide and deep in a young person. Typically there aren’t resources to do that... you know, that’s not the model. The outcomes and press people are like ‘numbers, numbers, numbers.’ We’re really understanding pretty much every day that it’s the investment in young people, ‘you do what it takes’ kind of approach, uhm, so that’s a juggle all the time. (Interview)

What Marla describes here is how FAM’ intense approach toward supporting youth fully doesn’t necessarily fit with funders’ expectations of outcomes. More holistic, process-oriented approaches to support like those I have outlined in previous chapters, especially where crisis is concerned, can be harder to name and prove because the results don’t appear to be universal to all youth served. Folks at FAM know, though, that it’s incredibly important to invest in the lives and needs of individual young people, even if it’s not cost effective, as Marla mentions.

This pressure to prove is also evidence of a larger trend in the way that youth programming and relationships therein are understood. In her article on youth and youth workers’ experiences of youth development in an after school leisure program in the UK, Sevasti-Melissa Nolas traces “shifting policy and practice landscapes” (27) that have, in line with shifting priorities for education policies, moved youth programming policy and practice toward more outcomes oriented models like Positive Youth Development (PYD) and away from older, more radical and process-based youth work practices. PYD can be understood as the en vogue theoretical and pedagogical framework oriented around supporting key factors that are accepted
to contribute to the development of youth into “prepared and productive” members of society, also associated with a turn toward outcomes-oriented thinking about youth and their development (Sukarieh and Tannock 2011). In contrast, as defined in this article and in others, the practice of “youth work” constitutes a less structured, more relational way of being with youth (Rodd and Stewart 2009, Howard 2011, Sukarieh and Tannock 2011). Nolas evokes a rich history of youth work, especially in Europe and the UK, one concerned with “the riskier and messier sounding language of relationships, identity and belonging that is found in more critical youth development literature (Fine and Sirin 2007) and in radical youth work traditions” (27). To me, this sounds a lot like the work that FAM does, investing “wide and deep” in young people, like Marla points out. As Marla says, that’s not necessarily the predominate model funders want to see. Nolas concurs, writing that this way of being with youth is becoming less and less palatable for policy makers and funding bodies due to continuing neoliberal shifts in Western, and specifically American culture toward models like PYD.

In response to these trends, Howard Williamson writes that a conference of European youth workers found that “youth work with more ‘vulnerable’ young people was being dehydrated through a misguided political and policy preoccupation with targets, outcomes, measurement and performance at the expense of relationships, trust, process, space and time” (204). Here, though speaking in a European context, Williamson articulates the conflict I’m interested in, one also keenly relevant in the US. This, I think, is the neoliberal, standardized “numbers, numbers, numbers” attitude that Marla mentions, one that doesn’t quite fit with the understanding of support at FAM.

The MCC’s YouthReach grant is perhaps a good example of the ways that staff are asked to describe and quantify their programs. It’s worth noting that the YouthReach program is part of
a larger Creative Youth Development initiative, Positive Youth Development’s artistic cousin. Creative Youth Development outlines the way that youth can be empowered and prepared for life using artistic process and production, largely in out of school time programming. It’s not so much that any of these policy or funding priorities like Positive or Creative Youth Development are wrong or bad, but that they ask for a very specifically articulated, and almost removed, kind of proof.

In their anthology, a radical organizing collective, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, outlines what they call the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC). They describe the ways that the growing number of non profit social change organizations in America have become hugely influential in social change movements while being simultaneously influenced by private foundations via grant funding. INCITE! Describes a history of private foundations, which emerged as tax shelters for millionaires like Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford in the early twentieth century, and which have moved in and out of the public eye, largely escaping scrutiny and regulation.

The non-profit and foundation model has evolved significantly since then, but a relationship still exists, and I think it can help us to understand the costs of outcomes based funding and policy priorities in the field of youth programming. When we combine an understanding of new neoliberal trends in youth programming with an analysis of the NPIC’s effects on the independence of social change organizations, and thus influence on social change movements, we can see a less often recognized impact of scarcity.

We know that scarcity of funding exists in the non-profit field, and so many organizations do rely on grants to do their work. But, when organizations are eligible for grant funding from foundations, they are at risk of becoming dependent on these grants, as opposed to
being funded by a steady base of constituents. Relying on grant funding creates some vulnerability where the independence of non-profit social change work is concerned.

Through priorities in grant funding, the NPIC asks that non-profits define themselves a certain way, according to a model that’s palatable, something digestible, that follows a hierarchy we might recognize in businesses and corporations, with norms along those lines. But, in truth, social change movements are more complex than a set of guidelines for internal organizational structure and culture. Take Hometown: it’s an organization that engages in social service and charitable work, yes, but it’s also a neighborhood.

The language of grant applications is not so complex, especially when it comes to newer and more neoliberal policy and funding initiatives in youth programming as I have discussed. Grant applications ask for a certain kind of program evaluation, quantifiable proof, if you will, of outcomes for youth. But, as I think is the case when it comes to the work of FAM, support for youth is made up of relationships, complex and multidimensional, perhaps escaping definition.

For me, this creates a tension between what programs like FAM need to hold, and what they are allowed to be by policy and funding initiatives administered by the NPIC. The Our Voices grant application for the YouthReach grant is detailed and descriptive, but as anybody who has tried to put something intense and emotional into words knows, it’s very hard to truly articulate all of the things that Our Voices holds. And if the kind of support that occurs at FAM would be considered inefficient or not widely effective, it might be hard to fund.

What I’m interested in here is painting a picture of a world where scarcity of funding means that youth programs are vulnerable to the priorities of other people, priorities that don’t always match up with what support looks like at FAM. More importantly, I’m interested in illustrating the ways that youth are caught in between when youth workers and other staff are
forced to, as Marla says “juggle,” always looking from one priority to another in order to get valuable programming funded. I wonder, too, about the costs of time spent performing discursive and descriptive gymnastics to quantify the unquantifiable.

Zooming out, we can see that funding not only becomes a motivating factor for programming choices about supplies, trips and excursions, food, and space use, but also something that forces programs to define themselves and the kind of support they can give around other people’s priorities in order to get funded. It’s a constant negotiation. In this way, I believe that scarcity of funding forces staff to operate cautiously and conservatively to “keep the lights on,” meaning that FAM must be defined by what is “reasonable” and “provable” as opposed to what is necessary.

“I Have to Do it in as Little Time as Humanly Possible” - Scarcity of Time at FAM

When I ask Lexi, one of the youth, if there are challenges associated with creating Our Voices, immediately she says: “time!” The date of the final performance looms on the horizon as we speak, and I can see that Lexi feels this with urgency as she says, “we only got, what, like three more rehearsals?” (Interview). Time is so very often a defining concern at FAM, and with Our Voices specifically. As I have discussed, funding at FAM can often be a limiting factor. Scarcity of funding, though, also produces scarcity of time. Sara says, “so time is a challenge and that’s because of that funding, right? Like, my position is supposed to be maximum of 32 hours a week and they don’t have funding budgeted for more than that” (Interview Sara). Because there’s not room in the budget for more hours for Sara, it means that she has less time to plan and oversee programming, as is natural. She continues, giving an example:

It probably takes three hours of work to go into one [weekly update] email, if you calculate it that way, and probably five hours of work to go into each calendar,
minimum, plus meetings that have happened to set those dates. And if that’s eight hours of my week then that means I don’t get to make phone calls [to family and parents] or get to do other things. So, yeah, if we had more stable funding and I had eight more hours a week, that would be ideal. But also, I don’t have eight more hours a week because I have children and a home and childcare and all of that, too, so I’m limited in how much time I can put into this job. (Interview)

What Sara describes here is a really clear example of the way that scarcity of time functions, creating a zero-sum game. This scarcity is produced both by the limits of the work week and by funding. It means that sometimes things just don’t get done in time, or administrative tasks must take priority over other urgent matters. It also means that there are some limits on what can be accomplished over the course of a week at FAM, including during program times.

Sam, as mentioned above, highlights similar challenges in her work with Our Voices:

This project has been in the red for years, which I’m not sure I should have said. But, uhm, it’s part of the challenge of it, is like, the organizations have backed in and given it the time it needs, but it also means that it doesn’t pay for itself and we feel that as teaching artists. I’m aware that I have to do it in as little time as humanly possible because it’s always in the red (Interview).

What she’s saying here is clear, because organizations are spending money (mostly in personnel hours) on Our Voices but not making it, the amount of money spent has to be minimized. This means that teaching artists and other staff, like Sara, have a really limited amount of time they can spend with youth and on preparation for programs. The impact of this is clear, too, when updates to the script don’t get made between rehearsals and supplies aren’t ready in time because the staff haven’t gotten around to getting them.

What Sam also points to, here, is the pressure that comes with working under constraints of funding and time. I hope that, in previous chapters, I have proved how much genuine care and emotion goes into the work with youth that folks do at FAM and Our Voices. Consider what it means to do an intensely human job like Sam’s in “as little time as humanly possible.”
images Sam invokes here are striking. Here lies, I think, an important tension to articulate. Constraints like time and money mean that work needs to be as efficient and streamlined as possible in order to conserve those things, that’s scarcity, whether literal or perceived. But when the work at hand is, by nature, not always efficient, linear, or convenient, a conflict arises. Support for youth, as I have described, is a complex and intense process, not always neat, clean, or quick. And so staff trying to offer support are put in a tight spot: between the work they know they must do, and the means to do it at hand.

Of course there are only so many hours in everyone’s day, and most working people are constrained by the amount of hours they can or can’t work in a given week. But, the scarcity of time is produced by the limits on funding for FAM and time becomes really important when working toward something like a final performance. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the implications of goal and product oriented programming as it happens in the context of Our Voices, but first, I will investigate scarcity of time as it constrains its rehearsal and production process. It’s important, here, to illuminate the costs of a lack of time on relationships of support in this work. Sam says,

I can’t, with the whatever, up to ten hours a week, really eight hours a week that I have for Our Voices, you know, I can’t go into each youth’s story and find out everything that’s going on with them for forty five minutes of our hour [production] meeting. Like, we need to talk about when are we gonna send the publicity out? You know, like who’s gonna be on stage when? (Interview)

With so many logistics to consider, and few people to do it, practical discussions between staff must take the place of attention to the individual needs of the youth on a week to week basis. Of course, there is still always some time to be found to touch base about youths’ needs and lives, even if it means adults stay late after meetings or do so over email. Nonetheless, this example
highlights the ways that, with only so many hours in the day (or, more accurately, written into staff’s contracts), the possibilities for communication and support for youth are limited.

In rehearsals, too, time constrains support for youth. Teaching artist, Oscar, says,

There never seems to be enough time to get enough of the work done, and sometimes at the end of the night I feel like I’m just leaving the youth hanging, uhm, and not necessarily closing the circle of where we started, and what we got to that night. And so a lot of the emotions can still be raw, uhm, all of the feelings they can still be holding. And so sometimes I’m really challenged, myself, with not feeling like I’m holding them the best way possible by, like, the end of the night because of time. And so that is something that always plays through my mind of: did I leave that okay? Did we leave that okay? Did we settle that? Did we figure that out? (Interview)

These questions address a continued struggle toward holding the youth fully in the time allotted. These meetings are so often full of difficult stories, strong feelings, and intense experiences. Caring for youth as they rehearse takes time and attention, and when time is scarce, this support is jeopardized.

Similarly, the amount of time built into the rehearsal schedule itself can also be a challenge. In general, the Our Voices calendar operates on a timeline, moving toward a fixed performance date. Though running on schedule is not necessarily a function of funding, most things in our world move according to a calendar, it certainly exacerbates underlying scarcity of time and constrains possibilities for support. Lexi, whose words began this section, speaks to what it feels like to be running out of time:

[It’s] nerve wracking! ‘Cause we haven’t had that many [rehearsals] this year ‘cause of the snow, we’ve had what, seven? Six? Something like that? Usually we have what, twenty? I’m not sure, maybe not quite that many
I’m just making up a number. But we [usually] have enough where this year it’s just like, what? And we just started the dance, the dance piece, and the performance is this month! Oh my god!! (Interview)
Lexi is half-laughing as she tells me this, but as I’ve watched rehearsal over the last several weeks, I know the waning amount of rehearsal time weighs heavy on everyone. Of course, working up to a deadline is a natural part of making theatre, and snow days, of which there have been two this year, are inevitable and out of everyone’s control. Still, it’s quite obvious that youth experience scarcity of time, both as it’s produced by funding and by forces of nature, as a point of tension. It’s unpleasant, anxiety-producing, and prohibitive to youth getting care and through spaces for creative support, specifically.

Indigo, too, articulates this in our interview when discussing the upcoming performance for DCF workers, a week before the final performance:

Oh lordy, what is it, a week away now, our first performance? I understand that we’re not putting all of the pieces from the performance into [the performance at DCF offices] that we’re doing in a week, but, I think… we’re not ready. You’re not feeling prepared?
We’re not ready. We ain’t ready yet! I would rather be more put together, more ready for it no matter what kind of performance we’re doing, even if it’s for DCF workers or whoever it is.
So the main challenge with time for you is feeling prepared?
Yeah and, like, we have a lot of ADHD children in this group and it’s hard to keep them focused to where we can work on the pieces, and get them together, and then I get ticked off and that’s never fun. (Interview)

The Our Voices ensemble is full of youth who are invested in and committed to making something they are proud of. When lack of time makes things stressful, these passions can get turned inward. In rehearsal, Indigo and others are vocal about their feelings on the scarcity of time, and often express frustrations with each other for not focusing on the task at hand, or not memorizing or rehearsing efficiently enough. In a lot of ways, this is a part of ensemble-ship, but I feel it’s worth illuminating the ways that scarcity of time can create stress and conflict among youth.
In addition to constraining support by creating tension among youth, scarcity of time also contributes to conflicts between youth and adults in the creative process. As I’ve described, time is tight, so there isn’t much leeway. In late February, the youth came to the teaching artists with some concerns they had about the performance. Jace spoke for a group of them who weren’t excited about the “Best Of” theme that would incorporate favorite scenes from the last five years of Our Voices which the teaching artists had suggested, and the youth had agreed to in the fall. Jace suggested the theme: “Words I Meant to Say But Never Did” which resonated with many of the youth. The teaching artists were open to these suggestions, but it was clear that, at this point, there was nowhere near enough time to really shape the performance in the image of the youth’s vision, so a compromise had to be made.

This example is a complex one. Regardless of scarcity, a change of plans at the last minute will most likely create stress in any context. What’s important here, though, is that time is a limit, a hard stop. When working on theatre and performance, artistic and creative visions can and do shift over the course of a rehearsal process. But at Our Voices, time was already scarce, and so a complete change of theme wasn’t an option. In this way scarcity of time limits opportunities for creative expression and support because it limits flexibility in a creative process.

Not only do current time constraints pose a challenge to the work of support at FAM, they also conflict with the larger trajectory of the program. Sam continues:

[Our Voices] has grown. Like, you know we did a performance at the state house last year. Last year was really hard because we didn’t have the fall [to rehearse] at all. So it was like, okay we’re getting bigger and doing more but we have less time. And, so this year we had the fall but now we have these snow days so we’re kind of in this also this challenging position. (Interview)
This year’s is the fifth Our Voices performance, and as years have gone by and the program has developed, there have been opportunities for growth like the ones Sam describes. But the calendar, and thus the amount of time allotted for rehearsal, remains much the same year to year. It’s natural for a program to grow in scope and size as time goes on, especially as staff make connections to partners who provide more outlets to share the work that happens in Our Voices, like at the Boston statehouse. But with the same amount of time to rehearse, working toward an increasingly larger, more fully realized Our Voices performance is more difficult.

For example, starting last year, the teaching artists asked the youth to start memorizing their lines for Our Voices so that the performance could be more polished looking with no one carrying a script on stage. This was an exciting process for many but, when it came down to it, proved to be really difficult. Many of the youth come to Our Voices are there to tell their stories, but performing them in front of an audience can be a big, scary step. For these folks, memorization has shown to be really challenging and a source of stress. Last year, most of the performers went on stage with cue cards. Those of us who have memorized lines or other text know that memorization takes time and practice, but there wasn’t actually more rehearsal time that year to accommodate that change. Performers must do more than they used to, and though it’s an exciting step, they have the same amount of time they had before.

This year, the teaching artists, in conversation with higher ups at Growing Forest, told the youth that they will be asked to memorize again. This has, along with other issues, caused some conflict between the teaching artists and the youth, who said they would feel more confident if they could have scripts in hand. Were there some extra time to work specifically on memorization and ensure that all the performers felt confident with their lines, this might not be an issue. But time is scarce, and so the increasing pressure to work toward a polished
performance remains. A couple weeks before the performance, the teaching artists announced that youth would again be allowed to have cue cards, though some had already been working on memorizing for some week. When it came down to it, the pressure was alleviated, but not without substantial struggle between youth and teaching artists beforehand. When time continues to be limited because of hourly and funding constraints, it means that growth in programming and scope also becomes a site of challenge.

All these things taken together can give us a picture of what scarcity of time looks like at FAM, especially when it comes to Our Voices. Limits on funding mean limits on the hours staff can work to support the program, and that becomes a limit on what FAM can do and be. This is visible in the everyday choices staff make about how to use their time, during programming and in preparation. We can see, also, how scarcity of time means that meetings, especially Our Voices rehearsals, can be characterized by stress and conflict while just trying to get things done. Scarcity of time takes a toll on the kind of support that can occur at FAM, as well as those who are attempting to give it under highly constraining circumstances.

These limits pose challenges we sometimes take for granted. Most of us live in worlds where there isn’t enough time to do everything that needs to be done. This is magnified when it comes to work in nonprofit and arts contexts (as well as many others) where time is often a function of funding, something else there isn’t enough of. Though this is so common in our society, I don’t think it has to be this way.

*Scarcity as a Whole*

In the above section I hope to have enumerated the ways that scarcity constrains the work of support at FAM, both practically and logistically, as well as through structural relationships
like the NPIC. Additionally, I hope that the costs of these constraints on the quantity and quality of support that FAM is able to hold is clear.

Scarcity of funding, and resulting scarcity of time represent a dynamic I believe is fairly dominant in non-profits and arts contexts, even more than at FAM, in many cases. By depicting and describing the particularities of these scarcities as institutional constraints on the work of support at FAM and in Our Voices, I hope to have parsed what we mean when we say “that’s just how it is.” The issues I have worked through in this section often constitute unacknowledged or taken for granted obstacles in this work, but naming them has power to help us better understand them, where they come from, and how conditions for this work might be bettered. I think it’s worth investigating the difficulties we have come to take for granted in today’s society to truly understand the very real effects of the little value placed on programming for youth.

I don’t have an answer to the question of scarcity at FAM. Any answer will not be an easy one. Still, I’d like to imagine a world where FAM and other programming like it are underscored by abundance, and not scarcity, characterized more by ease, comfort, and aspirations, than by stress, haste, and sacrifice.

The Child Welfare System as an Institutional Constraint

Adoption is hard and I’m going through it right now and it really sucks because I’ve never been adopted before and DCF is making it hard for me and so the only thing I’ve ever known was pain, but now I just feel anger and sadness because I have to be the one telling my baby sis “Big Bro ain’t coming home.” Not you, [FAM], because you are the reason I’m getting adopted in the first place. So thanks for all the loving and caring and warmth.

These are Xavier’s words from an early draft of *This is Me*, an opening piece in this year’s show. What I’ve replicated here doesn’t capture the beat on which he said the lines - Xavier writes raps. As long as I’ve known him, he’s been in the process of being adopted. At 15, he’s already been
in the system for some years, and lives in a group home. The experiences he writes about above serve as an introduction in the way his name and hobbies could not: a pressing experience in his life, a source of pain, anger, excitement, and a thank you. For Xavier, his time involved with foster care and adoption are a significant part of the self he shows to the audience. In a similar way, the performance he creates with other ensemble members lives in the context of foster care and adoption.

In much the same way that experiences with foster care and adoption are ever present in art making, the child welfare system looms large among the many things that complicate the building of relationships and experience of support at FAM. Of course, FAM serves youth who are affected by the child welfare system, either currently or in the past. As such, interactions with Department of Children and Families (DCF) restrictions and requirements abound. At meetings, we spend a lot of our time sharing and discussing DCF; its function, its structure, but most of all, the experiences youth have had in its care, especially the negative ones. In order to do this work, to get people in the same room to share their stories and create community around them, folks at FAM must navigate this highly complex and often bureaucratic system that created a need for such a space in the first place. In this section, I’ll take a look at some of the many ways that, coupled with some of the natural ways that age constitutes a barrier, the child welfare system complicates the work that FAM seeks to do, as well as the ways that folks navigate these complications.
“It’s Like, We Literally Can’t Get You at this Point” - Transportation, the Child Welfare System, and FAM

When asked about constraints on their work, Drew, the former Life Skills Coordinator, says:

I think the biggest barrier at times to being able to doing everything that we wanted to do was transportation and communication with some of the like programs that youth were in, uhm, so because FAM covers like a wide spread of geography in Western Mass and not all of our youth have like reliable transportation... And there were a couple of times where we didn’t hear from someone until last minute, like “oh, I wanted to be at this thing and I don’t have a ride” and it’s like, we literally can’t get you at this point because we start in twenty minutes and you’re forty minutes away. Uhm and that’s tough because it’s not always their fault. Like, if you don’t have access to a ride that’s just, like, tough and so it’s hard to have geography be like a limiting factor in access to things (Drew, Interview 2017).

Here, Drew describes a unique part of the FAM program and the complications it can produce. FAM staff and volunteers coordinate to provide or find rides to and from events for every young person in need of one – an intentional structure to support all youth in accessing FAM programming.

For some readers, this might seem surprising, but a few of the following particularities of the world in which FAM exists make transportation a vital access need. Some of the youth have caregivers who can drive them to and from events, and a few have drivers licenses and cars of their own. However, because many are currently in state care and without access to adults willing or able to give them rides, or, sometimes, the ability to get a driver's license, even if they are of age, lots of the youth depend on FAM staff for transportation. As Drew mentions, given the geographically dispersed nature of Western Massachusetts, and its even more inconvenient public transit system, distance can be a challenge. We can understand this to be a function of the
limited mobility that comes with being young, coupled with and exacerbated by youth’s involvement with the child welfare system, which further restricts mobility.

While discussing potential outreach trips to local high schools with FAM youth, Sara describes the logistics involved in coordination: “so we have challenges of, like, cars. Who has cars that have enough space in it, who has the time to go transport everybody, who has the ability to, like, go during the middle of the day to do things like that? … it’s constantly balancing” (Interview). Here, it’s clear that just figuring out who is going where and with whom takes a significant amount of juggling of possible seat and driver configurations. It’s not always simple, but Sara and other Hometown staff do this planning for every meeting and event.

These logistics also require youth to communicate with adults about when they need a ride, and where they need to go. If youth need a ride to FAM, staff need at least 24 hours notice in order to plan. But these sorts of conversations don’t always happen in time. One evening in November, preparation for dinner was well underway and most of the youth had already arrived when someone asked where Jace, a long-time FAM member, was. A short phone conversation between him and Sara, the program director revealed that he was at home, a fifteen minute drive away, waiting to be picked up. But, much like the instances Drew described above, he had never asked for a ride and it was too late for any of the staff to come get him. The phone call ended when Sara tried to tell him she needed to know about transportation earlier and Jace hung up on her, obviously upset to be missing FAM. About a half an hour later, to everyone’s surprise, Jace walked in the door. When I asked him how he’d gotten there, he told me that he was really embarrassed - he’d had to call a former caregiver and ask for a ride. He hadn’t wanted to, but being at FAM was important.
In the moment described above, transportation and communication around logistics actually caused conflict between an adult and youth, who have a generally trusting and close relationship. There are a lot of reasons it could have been hard for Jace to ask for a ride in advance – perhaps he is learning to plan ahead and ask for the things he needs. But, he also lives in a foster home where he doesn’t always have control over his own time, and he doesn’t have cellular service on his phone, making it so he can’t make phone calls without wifi. Still, pre-programming time is limited, and so is the availability of adults to provide transportation. So, Jace’s need for transportation and difficulty in communicating with Sara about it had the potential to drive a rift between Sara and Jace, leaving Jace feeling forgotten and uncared for, and Sara without the tools or information she needed to support Jace in getting to FAM. These is just one way in which this institutional constraint produces difficulty and stress at FAM.

When I ask Drew about the cost of all this driving, they add: “FAM used to end later, so when programming was ending at like eight or nine and then you were driving half an hour to Springfield and then forty minutes home, you weren’t getting home until like well after ten or close to eleven” (Interview). For Drew, this isn’t necessarily a failing of the FAM program, but the unfortunate combined result of Western Massachusetts geography and the foster care system’s limits on youth’s independence and mobility. In order to provide the connection and community for youth involved in an isolating and restrictive child welfare system, FAM must work against the exact apparatus that makes it necessary, going the lengths necessary just to get everyone together.

Drew and I agree, transportation isn’t only a challenge; driving time can be a place of connection and not just inconvenience. While we discuss the ways Drew formed relationships with youth during their time at FAM, with a little bit of a laugh in their voice, they remark:
As much as I hated it when I was a teen, cars can be a really useful place to have conversations and get to know people because, like, you can’t leave!

*You also don’t have to look at each other!*

Right, so there’s less pressure in terms of the, like, expecting eye contact, but there’s also kind of like nothing else to do sometimes besides you know, like, playing music. (Interview)

This unstructured time leaves space for relationships to grow. As Drew says this, I’m reminded of driving Jace home just a few weeks prior. Together we spent the fifteen minute car ride comparing our encyclopedic knowledges of the Harry Potter series, and evaluating the movie adaptations’ effectiveness. Jace remembers details I’ve forgotten a long time ago, his recall beating mine by a long shot.

For Drew and I, this sort of time is a chance to get to know the youth in our cars, and for them to learn a little bit more about us. Rodd and Stewart, on the other hand, might call this driving time an important part of youth work practice. In discussing their work with Australian youth workers, they write, “these opportunities to work with young people outside the formal working role are essential, and often allow young people to develop trust and to put issues on the table” (8) and, quoting a youth worker involved in the study, “driving is not incidental, the car is my office!” (8). Though all four of us exist in different national and local contexts, perhaps using different words to describe the things we do, the bottom line is clear: informal time together, particularly time spent in a car, has a value for forming relationships beyond that of formal contexts.

As such, transportation to and from FAM plays a role both in the shape of the professional roles of supporting adults and in their relationships with the youth they drive. I’ve witnessed the ways that finding and providing transportation for everyone causes stress for adults and cuts down on the time they have for their other duties. In this way, the need for transportation, as produced by the child welfare system’s restrictions on the agency of youth in
its care becomes a constraint and is often restrictive for youth and adults. Simultaneously, it
creates space for a way of being together that youth and adults might not otherwise experience:
one-on-one or in smaller groups, staring straight ahead, with nothing else to do but talk.

“We’re Not Even on the List of Priorities” - Foster Care Placement Instability and FAM

In addition to creating a need for the provision of transportation, the child welfare system
also produces a significant amount of instability, both for individual families and the programs
and people they interact with.

While describing the intricacies of her job to me in an interview, Sara says,
“transportation is a big part of our job right now, and getting the people there.” Quickly and with
more than a hint of exasperation in her voice, she adds, “finding out where they live, they move
around!” She goes on:

We just had four youth out of eighteen switch homes, none of which left us
contact information for the new places. So we had to call social workers and, like,
pull strings and, like, ask people for favors so we could find the youth who, then,
two of them are still coming, one has run away and the other one has gone back to
family and isn’t participating anymore. (Interview)

This example is off the cuff, but Sara perfectly illustrates a huge complication when it comes to
working with folks in state care, the way that many move between placements often and with
little warning. This happens for a number of reasons, sometimes having to do with a bad fit for a
foster youth or a foster family, youth’s needs going unmet in current placements, or a larger plan
for youth’s care. Many youth at FAM talk with great bitterness about the number of placements
they’ve had since entering foster care, some having lived in upwards of ten or twenty homes in
just a few years. It’s well documented, by sources both scholarly and not, that this instability is a
hugely detrimental force in the lives of foster youth (Samuels 2009). Not only do multiple
placement moves affect the long term wellbeing of youth in foster care, they also complicate the work of programs like FAM.

“We aren’t first on the priority for notification, I mean we aren’t even on the list of priorities,” says Sara, referring to finding out when and where youth have been moved by DCF. When youth switch homes, Sara finds out from the youth themselves (who aren’t always able to notify), their friends, or past or present caregivers, and this kind of notification isn’t always immediate. Placement changes for youth often mean that staff have to do a significant amount of sleuthing to track down where youth have gone in order to connect with caregivers, as Sara describes in the above example, and do things like rearrange transportation plans to accommodate new addresses. So, when DCF workers move youth from home to home and Hometown staff must follow the breadcrumbs to find them again, it adds substantial work to the logistics of getting youth to and from FAM on a regular basis.

On the topic, Drew says, “we know that this program helps youth and being there is kind of a really important part of that and if they can’t get there, or we can’t help them get there, that can be a really big challenge” (Interview). So, not only does this kind of instability prove to be a logistical obstacle for FAM staff, it also threatens to prevent or even sever meaningful supportive relationships.

In our interview, Indigo tells me a bit about how she came to support at FAM:

I think I found it in a really odd way. Like, I came here, I really didn’t talk to anybody at first, but who really does open up automatically? And, like, I didn’t have to open up myself, like people came to me, and I’ve never really had that. In other places I’ve always had to go out to them and go put myself out there and that’s why I really never did, because I was uncomfortable with that. But here, they come to you, they don’t push you to, like, come out of your shell, quote unquote, and to participate, they just, like, nudge you (Interview)
Finding support at FAM was a process that took time, and consistent relationship-building with peers and staff at the program. Because Indigo’s placement and transportation options have been stable, she was able come to FAM consistently and find a community there. But it didn’t happen automatically, as she says.

“Some of [the youth] will come once or twice and never come again, because they’re like ‘oh it’s just another place where they’re gonna tell me what to do’,” Sara says, describing what it’s like when someone first starts coming to FAM. She continues,

But if they come, if they keep coming, by the time they get to their third or fourth meeting they start to open up and tell us what’s going on in their lives. And I’m starting to see that as, like, that barrier breaking starts to make it to where they want to be here, they want to come, they want to be a part of it, and it starts to change what they’re doing in their lives (Interview).

For Sara, developing these relationships, doing this work takes time. Intention and effort, yes, but on a more basic level, people need time to get comfortable, to get to know one another, and to figure out how to avail themselves of the resources FAM has to offer.

I think of Shay, a newer member of FAM who came with a residential program. She was quiet at her first few meetings, throwing a few smiles here and there, and talking mostly to others from her program. As winter went on, though, I saw her open up a little more. Just before Christmas, when we went bowling, she eagerly took on the role of scorekeeper and offered equal amounts of cheering and teasing to her teammates. I remember noting how much more excited she seemed to be at FAM, how much more connected to others she appeared. After Christmas, though, Sara informed me of what she mentioned in our interview, Shay had been moved to another program and had subsequently run away.

It’s situations like this that put into sharp focus for me the individual cost of this kind of instability at FAM. When a young person gets pushed from home to home, it can mean that their
ability to attend FAM is interrupted or even cut off completely. If someone has been relocated to a different placement where caregivers don’t know to or can’t get in touch with Hometown staff to make arrangements for attendance and transportation, FAM can’t do its work for that person because they can’t be there. It’s in this way that the child welfare system, and the instability it creates for youth in its care constrains the work that those at FAM are able to do with individual youth.

In addition to the cost of this on individual youth where their attendance and connections to FAM are concerned, placement instability also affects the group dynamic as a whole. Over the course of a year at FAM, attendance fluctuates an incredible amount. Youth stop coming, because they don’t want to be there or, as described above, because something prevents them from coming. Sometimes we never see them again, or they come back a few weeks or months later.

While this goes on, more youth are also joining the program as staff do outreach at DCF offices and residential programs. Along these lines, Sara describes some of the challenges when it comes to outreach:

We are not a government agency, we don’t have access to the rolls of the youth that are in foster care, the only access we have to them is by, like, finding them through word of mouth, until this year. This year I was invited to go to the DCF offices in Springfield and Van Wort [Massachusetts] to describe to the workers and their supervisors what our program is, and give them my contact information… we got four or five more youth that way. So that’s pretty exciting, uhm, but yeah that’s a big challenge, like finding the youth that actually need us, that’s hard. (Interview)

As a system, DCF does not work formally with non profit programs like FAM, so making connections for the purposes of outreach comes down to word of mouth or making personal connections with DCF staff to access the youth they serve. And so outreach, carried out in this way, is a long and intense process that has been ongoing for some time. Only recently, though,
has FAM been able to connect with more DCF workers and residential programs, meaning that attendance from youth connected to these programs has only just risen.

So not only does the group lose members on a week to week basis, it also gains them. As you can imagine, this creates a huge fluctuation in group dynamics every week. Sometimes this fluctuation even occurs throughout the meeting as groups of youth trickle in from about 3:30 or 4, right after school and about an hour and a half before program starts, to about 6 or 6:30 (when several of the residential programs are able to bring youth), after dinner when the program has been underway for quite a while. Not long ago, I observed how, over the course of just one meeting, staff explained the shape and dimensions of the FAM program and Our Voices activities three separate times. This is just a small example.

While this kind of fluctuation in attendance that results from interaction with and dependence on the child welfare system is an inconvenience at more openly structured FAM meetings, it becomes a significant challenge where Our Voices is concerned. Teaching artist, Oscar, remarks on this inconsistency:

One of the things I know that I am personally challenged with here is the lack of consistency with youth, especially when trying to move a show forward, right? So, uhm, but I’ve learned after five years that it’s mostly out of their control, the youth’s control, and it’s just the way it is, no matter how much I want to change it or my co-director wants to change it, it is just what it is, and we have to be there to support the work. (Interview)

The costs of instability in attendance mean that rehearsal is made more difficult and often more taxing. But, in many ways, it’s out of everyone’s control, more so than were this instability created simply by youth dropping out or joining late of their own accords.

For example, a key part of building a performance is creating an ensemble of people who want to and know how to work together. During the first few months of the year, Our Voices meetings consist mostly of ensemble building exercises: get-to-know-you games, and writing
activities. This gives the youth a chance to get to know each other on a deeper and more creative level, as well as giving the teaching artists and the youth a chance to feel each other out so that when it comes time to write and produce the performance the group can work together well. But, as has happened in the past, the group that we start the year with can look completely different than the group that performs come April. And though the time spent building an ensemble is not necessarily lost to fluctuations in attendance, it does mean that there may not be a consistent ensemble throughout the process.

In addition to the ways that fluctuation in attendance has an impact on the dynamic of a Our Voices ensemble, the actual writing and rehearsal process is also affected. Writing and producing a performance takes place over the course of several months. When the group of youth participating is in constant flux this process becomes complicated and the logistics become labor-intensive. When youth join or drop out of the show, it means that their writing must be added or taken out of the script, sometimes lines are given to other performers, or newer performers must sit out of scenes that have already been developed.

For example, early in the script writing process, the group was working on This is Me, the piece mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. It’s a simple piece, where each ensemble member says something by way of introduction. Some describe their attributes, some talk about their experience at FAM, some tell a condensed version of their story. This piece had been in development for three consecutive rehearsals, but because the group had continued to fluctuate, there were introductions still missing from the script. The youth who wanted to add their words quickly scribbled some lines in their journals while the rest sat idly. As you might imagine, this short break turned easily to a longer one, with side-conversations popping up as they do and youth getting up to grab a snack or use the restroom. The youth who were writing then took their
journals to have their words transcribed by the stage management intern, giving specific instructions or answering her questions, all of which took some time. Meanwhile, the group, now mostly socializing in the moments between activities, could not continue to rehearse the scene. It wasn’t exactly chaos, but it was close.

This kind of moment isn’t necessarily a huge problem and it may not matter in the long run, but it also means things aren’t really going as planned, not quite on track. It’s a great example of the way that the writing process is affected by the instability when it comes to attendance, which, in turn is largely caused by child welfare related changes in placements or group home staffing issues.

Additionally, as this kind of shifting can happen at any time, it means that the script is often still changing pretty deep into the rehearsal process. For a lot of the youth, a changing script is a moving target, especially when they are expected to memorize their lines. In fact, it takes many youth a long time and a lot of work to be ready to be on stage as many do not come to Our Voices as performers. These youth are often buoyed by a script, the consistency of which is difficult to maintain. In the past, late edits to the script caused a significant amount of frustration and friction between the youth and teaching artists, as well as between adults.

There are a lot of ways in which the interaction FAM has with the child welfare system complicates the work folks in the community are able to do. When the lives of participants in the program are marked by significant instability created by multiple and often sudden placement moves, it means that their participation in FAM and Our Voices is jeopardized. It means that staff must work extra hard to keep track of where youth are living and how they can be contacted. It means that the group composition and dynamics are constantly shifting, affecting the long term work that can be done over the course of a year.
Thinking Through Child Welfare’s Effect on FAM

I’m not interested in proving that the child welfare system can be inefficient or that it often operates at the expense of youth it’s supposed to protect. Many before me have engaged with that topic (Lash 2017, Newton et al. 2000, Samuels 2009, Samuels 2014, Storer et al. 2014, Unrau et al. 2008). I am, however, trying to demonstrate the particular, specific, and sometimes hidden ways that these flaws impact the work of a group like FAM, a project like Our Voices. Coordinating and providing transportation for youth becomes a huge, though not insurmountable, task. Instability in attendance comes to mark the group dynamic and, thus, the process of creating a performance. It’s not so much that these constraints create “bad” conditions for those involved, though they are perhaps less than ideal. From the constraints detailed above and their pronounced effect on day-to-day operations at FAM and in rehearsals for Our Voices, I think we can understand that work in organizations like Hometown is highly dependent on the context in which they exist. It also shows us that supporting youth in that context is often highly specific and sometimes complicated. I hope that the depictions I have offered give a sense of one of the reasons that this work is hard, perhaps putting the relative successes and challenges at FAM into perspective. One needs to understand exactly what they are up against.

More specifically, it is clear that these challenges make it so that many of the day-to-day operations for making FAM and Our Voices work have come to revolve around contending with the many dimensions of the child welfare system, which often exacerbate pre-existing concerns for programming like funding and youth’s mobility. In this way, FAM and programs like it become defined around the systems they exist under. Of course, this isn’t surprising, but it does mean that programs like FAM must work to meet the needs of a system, and not the needs of the
youth within that system, catering to the bureaucracy of DCF before the youth under its care. Requiring transportation and placement instability are needs and issues created by the child welfare system but not met by it.

In her introduction to *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, Andrea Smith cites the history of women’s organizations, pointing out that the Reagan administrations’ cuts in funding for public services forced non profit organizations to provide the services the government would not. She writes “consequently, the antiviolence movement essentially became a surrogate for the state” (Smith 11). Though this example deals with a different era in history, and perhaps a different sort of social change (still not totally unrelated) it gives us an important lens through which to look at the world FAM exists in. Hometown is, in many ways, a social service organization that fills in the gaps left by a somewhat dysfunctional child welfare system. When FAM offers familial care and support that the state should have secured for youth, FAM takes the place of the state.

As such, one of many potential ways to ease this strain on program staff might involve DCF more directly in logistical and communication matters. In the past, local DCF offices and individual case workers haven’t worked directly or dedicatedly with Hometown to make sure that youth are able to access its services. Some foster parents do, but it varies individually and isn’t always reliable. As Hometown staff make more connections with local child welfare agencies, this is changing. Still, it has still created a dynamic where staff have to work around these structures and individuals, often serving as a stand-ins for caretakers who might otherwise make sure that youth could get to programs that offer avenues for leisure, community, and self expression. As a part of the services created for youth in care, DCF works to make sure that youth are able to access things like therapy and doctors visits. However, when it comes to getting
to FAM, another valuable way for youth to grow and heal, youth are on their own, and Hometown staff and volunteers must meet that need. These folks serve as a surrogate for the state but, without the same organizational cooperation with DCF, are not valued in the same way as providers of support that takes the shape of something like physical and mental healthcare.

DCF prioritizes more clinical forms of support when it comes to providing youth with the experiences they need. But FAM offers a similarly valuable kind of support, it just takes the shape of leisure and creative expression. If DCF and those involved in creating care plans for youth acknowledged more consistently that FAM and Our Voices are valuable and necessary spaces of support, perhaps there might be more support from DCF for getting youth there, and keeping FAM staff informed of their movements in the system. Of course, this isn’t so simple, as DCF workers also exist under their own specific set of institutional constraints. Caseworkers are notoriously overworked, and DCF offices consistently understaffed (Barrett and Greene 2017), so there’s no easy fix when it comes to questions like who should do the driving. Still, there is room for DCF and individuals working under it to expand understandings of what kind of support matters, and I hope to have proved that FAM does. Then, we might hope that the logistical, geographical burden of transportation and communication might be shared between the system that created the constraints, and the organizations that meet the needs.

Organizational Partnership as Institutional Constraint

As I’ve discussed, the Our Voices segment of FAM programming is made possible by a partnership between Hometown and Growing Forest. In a way, the institutional constraints I have already outlined mean that the partnership between the two organizations makes the work of support, especially creative support, possible. Neither organization has the scope or capacity
to run Our Voices on their own, they need each other. And though this partnership is the site of
great creation and collaboration, it also produces conflict that constrains the work of support that
can be done.

Hometown and Growing Forest Theatre are by no means the only organizations that
come together to create programming for youth combining their varied resources and expertise.
Neither is this partnership the only one affected or made necessary by scarcity of funding, time,
space and other such resources. So, I feel it’s important to explore organizational partnership in
youth programming through the lens of Our Voices because, over the course of my time with the
program, the complexities of the partnership have come into sharp focus. They offer, I think, a
lot in the way of perspective and context on the work we do when we come together.

“I think the structure of the partnership is generative and it makes the whole thing work,
it’s also challenging,” says teaching artist, Sam, of this tension when I ask about challenges in
her work. She goes on,

It’s a challenge, the time requirement that a real, in-depth partnership like this
takes and that the partners, the complementary roles, which is what works, you
know what I mean? It’s like the greatest strength is the greatest weakness. So I
feel like the two roles and the way they balance each other really is so essential,
and it’s also a challenge because each partner has something different on their
mind that they need to accomplish, and so we’re always needing to come together
and figure that out within, like, a time constraint. (Interview)

Our Voices is built on an organizational collaboration, but each organization has different needs
and goals for the time spent together, and there’s not much time in which to hash these out. Most
of us know that partnership requires a great deal of communication and coordination, but as I’ve
already discussed, time is at a premium at FAM. Staff have developed strategies to streamline
planning and reflection as much as possible, but often there are issues that must go undiscovered
or unaddressed for lack of time. This is just one way that partnership between these organizations, though a source of great possibility, can constrain the work of support.

Further, the teaching artists come to Our Voices in order to produce a show, and so they work with that goal in mind. Hometown staff are there to support the creation process, but FAM holds more than just that part of programming, so their goals are often different. Organizationally speaking, Hometown focuses on rooting young people in community. As I’ve discussed in previous chapters, this translates to a holistic and individualized approach to supporting FAM youth, one that is often process and relationship based. The organizational priorities of Growing Forest Theatre are not too different, both organizations aim to empower and support young people. However, as I’ve said, producing a show is necessarily a goal-oriented endeavor, meaning that priorities of support must move toward accomplishing something.

These different organizational priorities come into focus when it comes to deciding on the calendar for the year. There has been some conflict about how much time should be devoted to Our Voices and how many meetings should be FAM activities more generally. For the teaching artists, having a consistent rehearsal schedule is key to building an ensemble and producing a cohesive and somewhat polished show that youth feel confident performing. Sam says, “it’s hard to do something once a week for a year and the reason we have that schedule, in my mind, is because the youth need that kind of continuity. It would be better artistically for the process, with momentum building, to meet like twice a week for five months or something” (Interview). We both agree, though, that sort of schedule is unrealistic, as a function of both funding and the commitment youth are able to make to the program.

Along these lines, when Sara, the director of the FAM program, and I talked about the calendar for the upcoming year, she told me she wished there could be weeks in the spring
without rehearsals, where meetings could be used for field trips and more relaxed activities. Because this would cut down on the amount of valuable time for creating the performance, it wasn’t possible to schedule this way. Sara lamented, “the teaching artists want to work with artists who are committed, but the artists they’re working with are traumatized youth who need breaks!”

All parties in this situation are looking toward supporting youth in different ways. Often, for the teaching artists, creative support means a dedicated attention to the artistic process, which requires a kind of discipline and consistency from the program structure, in this case, the calendar. Naturally, when time is devoted to Our Voices rehearsal, there becomes less time and space for other kind of programming which holds other kinds of meaningful support for youth. It is by no means a zero sum game, but there is certainly a question of priorities when it comes to allocating time in the calendar for different types of programming which make space for different kinds of support.

This discord occurs not only in creating the calendar for the year, but also during programming and rehearsals. Later, in an interview, Sara tells me about the challenges she faces in her work when it comes to what youth need from the space at any given moment:

We have these external dictates that we have to do. Like, we are working on a show with [teaching artists] that are paid to come and be here, to work on this show, and they want focused ensemble members. But this is also the only time that these youth get to come and be in a safe place where they can go through what’s going on, so a lot of times the youth and the teachers are at odds because the youth are coming here for support and the teachers are coming here for a show. And we’re trying to bridge that, that’s me Dominic, Bex, and Marla, that’s our job is to bridge that and to say “hey, if a youth needs support, we can give them support and then we’ll get them back to you as soon as we can”... And it’s difficult being that bridge (Interview)

What Sara discusses is a conflict that I see often. Sara and other Hometown staff often act as go-betweens between the youth and the teaching artists on artistic matters, as well. Often, youth
come to them with concerns or complaints about the rehearsal process or script. Sara or Dominic support the youth in taking those concerns to the teaching artists, often helping them find constructive ways of asking for changes instead of simply expressing frustration. Though I think this mediation is a natural part of the work of support, it has an obvious toll when it happens consistently, and might put Sara and Dominic in a difficult place, professionally.

In addition to the difficulty of mediation that springs from partnership, Sara also points out that youth and teaching artists are sometimes at odds when it comes to what they want from the space. Making a performance necessitates working on a timeline, but the needs of youth don’t always match up with that timeline. This dynamic is pretty visible, especially when there are barriers to youth being focused, many wanting the process to move slower, with a little more time for playing, relaxing, and just being together. Youth often agitate against the structure of rehearsal, and want more time to relax, eat dinner, and take breaks. But, as the performance grows nearer, less casual time is possible. For example, at a meeting in late March, to the chagrin of many, dinner time was used to do a read-through of the script. Youth had to remain focused and engaged while eating, during a time that is usually primarily social.

This mismatch also creates tension between adults who are attempting to do sometimes conflicting jobs. For Hometown staff, meeting the needs of the youth at any given moment often means they can be pulled from rehearsal for a one-on-one conversation or to address an issue unrelated to the task at hand. Though this is an incredibly useful and necessary way for youth to receive support, it’s sometimes at odds with what the teaching artists expect in order to facilitate rehearsal. Sam, for example, describes how having performers come on and off stage can make her work more difficult: “Well the primary challenge is that it’s near impossible to make a piece of performance without performers on the stage!” She laughs, and continues:
No, I’m serious, man that is just that is for real the biggest challenge of this whole thing! Yeah, because you’re trying to block something and figure out where people are on stage and then, it’s like, on Wednesday night we started with eleven people on the stage and there’s only eight and then it’s like who’s gone? And those people come back, but I didn’t even know that they came back because I was looking at this person and then someone else left so it’s, like, it’s a total brain kerfluckle! (Interview)

It’s not so much that youth shouldn’t leave the stage, often they need to do so to take care of themselves. When they do take a step out, it constrains what can be done in rehearsal given the limited amount of time. Hometown is a space where youth can attend to their own needs and seek support from adults off stage when they have to. In a more structured educational theatre rehearsal, leaving the stage during a rehearsal while not on a break would not be acceptable. Our Voices is by no means that strict of a space, but it is similarly goal oriented and, thus, necessitates a kind of consistency.

When I ask Sara if there’s anything she’d like to add to our interview, she’s quick to say this:

The most important thing we can do is be fun. Like, be safe, be kind, be gentle, those are the things that’s actually gonna make a difference in the way the young people feel about themselves and about the world. If they come to a place and there’s too much pressure to get themselves in gear, or get their life in order, or do other things, they get a lot of that out of there, and so being a fun, safe, kind, playful place is sometimes, is really actually the most important thing that we do. They get a lot of the other stuff from everybody else, so the way we can make a difference in their lives is being something they don’t have elsewhere, just loving, caring, fun. (Interview)

The flexible, open nature of support in FAM programming, specifically, holds incredible value for youth whose interactions with adults outside of its space are often characterized by structure and strict expectations. Work of support occurs in the gentle, depressurized spaces, too. There’s some dissonance here, between the ways youth access the space, as defined by Hometown’s
organizational priorities when it comes to supporting youth, and the structure that creating and rehearsing a performance necessitates, even when it’s as scaled down as Our Voices is.

I don’t believe the priorities Sara describes are fundamentally contradictory to the time and discipline it takes to create a show. But, often it feels like the two objectives are pitted against each other by virtue of the other constraints at play. As I’ve said, this isn’t so much a mutually exclusive situation, where certain kinds of support must be prioritized, therefore creating a hierarchy. When these two organizations come together, there exists an incredible capacity to support and power to create. This programming is generative in many ways, and youth are excited and passionate about it, but partnership is often complex in its own right, at any scale. And when time is increasingly limited, and logistics are complicated, navigating organizational partnership where priorities for support are sometimes different becomes a much more difficult task.

The conflict I’m describing here is created by the partnership of two organizations whose goals and priorities for supporting youth are somewhat different by nature of the different work they do, not by any one person’s doing. Perhaps with more space and time, and fewer external issues to contend with, balancing priorities of support in this partnership might come a little easier to all involved. I believe it’s important to illuminate the tensions that result from this partnership, not to critique or condemn it, but because the topic is intimately related to how support functions at FAM.

It must be said that this partnership offers a lot. After all, more organizations involved in Our Voices means more supportive adults in the lives of youth who participate in programming. It means more and different kind of expertise and experiences brought to the table. Organizations often must come together to achieve things and create programming that exceeds what they
might be capable of individually. Of course, organizations are limited institutionally by their ability to expand their programming. At this point, neither Growing Forest or Hometown have the capacity to run Our Voices on their own, nor should they necessarily. But, partnerships, collaborations, and coalitions spring out of these limits, and so I believe we must investigate what happens when people do come together: what does it create? How is it complicated?

Further, I hope this section provides some perspective on the human complexities of professional partnership. For many of the people I spoke to, this organizational partnership and the resulting programming is a source of great pride, but also, of frustration. Everyone involved in Our Voices cares deeply about it, and also about each other. These, due to the constraints I have outlined, are sometimes at odds. At its most pointed, this puts individuals in conflict who are all trying to do their jobs or participate fully. It is so easy to get wrapped up in the incredibly important work of Our Voices. Sometimes, in the more difficult moments, I find myself caught between necessary structure and valuable flexibility. In a moment like this, I must take a step back to think: from what does this work emerge? What is most important about it? And how can this partnership work, not in service of any one person’s goals or priorities, but toward full and balanced support for youth?

Discussion

“That’s a hard question,” says Oscar, when I ask him what one thing he would want in order to do his job in an ideal way. “It doesn’t have to be one thing” I suggest. He pauses, “yeah, cause it’s not one thing,” lets out his signature full laugh, and tells me:

The work demands messiness. The work demands us to not always get to the top right away, the work demands us to get to a certain place, and so every experience we have in every rehearsal, all the time, is supposed to be happening to get to the end product… yeah, so there is no one thing, or couple things, or few things that
would help change or impact anything for me because I think everything is actually meant to happen the way it does” (Interview).

Challenges, difficulties, and constraints are simply a part of the work for Oscar, and he cheerfully rejects my question about ideal conditions for working with Our Voices. I welcome this, and include his comments here to establish that, though I believe understanding the way institutional constraints affect FAM is important, they by no means define the relationships that exist within. As Oscar points out, the work demands messiness, and things would be messy whether or not FAM existed under scarcity, in response to the child welfare system, and in organizational partnership.

Still, I believe these constraints are a part of the reality of work with youth, and so in order to understand what support means, painting a picture of these sometimes difficult dimensions of the work is necessary. So often during interviews and in conversations with others in my life throughout this process, when I described the notion of institutional constraints, or described some of the things I was writing about, I was met with statements like “so it goes!” or “life in non-profit, right?” or “that’s just how it is!” The idea that work with youth, in non-profit settings, and/or in the arts is naturally constrained prevails in our culture, and for good reason, I think. It’s important to acknowledge what it looks like to this work if we are going to approach it realistically.

However, the taking-for-granted of institutional constraints, the “that’s just how it is” mentality does a disservice to those who seek to truly understand the work of support, with youth, in non-profits, and in the arts. Acknowledging realities is different than interrogating them. In this paper’s introduction, and in earlier chapters, I have argued that the work of support is made invisible because it is devalued, socially and economically. I would like to note here that the constraints I have outlined above are produced by these same factors. This work is
constrained for many of the same reasons that it is invisible, so it is doubly important to interrogate institutional constraints.

By describing and depicting the way that people at FAM experience scarcity, interactions with the child welfare system, and organizational partnership, as well as the effect these factors have on supporting relationships, I hope to have laid the groundwork for a fuller understanding of what support means and looks like. The understanding I am moving toward in this paper ties institutional constraints and their consequences directly to larger systems of economic and ideological domination like capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, and misogyny, which have created reasons to underfund and complicate work at FAM. This is “how it is” but “it” is also produced by logics that strip the work of support, and those who do it, of the recognition, respect, and institutional support they rightly deserve.

These systems reward economically efficient labor and corporatized organizations as opposed to human-oriented and process-based work with young people grounded in reverence for their present experiences (Nolas 2014; Smith 2007; Sukarieh and Tannock 2011; Williamson 2011), they fail to recognize women’s work with young people as skilled and important (Federici 2008; Modigliani 1986), they create poverty that puts children in danger (Kucinich 2017), and then they enact systems of regulation and surveillance on poor and working class communities, largely affecting families of color, in the form of the child welfare system (Lash 2017).

These are the systems we see at work when people at FAM get used to making do with less, fashioning financial security, racing against time, driving miles and miles, chasing down youth at their new homes, and balancing organizational priorities in the face of conflict. By understanding the cause and effect of institutional constraints at FAM, we can see that some of the difficulties produced are no one individual’s fault, nor incumbent upon one organization to
fix. Additionally, I have sought to depict the ways that institutional constraints can cause failures of support among individuals. Understanding constraints and their effects as institutional gives us a way to hold these moments holistically, and strengthen supporting relationships instead of fracturing them. In this analysis lies the makings for a language for and in supporting relationships that takes into account that things in this work can be hard and messy, acknowledges how these are felt, while holding why they happen.

Though I have sought to point out how these difficulties are a product of the world at large, not a naturally occurring phenomenon, and to make visible their effects on the work of support, supporting relationships, and individual people at FAM, I cannot solve these problems with this project. If I were to offer recommendations here, they would be somewhat simple: readily available and sustainable funding for the work of support that does not force anyone to compromise their values, or create competition among youth programs; better communication and cooperation between youth programs and the systems under which the youth they serve exist; and sincere and honest alignment of values among organizations partnering to support youth. I realize this is a tall order, and Rome was not built in a day. This project simply seeks to equip us with some tools to acknowledge these realities and work with and against them toward support that continues to be messy, but not needlessly so.

What I hope to have done here is to have illuminated some institutional constraints and their profound effect on supporting relationships at FAM. While they do not define FAM, or other programs like it, they constitute a significant part of day-to-day considerations through which the work of support takes place. The work that people in the context of youth programming do to contend with and work around these constraints is significant, and often taken for granted when we say “that’s just how it is.” By making visible these sometimes
difficult dimensions of support, I hope to have laid the groundwork for moving toward value for youth, and the programs and people that support them that is both ideological and material. If we know about institutional constraints, we can work toward imagining institutional support.
Conclusion

This project sprung out of my curiosity, and I think it ends there, too. Chiefly, I came to these questions as someone between two stages of life, trying to arm myself with tools to be a supporting adult as I move toward a professional role in youth work. I think about the words offered to me by interviewees as data, yes, but also as an earnest conversation between two people embedded and invested in the work. I am grateful, above all, to have been able to document perspectives that have so influenced the way I move into the world. The research and writing process has offered me a chance to engage deeply with my surroundings as a volunteer at FAM, and also to work through long held questions about the nature of this work. Most importantly, though, I hope to have been able to honor the supporting relationships and work of support that exist at FAM.

What began as simply an exploration of support at a specific youth program has become a kind of a love letter, but one that makes some demands. I came into this project asking: what does support for youth in foster care, and in general, mean? How is it affected by institutional constraints? These questions remain at the core of this project, but now it also asks: what can we learn by exploring support in all its complexities? How can this exploration become a way to speak back to systems that devalue young people and those who support them?

In much the same way that this endeavor has been one of personal growth and learning for me, I hope it can be for others. By now, the value of supporting relationships at FAM should be clear. What follows are a few final thoughts that serve to sum up what might be called “findings,” as well as comment on the larger implications of this work, and move forward with new knowledge.
What I Saw

Through this research, I have been able to articulate some of the things that often go unspoken about supporting relationships between youth and adults. I have found that support in its various forms plays a key role in the lives and relationships of the folks who inhabit youth programming spaces like FAM. Having adult supporters matters to youth, in terms of their present experiences of care, love, and safety at FAM, but also when it comes to their growth, learning, and expression. More, adults who do this work are highly invested in the youth they support, sometimes to a fault, and though they can’t always get it right. These relationships demand and create earnest connection, even when it is somewhat contested, and although it can be difficult to name. Finally, support between youth and adults must respond to the systems under which it exists, sometimes complicating the work of support.

I hope that this project goes farther than simply defining support and naming institutional constraints. More, it has been my aim to describe the work of support at FAM with the clarity and detail I have experienced it, as well as to interrogating how constraints play out at FAM and how people negotiate them in the spaces they affect. This means making clear the many ways support can look in the context of FAM, as well as to call attention to the costs when it is constrained by factors like scarcity, the child welfare system, and organizational partnerships. I believe FAM allows us to better understand what we mean when we say we are giving and receiving support. For youth at FAM, support means family, means creating, means survival, means home. This investigation has been one that centers value, and so in describing the work of support at FAM, I hope to have given a sense of what is lost when there are limits and constraints, especially when those are linked to larger oppressive forces. At minimum, this research can at least play a role in some reflection on the work of supporting youth, helping us to
think through what’s working and what’s not, and interrogate who we are when we come to the work of support. Were I to imagine this project as something that speaks to more than the individual, though, I would consider it a demonstration of the incredible value that the work of support yields for youth, a value which, in our world, needs to be articulated. As I have discussed, work of support at FAM is constrained institutionally for many of the same reasons it is made invisible. FAM and programs like it deserve institutional support that accommodates the realities of their programming, be they inefficient, hard to prove, or escaping definition. Obviously, making specific recommendations about funding and programmatic structure is beyond the scope of my capacities, at least in this moment. But I think this work is important enough that it should exist outside of the realm of scarcity, named and supported by the world in which it exists.

Implications of Making the Invisible Visible

As I’ve said, my investigation of the nature of support at FAM also seeks to excavate the sometimes taken for granted, everyday, unseen ways that people hold each other at FAM, especially in their professional capacities. The work I have done to define support, as well as to explore connection, and institutional constraints upon that work makes clear the complexities and value of that work. However, these are dimensions of support that aren’t always visible, both on an institutional level, and an individual one.

Many factors in our world make it difficult to see the work that goes into supporting young people, especially those who are in foster care, and especially in non-institutional settings that engage with art making. When we devalue young people (especially those in foster care) and the people that work with them, as I have mentioned throughout this paper, we find ourselves
knowing less about relationships of support and care in youth programming. The way we talk 
about young people and the programs that support them, largely in generalizations and toward 
“outcomes” and “effects,” is evidence of this. I hope that a better understanding of support for 
youth gives us the tools to understand them as whole people, whose experiences are worthy of 
knowing fully.

This question of value has to do both with issues of age and with those of gender. Largely, professionals who work with young people are women, that is a reality of life in America. And, as I have discussed, though not everyone who works with youth at FAM is a woman, feminization of youth work characterizes the field, and so we must contend with the 
gendered nature of the work of support when it comes to value. Here, I would like to return to a 
theoretical underpinning of this work. I feel that making the invisible dimensions of support for 
youth visible is a critical feminist undertaking. Imagining this work more fully, clearly, and 
complexly becomes a feminist project in that it allows us to better value unrecognized work 
constructed as women’s work.

Finally, I want to underscore that this gap in knowledge is cyclical. When we do not 
value support for youth, we do not learn about it, and when we do not learn about it, it will 
continue to be devalued. Increasingly, today’s youth, especially those whose identities and 
experiences are marginalized, are growing into a world that is less than kind, leaning toward 
cruel. Young people, especially those who are otherwise marginalized, need allies, they need 
people who listen to their experiences, who help them get where they want to be, who work with 
them to make art, who are present in their hardest moments. Young people need support, and so, 
simply put, this work is valuable and should be understood as such.
In this paper, I have sought to make visible as much of the reality of the work of support, and what makes it complicated as I possibly can. I have written with an eye towards description, interrogation, and questioning in the hopes that laying before you what I have experienced at FAM can lead us toward understanding and therefore valuing its work, and the work of programs like it.

Moving Forward

One of the chief aims of this project was to move toward a language of value that accommodates these relationships, strong and constrained by professional roles as they may be. I have not developed new words through this project, that’s above my pay grade, as it were. I have, though, been able to notice for myself what it is I fail to articulate when I try to talk to those I am in supporting relationships with. For example, Hampshire College, from which I am about to graduate, functions under a fair amount of scarcity at the moment (though as a private undergraduate institution, this looks cushier than it might in your average youth program). Still, we have a faculty and staff workload issue.

Me and my peers bear witness to it, often hearing conversations about it in school meetings, listening to our professors express guarded frustration and exhaustion, struggling to find meetings times, watching them run from meeting to meeting, and never quite having enough time to get through everything when we do meet. Of course, Hampshire is still very much functional and we receive really unique and high quality advising, workload be damned. That said, this all has a cost, and my friends and I feel it when the staff and professors we work with drop balls, have to step off committees, cancel meetings, can’t answer emails, don’t have enough
time to read our work or observe rehearsals, and sometimes don’t even have their full attention to give us. It’s really hard but it’s none of our faults.

I have noticed these dynamics at full force and written this paper simultaneously, and it has opened up for me a world of understanding, seeing my research play out in this institution. And though the contexts are vastly different, it has equipped me (and my peers with whom I have shared these thoughts) with a more full capacity to name and hold our relationships as they exist under this scarcity. It’s really hard but it’s none of our faults. Still it is incredibly hard to talk about, as these relationships exist within professional boundaries between teachers and students, demanding a certain kind of distance. But with this understanding, I come closer (by the day) to naming these dynamics, to being able to have earnest, compassionate, difficult conversations about these relationships, even when they are constrained by time and a difficulty discussing the things about them that are hard. I come closer to saying to supportive “adults” here at Hampshire: I CARE ABOUT YOU, I SEE YOU, I UNDERSTAND WHEN THINGS ARE HARD.

These realizations come amongst a flood of others, and a deep conviction that there is something to be learned here, something that might help those of us in supporting relationships better understand and hold each other. I cannot tell individuals which of my observations will be useful to their work with youth, or will shed some light as their experiences as young people. But I know that I am equipped with a new set of tools for naming, discussing, and interrogating support, both as an emerging adult and youth work professional, and as someone who continues to find herself in the role of receiving support.

I am far more comfortable with what I do not know about relationships with young people, with holding the fact that “right” or “wrong” does not cut it when it comes to offering
support, with acknowledging the limits of support, institutional and otherwise, and articulating exactly what it is we do when we say we are supporting one another and why it matters. I have been able to apply these to many of my relationships already. I hope the above example serves to demonstrate that the work of support will always be messy, especially in a world where it is not appropriately supported by larger economic and political systems. But with careful exploration and articulation of these relationships, I know that I, for one, will be a better member of supportive communities, professional and otherwise.
Bibliography


