

# *transformative work* in Programs for Children and Youth

*by lena o. townsend*

Children, and people more generally, are **builders, makers, speakers, creators.** The making of works and work itself, are in large measure what we humans are about. Held within that wide embrace are what we know and name as identity, worth, recognition and respect; and also, independence, livelihood and vocation. Looking at children from this perspective calls attention to that strong desire to make—things and sense; a world and a life—as broadly descriptive of us as persons, as selves.

*Patricia F. Carini (1994)*



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Youth programs that meet during the out-of-school hours, particularly those offered by organizations that have historically collaborated with their community members to support their interests and meet their needs, are in a unique position. These programs have the potential for and a history of engaging young people in experiences that can transform their lives in the most positive ways. In this article, I will explore the nature of engagement in

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what will be referred to as “work” and some of the transformative experiences that can and do occur as a result of this “work.” I will also highlight and celebrate those programs that engage youngsters in developmentally appropriate transformative experiences. My hope is that more youth programs will rethink their offerings and create programs that can truly engage young people in positive transformative experiences.

At the present time, a great deal of both national and local attention is focused on the American public education system. In New York City, for example, educational standards have been developed and implemented. There is wide recognition that schools are expected to play a crucial role in the intellectual development of young people. However, in 1992 the Carnegie Foundation reported in its publication, *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*, that “Only 60 percent of adolescents’ waking hours are committed to such essentials as school, homework, eating, chores, or paid employment, while fully 40 percent are discretionary.” It is probably safe to assume that

an even greater percentage of time spent by early adolescents and children is discretionary because they are less likely to be employed. Clearly, in addition to schools, young people both have and need other supports, such as their families, places of worship and community-based youth programs, where they can be safely involved in programs that support healthy physical, intellectual and social development.

What is necessary for healthy development? Participants in the Fund for the City of New York’s Youth Development Institute, consisting of staff members from some of the most effective after school programs in New York City, met regularly for two years to discuss and identify the characteristics of programs that support children and young adults in becoming healthy, resilient individuals who respect, care for and support themselves, their families, friends, communities and the world in which they live. These characteristics, described in their publication, *A Guided Tour of Youth Development*, include:

- providing young people with opportunities for contribution;
- caring and trusting relationships;
- high expectations; and
- engaging activities.

These characteristics, however, do not develop in a vacuum but through engagement in meaningful social, physical, artistic and intellectual activities. These activities are opportunities to create tangible items such as pottery, a drawing or a doll, as well as less tangible concepts, like ideas, or, perhaps, some combination of the two, like skill at playing a sport, or developing a musical score or a dance routine. To me, these activities point to ideas about the value and importance of engaging in “work” which can serve to transform us as human beings.

## The Philosophical Basis of the Importance of Engagement in "Work"

Individuals from a variety of fields who support human development, including educators and psychologists, have explored the nature and importance of engaging "work."

During a 1994 presentation entitled "Poets of Our Own Lives," educator Patricia F. Carini, former director of the Prospect School in Vermont, vividly described the importance of work in the lives of children when she said:

The works that children make . . . reflect a widely distributed human capacity—the capacity to be makers and doers, active agents in the world and their own lives. Children everywhere make things. Children make things from mud, sand, snow, stones, blocks of wood or bits of cardboard or paper. They make things from their own bodies—from sounds, gestures, words. . . . They make a mark on any receptive surface using a fingertip on a frosted window, a sharp stick in the dirt or sand, or a pencil, a crayon, or paint on paper or lacking these, or just because it's handy, berry juice or some other natural dye. . . . Children do this enacting and constructing of the world everywhere [because] theirs is a sustained and powerful dialectic with the world, issuing in a seemingly infinite variation of activity and creations.

Works are conduits for expressiveness, as conversation with one's self and in commerce with others. Through works, the maker is carried through herself beyond herself—to join with others, to disclose possibilities previously unknown.

In his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1991), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist and educator, describes "flow" as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." Flow experiences are the kinds of experiences that he believes are necessary to live

an "excellent" life. He writes in *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (1997):

The quality of life does not depend on happiness alone, but also on what one does to be happy. If one fails to develop goals that give meaning to one's existence, if one does not use the mind to its fullest, then good feelings fulfill just a fraction of the potential we possess. A person who achieves contentment by withdrawing from the world to "cultivate his own garden," like Voltaire's Candide, cannot be said to lead an excellent life. Without dreams, without risks, only a trivial semblance of living can be achieved. (p. 22)

## Characteristics of Flow

The characteristics of flow are very similar to those of engagement and, again, it is through what I have referred to as "work" that these experiences might occur. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow experiences as:

- occurring when a person faces a clear set of goals that require appropriate responses;
- providing immediate feedback;
- requiring forming an intention, or setting a goal for ourselves;
- focusing psychic energy, establishing priorities and thus creating order;
- tending to occur when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable; and
- usually involving a fine balance between one's ability to act, and the available opportunities for action. (1997, pp. 29-34)

When facing a clear set of goals, as in games like chess, tennis or poker, it is easy to enter flow, says Csikszentmihalyi, because there are goals and rules for action that make it possible for the player to act without questioning what should be done and how, so the player lives in a self-contained universe of black and white.

The same clarity of goals is present in a religious ritual or a musical performance, or while weaving, writing, climbing a mountain or performing surgery. Activities inducing flow make the experience more likely to occur. In contrast

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to much of our daily life, he believes, flow activities allow a person to focus on goals that are clear and compatible.

Csikszentmihalyi sees flow activities as offering immediate feedback, making clear how well the participant is doing after each move: With each step, the climber knows that he has inched higher; after each bar of a song the musician hears whether her notes matched the score; the weaver sees whether the last row of stitches fits the pattern of the tapestry.

Challenges which are too difficult bring frustration, worry and anxiety, he notes in *Finding Flow*. Challenges which are too easy lead to complacency and boredom. If the challenges are easy and the required skill levels are low, the result is apathy. However, when difficult challenges are matched with high skill levels, the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life occurs: The climber, when the mountain demands every ounce of strength; the singer, when the song demands the full range of her vocal ability; the weaver, when the design of the tapestry is complex; and the surgeon, when the operation involves new procedures or an unexpected variation.

Csikszentmihalyi believes that “it is the full involvement of flow, rather than happiness, that makes for excellence in life.” (1997, p. 32) Flow experiences are transformative experiences that occur in the process of doing engaging work.

### Transformative Work: Personal Perspectives

During their January 1999 retreat, the staff of the Institute for Literacy Studies (ILS),

located at Lehman College of the City University of New York, discussed the idea of transformative work and its meaning to them by sharing photographs that represented engagement in “work” and the stories behind those pictures. From the stories emerged a rich and moving description of transformative work and what it has meant in the lives of these individuals.

Elaine Avidon shared a photo of her husband, a stained glass artisan, working during their lakeside vacation. She described him, as he works with hundreds of tiny pieces of glass, in the following way:

I almost want to say that I don't know him at those moments. He is so inside the complexity and articulateness of his work. He is totally and completely a worker. He is transforming something else from light and space. And, at the same time, he is himself being transformed. Life isn't compartmentalized into work and other; there is a thread and flow as a result of his work.



Deborah Freedman described a picture of her five-and-one-half-year-old daughter putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Her daughter is holding a puzzle piece, and even though we are looking at a photo, we can see that she is clearly focused and reflective. Deborah said, “She doesn’t jump into anything. She is sometimes considered to be shy or introspective. But, really, she is reflective.”

Barbara Martz shared a photo of her daughter, a college freshman, running in a cross-country race with 300 other girls for which she trained extensively. Barbara said,

My daughter doesn't like this photo because she feels that it isn't pretty. But the moment I saw it I loved it! It makes me think of the connection between play and work. Running is work. It's not just running but it's the hour and a half of working out every day. Running transformed her, and having an athlete in the family transformed my view of sports. It made me look at sports in a different light. Looking at 300 freshman girls break out of a line—I don't think I'd ever seen anything like it before in terms of strength!



get a lesson here and there. Over time I became a pretty good knitter. I made lots of scarves initially, and then I graduated to sweaters. I don't have much time to knit anymore, so my skills

have become a bit rusty. But whenever I can, I pick up those needles and let the knit, purl, knit, purl rhythm of the needles take me to another place as I create something wonderful.

These moving descriptions of individuals engaged in transformative work illustrate the contention that transformative work is engagement in physical, intellectual, artistic and other challenging activities that result in growth, development and change in the individuals engaged in that work, as well as in those around them.

The descriptions also show us the power and importance of transformative work, which is so powerful because it requires focus, commitment and intensity, and yet is engaging and pleasurable, even when it is difficult.

### Transformative Work: Instructional Perspectives

Recognizing the importance of the role of extended work in the lives of young people, the ILS brought the The Children's After School Literacy Project (CASL) project into existence. It was an outgrowth of the professional development work with youth practitioners in which the ILS has been engaged for more than a decade. The main objective of the project was to improve children's learning by increasing the opportunities for them to engage in and produce rich and meaningful work.

During the ten years prior to the CASL Project, the ILS had provided a variety of staff development experiences, including workshops,

When I think of experiences that have shaped my life in some profound way, what I recall most often is learning how to knit. When I was about seven years old, I decided that I wanted to learn to knit. The women in my family crocheted, and they tried to convince me that crocheting was easier than knitting and that I should learn to crochet. But I was adamant about wanting to learn to knit, and no matter how I tried to learn to crochet, I couldn't do it! Finally, on Christmas morning, under the tree, I found a beginner's knitting kit. My grandmother was visiting and I practically kidnapped her and convinced her to teach me to knit. She too was a crocheter, but she knew the basic knitting stitches, so she taught me everything she knew. Even though learning to coordinate those needles was a challenge, I practiced and practiced for weeks until I got it! After learning that basic stitch, however, I had no one to teach me other stitches. So, I bought knitting instruction books which I somehow deciphered, and when I found someone who could knit, I'd

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photo © Elsa Ruiz

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institutes and technical assistance, to a wide range of after school programs in New York City. Those projects focused on program development and the professional development of youth practitioners in the belief that changes in programs and staff will result in better programs for children. We still believe that. Based on other ILS work, however, we increasingly believe that more emphasis should be placed on the children themselves. One way to do this was to focus on children's work, so we chose to use the Prospect Processes as a vehicle for looking at children's work.

The Prospect Processes are a set of inquiry-based processes developed by educators, from 1965 to 1991, at the Prospect School, located in Vermont, as a way of looking at children and their work. The processes are descriptive, not evaluative, and were developed as a means of exploring the many dimensions of a piece of work, looking at work from the many perspectives of the group, and coming to an understanding of the perspective of the child who created the work.

Staff members, usually education directors and other professional staff members, from six programs participated in the CASL project. Structures included cross-site inquiry group meetings, workshops and site visits. At each of

the inquiry group meetings between April 1997 and June 1998, one program shared either a collection or sample of work done by one child or several pieces sharing a similar theme done by several children. During the year the kinds of work shared included writing, comic strips and other drawings, and a doll. In addition to inquiry group meetings, we visited programs and also held a mural-making workshop for inquiry group members and two evening workshops for line staff, one on revision and the second on spelling.

### **What We Learned About Children by Studying Children's Work**

The following is a description of what we, as CASL participants, collectively learned about several children by describing their work. Children in the program write in their journals once a week about something that interests them, and one of the first journal entries that we described was a piece of writing by an eleven-year-old boy.

The group described its style and mechanics as follows:

- the tone was conversational;
- it moves from the abstract to the concrete by shifting from impersonal references to friends to the use of the friends' names;
- the use of language builds movement and creates a sense of excitement; and
- he used conventions, including: indentations to indicate paragraphs, parentheses, an apostrophe, a hyphen, a caret mark to

indicate an inserted word, and past and present tenses.

In addition, this was a good example of a piece which offered us insight into the child, as we came to know the child through his writing in a way that we might not have done otherwise. Also, this opportunity for journal-writing provided the child with an opportunity to better know and express his feelings. The writing portrayed a child we described as sensitive and sympathetic towards his friend, one who down-played, at least in this situation, his own problems and focused on his friend. Gender issues were introduced in an unexpected way: we learned, surprisingly, that his friend was a girl.

The second, and very different piece of work was a drawing done by an eighth-grade girl participating in a program which meets twice a week, for two and one-half hours, to explore math and science through art, cooking and other activities. Looking at this piece, the group:

- Described the various ways in which lines were used in the drawing: short, quick, straight strokes to create the door and the window; the lines of the person's pant legs more fanciful, pointing toward a sense of movement; the lines of the tree less defined, creating a sense of distance in the drawing.
- Noticed the child's use of perspective and how space was used to "invite" the viewer into the picture.
- Described the tone of the drawing as somewhat serious, and the look on the person's face as pensive.

The group members saw the child as having a vivid imagination and being unafraid to think. They sensed deliberation and precision in the work. There was a great deal of attention to detail; she used smaller details to create a large picture.

This sense of deliberation, precision and attention to detail was also evident in the creation of a doll made out of hosiery, yarn and

felt by another child. By looking closely at the product of this young girl's work, we learned about her creativity as well as her design and sewing skills.

A site visit and discussion with staff at another program, a community service program, provided us with a portrait of a different kind of transformative work. In this program, young people from the ages of 10 to 21 are invited and encouraged to develop their own community service projects. One youngster, upon learning that clothing donated to the Salvation Army is not given to the poor but sold instead, developed a proposal to create a project to collect clothing and distribute it free of charge to people in need. The proposal was accepted; the idea was marketed and implemented. As a result, those in need of clothing in Washington Heights are receiving it free of charge!

When I think about or visit children's places such as homes, schools, and after school programs, something that strikes me in all of these settings is the level of activity. Regardless of the kinds of activities in which children are involved, from shooting hoops to fidgeting over a worksheet, the body is moving because it *must* move. When that energy is channelled, not into boring, meaningless tasks, but into work of the hands and mind, children can become engaged and begin to create. They can, through their work, come to better know themselves, their ideas, likes, dislikes and abilities. They become transformed through their engagement in "work." Clearly, by creating things and ideas, and through the process of creation itself, a unique self evolves during a healthy childhood and during development into young adulthood.

### How We Were Transformed By Studying Children's Work

Transformative work is also important in our personal and professional lives as adults. Participants in the CASL project, including the facilitators, discovered that studying the works of children was transformative for themselves as well. Learning about the children through their

work—the strengths, interests and unique qualities that become apparent when collaborative “looking” and discussion occur—is transformative. How, for example, can an adult work with a child who cares passionately enough about other human beings to conceptualize, propose, market and implement a program to provide free clothing to those who need it and not be transformed? How can that adult, based on his or her experience with this child, not look at other children and see the possibility that they have ideas that can transform both their own lives and those of others in their communities and beyond?

Studying children’s artwork and writing inspired several participants to include these activities in their programs. One participant reconceptualized her program and created comedy and drama clubs in which children became active and engaged creators. Another participant developed a mural project, the first of its kind for this program.

Transformation is an ongoing and circular process which, as the above example illustrates, occurs on many different levels. Individuals, through their engagement in “work,” can transform themselves and members of the varied communities of which they are a part and, in turn, can be transformed by others.

## Rich Opportunities for Transformative Work in Out-of-School Programs

Unlike many schools, out-of-school programs do not have to be bound by scheduling constraints. They can, therefore, arrange the three or more hours each afternoon in ways that are conducive to meeting the needs and serving the interests of the young people who attend the program. Program schedules can, for example, be designed to give children a “taste,” as my colleague Claudia Ullman says, of many different experiences, as well as extended periods of time to savor experiences, by engaging in “work” activities. It is this extended time spent on enjoyable and challenging tasks that allows an individual to recognize and develop his or her unique abilities. It is also during this extended time that transformative work and work in a flow state can occur.

One of the characteristics of work in the flow state, as I stated previously when discussing Csikszentmihalyi, occurs when a person faces a clear set of goals requiring appropriate responses. Out-of-school programs that support youth development provide youngsters with opportunities to set goals for their work.

Program staff often talk about the importance of building young people’s self-esteem. As Carini (1994) said, it is through engagement in making and creating that we find ourselves: our talents and interests and, as a result, our identity. Finding one’s identity is the work of childhood and adolescence. By providing youngsters with experiences that support them in developing their skills, and by using these skills to challenge them in manageable ways, programs support the development of young people’s self-esteem. Programs can support young people who are developing their skills in a variety of areas by providing structure and support, quality instruction, opportunities for them to choose the activities in which they want to be involved and extended time for these activities.

Think about how you and your friends came to enjoy and become “expert” at your favorite activities. Whether the activity is basketball,



*Maleeka, Grade 2, Manhattan*

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drawing, playing an instrument, sculpting, dancing, reading or writing, it was by being exposed to the activity, making a decision to pursue it, setting goals for how well you wanted to do it, and having extended time to engage in the activity—in other words, by “working” on it.

### **Implications for After School Programs**

Transformative work is done in relation to materials, to ideas and to other people, and it transforms not only the worker but the materials, ideas and other people. We clearly see this transformation of materials in all of the stories, and particularly in Elaine’s story of her husband creating stained glass, Deborah’s story about her daughter putting a jigsaw puzzle together, and the creation of art, written stories and a doll by the children in the after school programs.

It is simultaneously solitary yet shared with other individuals and groups. Elaine’s husband performs solitary work, but the final product will be shared with more people than we can possibly know. When Barbara’s daughter works out, she, alone, is transforming her own body into a stronger one with more stamina. However, she is a part of a larger community of athletes. When I knit, I usually do it because I want to be alone and quiet. Yet I know that all over the world, there are people knitting for themselves and for individuals and organizations about whom and which they care.

This work supports us in developing skills and, often, tangible products as well as vision for our work and our lives. Elaine’s husband develops the skills of a stained glass maker as well as

an identity as an artisan. Barbara’s daughter develops her physical abilities as well as an identity as an athlete.

We see the transformation of ideas and other people in all of these stories. Elaine, Deborah and Barbara are watching others work, yet their ideas about the work, and their ideas about the people doing the work, and they, themselves, are clearly being transformed. Not only are the “workers” growing and changing but, through their mutual interaction, the observers are changing as well. Perhaps most powerfully, we can see the transformation of a community as a result of the work of young people in a community service program. As a result of the transformation of a young person’s idea for a clothing bank where clothing would be free, a community has an invaluable resource and others have a model for pursuing their own transformative ideas.

Finally, transformative work gives us access to our humanity. Through our own transformative work, as well as in the work of others, we find our connection to other human beings and recognize and appreciate their value and that of the human spirit. We see this in all of the stories as the storytellers describe the pride, love and even awe of the experience of watching their loved ones at work and coming to know them better through their work.

Early in this article I stated that, increasingly, standards are being developed and implemented in school systems across the nation. What isn’t described is the effect that these standards have had on instruction in many schools where emphasis on the “basics” and “meeting standards” has meant increased time on isolated

skills-based activities, leaving little or no time for involvement in arts, music, physical education and various other activities that can become the “transformative work” that it is so necessary for young people to pursue.

Supporting young people to live “excellent” lives now and in the future is the goal of most educators and youth practitioners. The “flow” experiences that Csikszentmihalyi describes occur as a result of engagement in what has been referred to earlier in this article as “work:” activities such as games, music and visual arts, crafts, writing, reading, physical challenges and interesting conversation which can all lead to the experience of living “excellent” lives. Out-of-school programs are the only settings in which some young people will find opportunities to have these experiences.

Many after school programs have developed their identities based on their perceived relationship to schools. They view their purpose as supporting schools and the goals of schools, a view they hold because they seek to support youngsters. In a political climate where the push toward extended school day programs (many of which will replicate the regular school day practices) is intensifying, there are very few spaces where children can discover and engage in “work” that they love. After school and other youth programs may become the only places where young people have opportunities to “taste” a variety of experiences and spend extended periods of time pursuing their interests and passions. Therefore, after school programs *must* continue to think about the developmental needs of youth, particularly the need for engagement in transformational “work.”

In addition, each program must identify its own way of meeting those needs, based on the program’s expertise. The most exciting and engaging programs are clear about their specialty: dance, the arts, community service and sports, for example. They have a special identity and focus, and they hire staff with expertise

in their special area and/or they provide staff development opportunities for continuous skills enhancement. Their program structure allows young people to make choices as they provide youngsters with as much time as possible to remain involved in engaging activities. They know that the after school program may be one of very few places where young people can get involved in these challenging and engaging experiences, the kinds of experiences through which they will realize that it is possible to live a life filled with “work” that they will love and seek throughout their lives, if they are to live “excellent” lives.

As stated earlier, many after school programs are in the privileged position of having the flexibility of scheduling and freedom from prescribed curricula to provide young people with extended opportunities for engaging in work. At a time when there is greater pressure to be more “school-like,” after school programs have a responsibility to think carefully about the developmental needs of the young people they serve and to meet these needs in creative and developmentally appropriate ways.

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