

# Afterschool Matters

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## Literacies in Afterschool Programs

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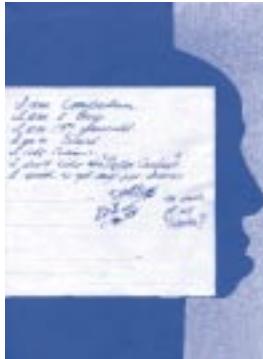
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## FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Colleagues,

Because the mission of the Robert Bowne Foundation is to support the literacy development of children and youth in the out-of-school time, we receive many proposals from organizations who share that mission. These proposals provide us with a snapshot of the wide range of ways in which youth practitioners view literacy and literacy development. Some programs seek to develop reading skills by teaching word study, comprehension, and vocabulary development strategies. Others seek to develop writing and other communication skills. But we are most excited when we receive proposals from programs that support reading and writing development by building on young people's interests, supporting youth in their personal exploration, giving them the chance to look critically at the world around them, and helping them have an impact not only on their immediate social networks and communities but also on the wider world. Such programs are the ones represented in this issue of *Afterschool Matters*.

The range of kinds of literacy and literacy development outlined in these pages is impressive. A common thread involves building on young people's interests and abilities—what Jrène Rahm and Kenneth Grimes call “sneaking up on education” in their discussion of how science learning is embedded in a gardening program that teaches entrepreneurship. Similarly, middle school students learn character and plot development, conduct research, and develop professional work habits in the comic art class Sarita Khurana describes. If you want to “sneak up” on adolescent girls’ literacy development, what better topics than fashion, as in Anne Thompson’s article, or hair, as in Daneell Edwards’s piece? The remaining two articles focus on respecting the needs of young people from particular, often marginalized, populations. The migrant education program described in Theresa McGinnis’s “It Means Thank You” helps ethnic Khmer youth negotiate their various worlds and languages by promoting multimodal literacy practices. Mollie Blackburn focuses on ways out-of-school programs can enable lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth to construct safe spaces for both literacy and identity development work.

Our understanding of literacy in the field of youth development and literacy education is evolving. The Robert Bowne Foundation’s work to support literacy development evolves in tandem. Through the thoughtful work of programs like the ones you will read about on these pages, we will continue to learn and grow as a field. Through such work, we grow in our understanding of the most effective ways to support young people in becoming active citizens and change agents who will, in turn, make our world a better place for all.

## Afterschool Matters

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*Afterschool Matters* is a national, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism, scholarship, and consciousness in the field of afterschool education. Published annually by the Robert Bowne Foundation, the journal serves those involved in developing and running programs for youth during the out-of-school hours, in addition to those engaged in research and shaping policy.

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# *so you want to be* **a superhero?**

How the Art of Making Comics  
in an Afterschool Setting Can  
Develop Young People's  
Creativity, Literacy, and Identity

by Sarita Khurana

What do you think of when you imagine comics? Superheroes in colorful costumes who fight dastardly villains? Cuddly bunnies, mice, and cats? McCloud's (1993) classic definition of comics is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9). By that definition, the epic story contained in a pre-Columbian picture manuscript "discovered" by Cortes around 1519 qualifies as a comic. This 36-foot brightly colored screen tells of the great Mixtec military and political hero 8-Deer Tiger's Claw. The Bayeux Tapestry, a 230-foot tapestry detailing the Norman conquest of England in 1066, as well as Egyptian paintings, Trajan's Column, Greek urn paintings, and Japanese scrolls, also qualify as comics (McCloud, 1993).

Another example is Electro Magnetic Man, created by Sal<sup>1</sup>, a sixth grader at the Educational Alliance's afterschool program at School of the Future in New York City. "Electro Magnetic Man is, like, 15 years old, and he lives in Manhattan. There was an experiment and he blew up and got supercharged... His powers are electricity that goes out of his hair... and he can fly and stuff.... His enemy is Dr.



A Manga character created by one of the comic art class students

**SARITA KHURANA** is the director of Community Schools and Youth Services for the Educational Alliance. She received her master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Risk and Prevention Program. She is also a filmmaker; she recently directed *B.E.S. (Bangla East Side)*, a documentary about immigrant Bangladeshi youth growing up in the Lower East Side of New York City. She is currently working on a documentary film about Bollywood background dancers, to be completed in 2005.

Vergon Van Stratafemeyer who clones evil military geniuses like Hitler and Napoleon to take over the world...

His real name is John Strapper and he's like really responsible and serious and but he doesn't want anyone to find out who he is because it would be hard for him" (interview, May 4, 2004).

A few months ago, in a visit to a bookstore, I went past an aisle of graphic novels, how-to-draw books, and comic collections. To my surprise, I saw about ten teenagers sitting on the floor or leaning against the bookshelves, with their backpacks in disarray around them. Mind you, it was 3:30 in the afternoon on a beautiful spring weekday in New York City. What were all these young people doing? They were reading. This assertion may come as a shock to those who perpetuate the myth that young people don't like to read—certainly not outside of required school reading, certainly not on a nice day when they could be playing basketball or video games. Yet comics constitute a whole genre of reading material that fascinates many young people.

I hear the skeptics say, "Well, comics aren't real reading material; those are just cartoons with words like 'Pow!' and 'Wham!' masquerading as dialogue." Such skeptics are missing an educational opportunity. At the Educational Alliance's afterschool programs, Alex Simmons, a teaching artist who specializes in comic production, teaches a group of fifteen middle- and high-school students The Art of Making Comics. In this class, comics are taken seriously both as reading material and as an art medium. Participants learn not only the craft of comic production—including storyline development, character profiles, sequential storytelling, and illustration—but also many of the skills that support literacy development and identity development in adolescents.



## Comics and the Development of Multiple Literacies

Comic art is one of the most popular storytelling media around the globe. From classic American comic strips to Japanese Manga, comics cover subjects ranging from humorous teen angst to social commentary. Youth are naturally excited to have a chance to draw their own characters and develop their own stories in comics class. After all, they've been reading comics for a long time, often starting with newspaper comic strips, and they've been familiar with animated characters since they were introduced to Saturday morning cartoons and video games. Comics class in an afterschool program is a natural draw for many young people. Older youth, in particular, vote with their feet when it comes to regular participation in afterschool programs. Many afterschool programs have naturally chosen to align themselves with youth culture, promoting activities to which young people are drawn, such as hip-hop dance, photography, fashion club, and soccer. To that list we can add comics. As Shirley Brice Heath (2001) has stated, "For some children and youth [afterschool programming] fosters a sense of self-worth and a host of talents—particularly linguistic and creative—that classrooms neither have the time nor legal permission to foster" (p. 10).

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much of the vast body of research on literacy instruction has concentrated on young children, Alvermann (2002) has focused on effective literacy instruction for adolescents. She points out that today's society demands fluency not only in reading, but in a multitude of areas including

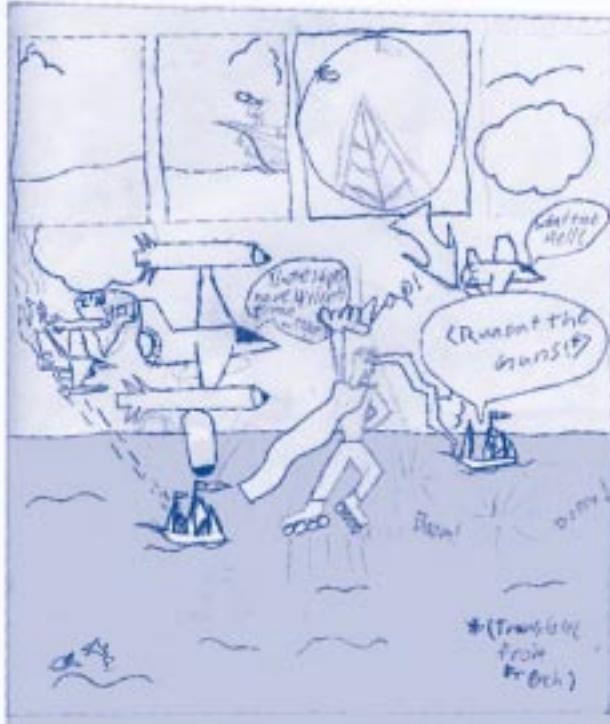
computer, visual, graphic, and scientific literacy.

Effective literacy instruction for adolescents acknowledges that all uses of written language (e.g., studying a biology text, interpreting an online weather map, and reading an Appalachian Trail guide) occur in specific places and times as part of broader societal practices (e.g., formal schooling, searching the Internet, and hiking).... [It] builds on elements of both formal and informal literacies. It does so by taking into account students' interests and needs while at the same time attending to the challenges of living in an information-based economy during a time when the bar has been raised significantly for literacy achievement. (Alvermann, 2002, pp. 190–191)

Alvermann specifies a number of areas that effective adolescent literacy instruction addresses: issues of self-efficacy; student engagement in diverse settings with a variety of texts, including textbooks, hypermedia texts, and digital texts; the literacy demands of subject area classes, particularly for struggling readers; and participatory instructional approaches that actively engage adolescents in their own learning (Alvermann, 2002). The art of making comics is a viable medium for addressing several of these areas.

Scott McCloud's 1993 book *Understanding Comics* is a foundational text in comics theory. On the first page, he summarizes the appeal of comics for adolescents in his own story: "When I was a little kid I knew exactly what comics were. Comics were those bright, colorful magazines filled with bad art. Stupid stories and guys in tights. I read real books, naturally. I was much too old for comics. But when I was in eighth grade, a friend of mine (who was a lot smarter than I was) convinced me to give comics another look and lent me his collection. Soon, I was hooked!" (McCloud, 1993, p. 2).

Being "hooked" is exactly how I would describe most of the students in Alex's comics class. In one of my first visits, I met Sal, the sixth-grade comic artist. Sal could not stop talking about Electro Magnetic Man. "Who?" I asked, in



Sal's Electro Magnetic Man

deep amusement and interest. "Electro Magnetic Man," Sal repeated with serious firmness. "Oh, OK," I said, trying to get it right, "Tell me about Electro Magnetic Man." And that was the beginning of my immersion into the world of youth comic production.

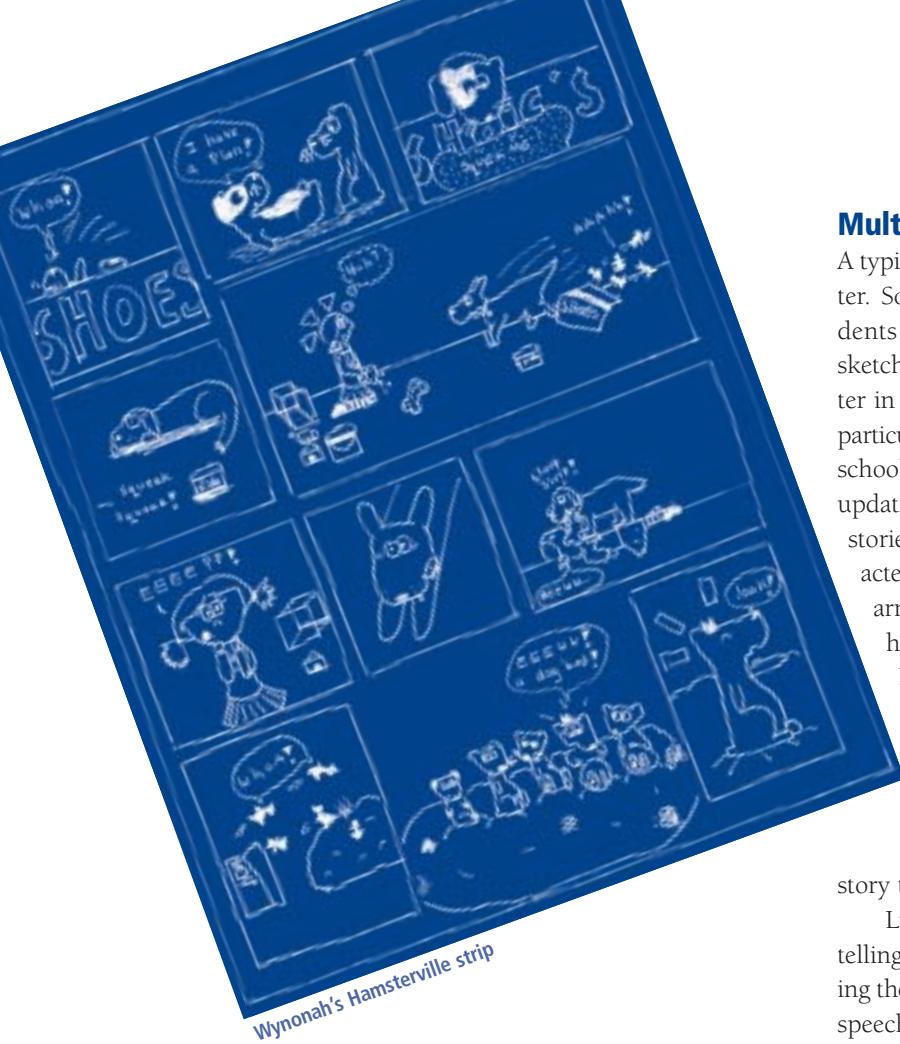
### The Background of the Comics Class

The Educational Alliance, an old settlement house in the Lower East Side of New York City, serves children

and families in a number of capacities, including Head Start, afterschool, and mental health programs. My role there is to oversee the development of community schools and youth programs. My research for this article took place at School of the Future, a public middle and high school in Manhattan with which we've partnered for the past five years to provide an afterschool program. Our partnership with School of the Future is like several others we have with schools across New York City, where we support and expand the school day by providing young people with enrichment opportunities they do not usually get in school. I regularly work with the Alliance's afterschool director at School of the Future to oversee the program, but during my research for this article, I participated simply as an observer of the class.

Students at School of the Future are sixth to twelfth graders from all over the city—a diverse mix of African-American, Latino, Asian, and white students. Of the 550 students enrolled in the school, approximately 300 are part of the daily afterschool program. Most attend the program because they like what's offered there: arts, technology, sports, academics, and recreation. Students select their own classes each semester and receive elective school credit for regularly participating in and completing the classes. This credit helps build connections with the school day and provides recognition of the learning students do after school. All our classes use project-based learning; culminating projects include performances and visual art displays.

During the spring 2004 semester, the comics class had 15 students, about two-thirds from the middle school, and the rest from the high school. As many girls were enrolled in the class as boys. About half of the stu-



dents were new to class, while the rest were re-enrolled for at least a second semester.

The instructor, Alex Simmons, has been working in the afterschool setting for the past four years. His background is in the comics industry; he spent many years producing and writing his own work, *BlackJack*, a comic about an African-American soldier of fortune set in Tokyo in the mid-1930s. As an African-American man, he is a veteran of dealing with the difficult race and class dynamics of an industry that has traditionally been managed by white men catering to a white male audience. Of the many afterschool educators/teaching artists that I know, Alex is one of the best. He cares deeply about his students and is extremely knowledgeable and passionate about his medium.

My research took place in spring 2004. I attended the comics class every Wednesday afternoon for three hours during 12 weeks. I not only observed the students and teacher but also participated in several of the exercises during class time; in addition, I spoke with students—individually and in groups—informally as they were working, pulling some of them aside for more formal interviews during class time. Alex and I met several times outside class to speak about the class and various students' work.

## Multiple Literacies in the Comics Process

A typical day in the comics class begins with a lot of chatter. Sometimes I arrive before 3 PM to find several students already in the classroom, pulling out their sketchpads and notebooks, as the rest of the students filter in from snack downstairs in the auditorium. On one particular day, I notice Hillary and Wynonah, two middle-school girls, already seated next to each other, busily updating each other on what's happened in their comic stories since last week's class: Wynonah's animal characters in "Hamsterville" have run away from home and arrived in New York City; Hillary is still working on her sketch of her main character, Gladiator Girl. Most of the students sit in twos and threes, working and talking even before Alex has officially started the three-hour class. Others sit by themselves, usually wearing headphones, working in their own musical space. Someone always brings in a new comic book to show or has a story to tell about his or her character's latest adventure.

Like any other written medium, comic book storytelling has its own conventions. Students begin by learning the basic elements of the page: panel, thought-bubble, speech balloon, caption box. Other basics are visual rather than word-based: drawing the human body, learning perspective. Ultimately, students learn how to use both images and words to construct complex stories.

Since not all students have fluid drawing skills, the first 15 minutes of class is usually an exercise in one-minute sketching. Two students volunteer to be models, while the rest tell them how to pose. For instance, when Wynonah and Hassan volunteered, the rest of the class called out action poses: "You guys have to act like... Hassan is riding a horse, and Wynonah, you're on the floor in pain." "OK, both of you pretend you're doing a *Matrix* pose like jumping between buildings." Then we switched to two new volunteers: "OK, Jake, you're dancing, and Mia, you're sitting in a yoga pose near his feet." "Jake, you lie down, and Mia, you stand up and pretend you're going to kick him in the stomach" (field notes, February 10, 2004). These exercises get students to see the world from different angles and help them with their drawing styles. Students work on basic drawing techniques such as line, shape, color, and perspective. They can have their classmates pose in stances that occur in their storyline, so they can practice drawing something that is relevant to their work. Sometimes Alex asks the students to make a one-minute sketch into a comic strip, so that the drawing practice becomes an exercise in sequential storytelling.

When sketching time is over, students get down to work on their projects. New students begin with three- or four-panel comic strips like those in newspapers. Even a three-panel strip requires a storyline; it has to have a beginning, middle, and end. Students need to think about elements of story structure: What is the genre—science fiction, adventure, fantasy? Who are the characters? What is the mood—humorous, serious, or suspenseful? What is the point of the story? What are the first and last shots the audience will see, and what's in the middle? Sal's first four-panel comic strip about Electro Magnetic Man introduced the character, who is shown being zapped by telephone wires. The last panel shows him with electric yellow zigzag hair and a bolt of lighting coming out of his left hand, announcing, "I'm Electro Magnetic Man!" This may not seem like the kind of writing students have to do in English class, but they are learning to use such basic literary elements as plot, character, and theme.

Once students feel comfortable developing a basic comic strip, they can move on to more elaborate work. One option is to develop their initial strip into a series. Alex asks students to think of themselves as comic artists producing for a daily newspaper, so that they make a new comic strip for every class and complete a whole series within a semester. Malcolm, a sixth grader new to the class, is working on a series called "Fowl Prey," in which a group of birds conspire to conquer the world. The first strip shows a group of seven or eight birds meeting in the basement of a house, establishing their purpose: to rid the city of other gangs. By the end of the spring semester, Malcolm has produced eight "Fowl Prey" comic strips. The birds have come a long way in carrying out their dastardly plot—and Malcolm has come an equally long way in his ability to use the elements of narrative.

Another project option for students is to develop their own comic book. Newer students usually work on producing a four-page comic book, while more seasoned students may produce a complete 22-page comic. The process is the same, and Alex has a way of breaking it down into manageable chunks. Like many good after-school educators, he starts where the students are—with their enthusiasm and ideas. This practice of engaging young people's interests, taking their skill level into account, is central to good youth development.

**This may not seem like the kind of writing students have to do in English class, but they are learning to use such basic literary elements as plot, character, and theme.**

### **Character and Story Development**

Comic book production begins with developing a profile sheet for the main character: What is her motivation and background? What are the main events in her life? Linta, another sixth grader, shows me the profile sheet for her character, Muoliko, drawn in full Japanese Manga style and personality. It reads: "Muoliko—she is turned into a half-cat for stealing and eating someone's magic red bean cakes. She eats them and is kicked out of her house by her sister because her younger brother is allergic to red bean cakes. She takes care of herself. Muoliko tries to find a way

to undo the spell. Tomboyish, Age 11, comes from the planet Copiko" (profile sheet obtained in an interview, April 28, 2004).

Next, students write pitch sheets similar to the ones professional comic artists use to present their work. In this storyline summary, students are not yet working on the exact details, but they have a good idea of the story structure as a whole. Next come script layouts: thumbnails of each

page of the comic book. This is the step in which students work out the details of their story. A script layout can take a student an entire semester to produce, because it includes a rough sketch not only of text but also of images.

Together these pieces—character profile sheet, pitch sheet, and script layout—make up a presentation package. Students could go to an industry representative with a professional portfolio of their work. Once the presentation package is complete, students move on to actually writing, drawing, inking, lettering, and coloring the entire comic.

### **Learning Professional Standards**

Alex likes to intertwine the conventions of the comic book industry, which he knows from the inside, into the class. He helps students connect with the larger world and gives them room to envision themselves as professional comic artists. Linta, creator of Muoliko, tells me that she has been interested in Japanese comics and animation since she watched a Hayao Miyazaki film called *My Neighbor Totoro*, and then *Sailor Moon*, when she was six. She tells me that she wants to grow up to be a Manga artist and that the class has allowed her to pursue her vocation.

In comics class, young people explore all sides of the comic book industry. They learn the various roles, such as penciler, writer, inker, editor, colorist, and letterer; sometimes they practice these roles on each other's work, in the way production is typically broken down in the industry.

Students also get a sense of what the world of comics is like with trips to the Museum of Comic Art or to comic book publication houses such as DC Comics or Marvel.

### Multiple Points of Entry into Literacy

Comic book reading can serve as one of many possible points of entry into literacy. When I asked Hassan how long he'd been reading comics, he said that he'd been into comics since he was five: "Yeah, I used to play lots of video games and my dad wanted me to learn to read so he gave me comic books to read like the original Batman and Superman.... That helped me be more interested in reading and give it a try" (interview, May 4, 2004).

The varieties of comic books and graphic novels are as diverse as those of any literature, ranging from science fiction, fantasy, and adventure to teen romance and humor. One interesting phenomenon has been the introduction of Japanese Manga. While, in the West, mainstream comics are almost entirely for children and adolescents, in Japan, many different types of Manga are written for people of all ages and both genders. It is not uncommon to see a middle-aged man reading Manga on the subway. Manga comics are taken as a serious form of literature; while American comics are 22 pages long, the average Manga comic has 350 pages and contains as many as 15 chapters. The introduction of Manga in the U.S. has opened up a whole new audience for comics: girls. The comic industry in the U.S. has always been geared for a white male audience; the vast majority of characters are white males in some superhero fantasy quest. However, there is a whole genre of Manga written specifically for girls. Such Manga as *Love Hina* and *Pitaten*, with their strong female leads, appeal to girls like Linta, who said she prefers "stories that have more build-up than American comics" (interview, April 28, 2004). Partly because of the popularity of Manga, at least half of the comics class is usually female, and many of the female students' characters reflect these Japanese comics.

### Using Comic Art to Support Learning Standards

Comic storytelling is a rich medium with which afterschool practitioners can build on the skills and knowledge students learn during the school day. Alex makes regular reference to what is taught in language arts, English, social studies, science, and history classes. He even has students work up single-panel political cartoons, which give the class an opportunity to discuss current events and politics.

Students develop what they learn in school in new ways, putting Greek mythology or their fifth-period science experiment into their comics. Of course, they also draw on popular culture references and their own experiences. Whether they're working from television, the latest video game, or someone they know, ultimately the class is about telling stories in visual and verbal form.

Engaging young people in comic production is a clever way to help them work on language arts skills. A look at the four New York State English language arts standards reveals how comics can enhance literacy instruction:

**Standard 1:** Students will read, write, listen and speak for information and understanding.

**Standard 2:** Students will read, write, listen and speak for literary response and expression.

**Standard 3:** Students will read, write, listen and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

**Standard 4:** Students will read, write, listen and speak for social interaction. (New York State English Language Learning Standards, 2004)

### Comic book reading can serve as one of many possible points of entry into literacy.

Each of these standards is addressed in producing comics. A comic artist must process information by sequencing the plot of a comic before writing it, as demonstrated in students' development of a character profile sheet and script layouts. Comic art is an expressive, interpretive art form with a long history of techniques and aesthetics; students need to work at interpreting how the images and text work together to tell the story. In order to effectively tell a comic story, the artist must analyze and evaluate the underlying meaning of the story. The artist must also interact socially with other readers; students often discuss their work in small groups in the comics class. The reading aspect of the standards is also addressed, as students further support their investment in comics by reading various publications, exploring different genres, and learning new vocabulary. Students often revise their work with the help of the instructor, going through several drafts to produce the final version.

The process by which Hassan, a seventh grader who has been in the comics class for two years, worked out his story demonstrates how comic production can promote research and inquiry skills as well. Hassan's comic features Hazara, an orphan who was raised in a monastery in 16th-century Japan. Of course the monks have trained him, so that now he is a super-powered Samurai warrior. Hassan came up with his character because he loves Samurai movies. But when put to the challenge of actually figuring

out his character's life, Hassan had to do some research to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. Where did Samurais come from? How were they raised—in a noble family, as peasants? How were they trained?

Other students might be attracted to a different genre, such as sword and sorcery. Alex asks them what they know about history and mythology, so that they start by building on their own knowledge base. He shows them examples of how other comic artists have developed their settings. Then Alex helps students find appropriate books and encourages them to use the web to look up the relevant historical period and read about the places they want to use as settings.

On a recent visit, Sal showed me his latest Electro Magnetic Man strip, and I asked him to describe what was happening. "In the first panel, that's a U.S. battle ship patrolling the waters. In the second panel, that's Napoleon sailing in an old 48-gunner ship and it's about to attack the U.S. ship." "OK, wait," I say, "How do you know so much about ships?" (I had no idea what a 48-gunner ship might be.) I found out that Sal is a big fan of ships, and not only from watching *Master and Commander* one too many times. He told me about a collection of books about Horatio Hornblower and the British Royal Navy (interview, May 4, 2004). Although these books are too advanced for him to read, his love of ships has gotten him into listening to the books on tape. Reading them himself is certainly in his future.

### **Adolescent Identity Development through Comic Art**

Producing comics not only supports young people's literacy development, but also promotes their identity development. As young people grapple with questions of identity during adolescence, comics production in the after-school program offers them a unique way to enter into an imagined world that allows them to experiment in safety



A panel from Malcolm's Fowl Prey

because it is their own creation. As McCloud (1993) explains, "entering the world of the cartoon, you see yourself... through factors such as universal identification, simplicity, and childlike features of characters" (p. 57). The cartoon "is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it..." (McCloud, 1993, p. 57). Inventing characters and story-lines is a way for young people to express feelings, play out likes and dislikes, make choices, and test new ideas.

**Comic art is an expressive, interpretive art form with a long history of techniques and aesthetics; students need to work at interpreting how the images and text work together to tell the story.**

Eva's comic, *Night Shade*, illustrates how young people can use comic production to work out common adolescent identity issues. Eva, a ninth grader, is in her third year in the comics class. She has developed a complete 22-page comic book about *Night Shade*, a 16-year-old girl whose father was murdered by a police officer. Because the family is poor, *Night Shade*'s father resorts to burglary in order to care for himself

and his daughter. On one such expedition, an alarm gets tripped and a police officer is called. Somehow, too much force is used, and Night Shade arrives on the scene to see her father beaten to death by the police officer. Night Shade swears to avenge her father's death by tracking down this police officer. As she has no means of survival, she does what she knows best—she steals. Inevitably, she is caught and sent to prison. There she meets a woman scientist who promises to give her superpowers if Night Shade will, on her release, take revenge on the assistant who gave the scientist up to the authorities. With this pact, Night Shade gains powers Eva described in an interview as "speed, strength, agility, and aim. Her secret weapon is the ability to use *night shade*, a poison that she can draw from her veins and inject into others" (interview, April 28, 2004). When Night Shade gets out of prison, she goes on a quest to find first the scientist's enemy and then her father's killer. Eva's first full-length comic ends at the point at which Night Shade has tracked down the scientist's assistant and is face to face with him in a late-night brawl in his laboratory.

### **Separation and Transformation**

Like Night Shade, all of the main characters in these students' works are somehow in the world on their own. Whether they are cute, magical, or villainous animals like Wynonah's hamsters or Malcolm's birds, technoid warriors like Hassan's Hazara, or girls or boys who are physically transformed with new powers like Sal's Electro Magnetic Man or Linta's Muoliko, none of the main characters lives with their biological family. Many have been abandoned or orphaned by a parent's accidental or murderous death; others, with a history of family conflict, are kicked out of their homes or run away. This separation from the family is a prerequisite for the main character to begin his or her adventure in the world. Many adopt new families or friends along the way, usually someone who helps the main character develop his or her new powers and identity. I asked Hassan how Hazara became an orphan. "A demon inhabited his body, and

that body killed his parents. After he leaves the monastery, he becomes friends with other people, but I guess he's looking for his purpose. He's kind of soul-searching and dealing with this demon" (interview, May 4, 2004).

The fact that the characters are in the world on their own parallels the adolescents' own desire to explore their world. Through their characters, these young people try on new identities, playing with different subject positions. When the characters build community with new characters they meet, they are transforming themselves to adopt and occupy new spaces. In this moment, the young people are

figuring themselves out and making meaning of their world. In creating their comic characters—from the kind of personality they have to the clothes they wear, the time periods they occupy, and the adventures they seek—these young artists are defining a world of their own choosing.

Shirley Brice Heath writes that young people's art "layers identities and confuses categories of societal assignment" (Heath, 2001, p. 13). She says that young people's art resists their usual role assignments in the "real" world. Students' characters can be independent in the comic world, making choices that may not be available to their authors in their real lives, at least not until they are adults. For young people, who are usually marginalized in adult society, expressing themselves in artistic possibility, in imagined and futuristic scenarios, is an attempt to defy societal role assignments. Themes of crossing boundaries and of experimentation often appear in young people's art,



Eva's character, Night Shade

**Through their characters, these young people try on new identities, playing with different subject positions.**

especially in afterschool settings where youth have the freedom to create works of their own choosing.

### **Social Critique**

In her work on children's use of media and popular cultural symbols, Anne Dyson (1996) examines how young people's use of cultural symbols in their work reveals their view of the world and their values: "[C]hildren may position themselves within stories that reveal dominant ideological assumptions about categories of individuals and the relations between them—boys and girls, adults and children, rich people and poor, people of varied heritages,

physical demeanors, and societal powers" (p. 472). Eva's *Night Shade* illustrates how the vehicle of comics provides young people with an opportunity to explore their own social worlds through reading and writing. Eva's comic clearly takes issue with police brutality; it is a complex look at issues of power, class, and gender—issues Eva confronts in her daily life. Some of Eva's friends in school are young men of color who typically face harassment by the police; in New York City, we often read about police misconduct in the daily newspapers. Eva uses the experience of her friends and her knowledge of the world in her comic book. Eva explained to me that she invented her storyline because she was "sick of the superhero" who arrives on the scene to save the day—like the police officer in *Night Shade*—and then is glorified for horrifying acts, "like beating someone to death and using excessive force" (interview, May 4, 2004). Eva has subverted the traditional role of the police officer as "good guy" to reveal both her critique of institutional power and her own process of grappling with issues of police brutality and the abuse of power and privilege.

Students' appropriation of Manga characters or Samurai warriors also challenges the world of the traditional white male superhero. When I asked Hassan to describe Hazara, he said, "Well, he kind of reflects my personality—he can be serious, and he can get into trouble. He's kind of irresponsible, but a good leader, and likes to fight" (interview, May 4, 2004). Having gotten to know Hassan, I was not surprised to hear that he related personally to the characters he was creating. The previous semester, he had created, for the end-of-year visual arts display, a dreadlocked superhero that he said was based on himself, "but someone with powers." Students' characters take on new identities of race, class, gender, and culture, often morphing all of these in ways that extend or parallel their own selves.

## **Creating Self through Literacy**

Adolescents are in the midst of a soul-searching process of identity development. Comics have the potential to serve as a vessel for any number of ideas and images; they offer a temporal and liminal world young people can inhabit. In afterschool settings, a comics production class provides a safe, creative space where young people can test limits, exploring their worlds in outrageous and playful ways while at the same time developing literacy skills that support academic learning.

**Comics have the potential to serve as a vessel for any number of ideas and images; they offer a temporal and liminal world young people can inhabit.**

The semester ended with the students showing their work in the school's second floor display cabinets as part of the end-of-year afterschool visual arts show. Alex had also made the students' comics into an *ashcan*, a magazine of comic art, which he reproduced for students to take home. Many of the students will sign up for the comics class next semester to continue working on their pieces or to start new projects. Some will continue to inhabit their comic worlds over the summer, catching up on their favorite comic books or continuing to work on their original stories. The comics class has been a fun and engaging way for students to spend their Wednesday afternoons in the afterschool program; it has also provided a semester of learning, supporting literacy skills, and exploring new worlds.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> All participants' names are pseudonyms.

# "it means thank you"

Culturally Sensitive  
Literacy Pedagogy in a  
Migrant Education Program

by Theresa McGinnis

On a Saturday morning in the stark, dingy basement of an old middle school in Philadelphia, children of migratory agricultural workers are enthusiastically engaged in a wide array of activities. In the main room, Cambodian music blasts from a videotape students are watching of a professional Cambodian dance group performing the traditional Coconut Dance. On the floor in the same room, smaller children play with board games and puzzles. Behind a movable partition, children are repeating in unison the sounds of the language of Cambodia, Khmer, led by the Khmer language teacher. Down the hall, middle school boys sit at a long table sketching recreations and modifications of their favorite video game and comic book characters. Girls gather at another table to make floral designs of tissue paper.

The activities in which the Cambodian youth are engaged on this cold winter Saturday exemplify how afterschool programs, such as this migrant education program, can support youths' multilingual and multimodal literacy practices. These activities not only reflect diverse sign systems and modes of communication but also display the impor-



Thank-you note in Khmer and English (see page 13)

tant connections among literacy, language, culture, and identity. This article will explore these complexities in the context of the program's multilingual and multimodal literacy practices.

## **The Need for a Culturally Sensitive Model of Literacy**

The increase of culturally and linguistically diverse students in U. S. public schools calls for a model of literacy education in which the literacy and cultural practices of students are acknowledged and valued (Delpit, 1995; Edelsky, 1996; Street, 1995; Taylor, 1993; Weinstein-Shr, 1995). Current trends in education, including the mandates connected to the No Child Left Behind Act, do not support a culturally sensitive model of literacy. Instead, in many schools, literacy education emphasizes "monolingual,

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monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (New London Group, 2000). Success and failure in learning are often assessed in relation to students' acquisition of English literacy and their ability to comprehend meanings that are based in the dominant culture—with no acknowledgement of the social and cultural basis of those ideas. In this context, the value of an out-of-school program like the migrant education program described here is its culturally sensitive model of literacy. Such a model recognizes that the many ways in which youth use reading, writing, and language are located within social and cultural processes (Martin-Jones, 2000).

A culturally sensitive model of literacy acknowledges and values multilingual literacies and alternative models of literacy. It recognizes the importance of developing a child's first language and supports alternative modes of expression, since language is only one of many avenues by which messages are conveyed. Indeed, Kress (1997) believes that all acts of meaning making are multimodal; he says, "A sign is a combination of meaning and form" (p. 6). Youth have several layered identities that they express in different forms in different contexts. A culturally sensitive model of literacy allows for the human ability to frame images, express ideas, and make meaning through a variety of sign systems and modalities (Bakhtin, 1981; Kress, 1997).

Drawing on the work of Street (1995), Kress (1997), and Martin-Jones (2000), I approach literacy from a socio-cultural perspective. This perspective highlights the ideas of Bakhtin (1981) and Vygotsky (1986), who link language and literacy with culture and learning. Literacy and language learning happens in every social and cultural context, mediated by "cultural tools" such as symbols, technologies, and language systems (Vygotsky, 1986). The making of meaning is inherently social; it does not happen only through written texts (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1986).

To avoid oversimplifying the ways in which the Khmer youth in the migrant education program use literacy, I analyze not only literacy events—how the youth read, write, and interact around texts in particular settings—but also how their uses of literacy are connected to broader social and cultural contexts. The Khmer youth use literacy in culturally defined systems of practices such as participating in Khmer language classes, playing games, or participating in peer groups. I use the term *literacy* to refer to acts of reading and writing, but I also want to discuss how the Khmer youth use reading and writing in combination with other semiotic modes, such as art, music, and dance, to create multimodal forms of expression. I prefer the term *multimodal practices* to such terms as *visual literacy* in order to avoid using *literacy* as a metaphor for competence, some-

thing one either has or doesn't have (Street, 2000). The term *multilingual literacies* reflects not only the discrete languages Khmer and English with their distinct scripts or writing systems, but also the varieties of English the youth encounter and use, for instance, the English spoken in their urban neighborhoods as opposed to the forms of standard English they are expected to use in school. The term thus reflects the diversity and complexities of the youths' literacy and language practices (Martin-Jones, 2000).

### The Migrant Education Program

The federally funded Migrant Education Program provides supplemental education on Saturdays, after school, and during the summer for children of migratory farm workers throughout the United States. Migrant Education Programs nationwide serve diverse student populations in diverse contexts, so each program designs curriculum and social activities specifically to meet the needs of its students.

The urban migrant education program discussed in this article was developed to serve the needs of Philadelphia families who are bused to regional farms to pick blueberries. To qualify for the program, the students' parents must work in agriculture or in poultry plants, and the students must have moved with their families across school district boundaries in the previous three years. Approximately 150 students in grades K–9 attended the Saturday and afterschool programs during the school year; the summer program had some 250 participants. The majority of students were Cambodian (ethnic Khmer); the second largest group was Vietnamese. Other students were Chinese, Laotian, Somalian, and Mexican. Each year, as new families moved into the district and other families moved out, these numbers changed.

The program's students attended public schools throughout the city. In some schools, a student from the migrant education program might be the only Cambodian student in the class; in other schools, up to 20 percent of the student population was Cambodian. Students who did not live within walking distance were bused to the program. The program provided classes in art, science, English literacy, martial arts, and cultural dancing, as well as in Khmer, Vietnamese, and Chinese. I worked at the migrant education program from 1996 to 2001 as the English literacy teacher. Like the other teachers in the program, I was a certified public school teacher. My observations of the literacy practices of the Khmer youth are drawn from the whole program, not only my class.

The Khmer youth who attended the migrant education program were too young to have experienced the reign of the Khmer Rouge or the Vietnamese invasion of Cam-

bodia. However, their life narratives were shaped by their families' history of the Khmer genocide, the Vietnamese invasion, famine, flight, long stays in refugee camps, and relocation in a foreign country, followed by migration within the U.S. after their arrival. The youth's individual identities and social realities were shaped by four dimensions typical of this history and cultural background: distinct linguistic, cultural, and historical characteristics; survival skills and psychologies related to war; adjustments to a new country as immigrants; and discrimination, disenfranchisement, and racism due to their economic and political status in their new country (Kiang, 1996). In addition, the students in this particular migrant education program faced racism in their schools, peer pressure, and the effects of urban poverty. Although each student was of course unique, all of them considered themselves ethnic Khmer.

### **Preserving the Khmer Soul**

Mr. Tauch, the Khmer language teacher, expressed the importance of cultural identity: "[I] wish the Khmer soul lives always in the spirit and the mentality of all the Cambodian people so that the Khmer culture is still and always alive in our world" (field note, 1999). Language, literacy, culture, and identity are intimately linked (Gee, 1990; Nieto, 1996). Language can also serve as a powerful symbol of cultural identity. The Khmer youth in the migrant education program told me that, for them, the Khmer language is a primary marker of their "Khmerness." They knew that someone was Khmer if that person spoke Khmer. Mr. Tauch made it clear: "Our language is not *Cambodian* as many Americans call it, but it is *Khmer*. We are *Khmer*." Allowing students to explore and identify with their native language and culture enhances learning (Nieto, 1996). The program validated the cultural identities of its students and supported development and use of their heritage languages, affording students the opportunity not only to express themselves freely in their first language but also to learn about its writing system.

### **Preservation through Language Learning**

The Khmer language uses a phonologically based script derived from an ancient South Indian script (Needham, 2003). The Khmer teacher, a highly educated and respected member of the community, used the traditional Cambodian methods of recitation, copying, and dictation to teach the language. According to Needham (2003), in Cambodian culture this style of teaching is viewed as the best way for

children to learn to speak and write in Khmer. The recitation of the alphabet in the Khmer language class, as described at the beginning of this article, may seem to a Western educator to be driven by "skill and drill." However, the teacher conducted the class collaboratively. No student was singled out to repeat or read aloud alone; rather, the students supported each other through group reading and recitation. In addition, practicing sounds and letters was only one small piece of the class. Mr. Tauch also believed in passing on the history and heritage of the Cambodian people. Though the younger children practiced vowels and consonants, older children read Cambodian folktales. Than<sup>1</sup>, an eighth-grade student, told me, "I like the Khmer language teacher. He usually talks to me in Khmer. In class he tells stories. I like the stories. They are history stories about Cambodia."

Passing on culture and history to the young people, already an important value in Cambodian society, becomes particularly vital to a community that has relocated to a new environment. The youth are seen as an important means of keeping Khmer culture and history alive. In the migrant education program,

young children received coloring books of Angkor Wat; the books pictured the gods that watch over the temple, giving their names in Khmer. Mr. Tauch had the older students write in English about the Cambodian government, the Khmer Rouge period, and symbols of Cambodia such as Angkor Wat and the Cambodian flag. The following is an example of a student's writing about the national flag.

#### **Cambodian Heritage<sup>2</sup>**

National Flag – It was design by Mr. Iev Koes  
In October 1953 it was officially used in the country.  
(White) temple represents culture and civilization of Cambodian people.

(Red) = courage, braveness, blood of Cambodian people who sacrificed for the country.  
(Blue) represent peaceful feeling and tranquility of Cambodian people.

Keo

The migrant education program imposed no boundaries on language use; there were no artificial restrictions on where one should use English and where one should use Khmer. Participants used the language with which they could best convey their message and express their ideas, so that, for instance, Mr. Tauch used English to teach the history of Cambodia. Thus, students

learned to move among languages, choosing the language according to their audience.

Students also felt free to experiment with the writing they acquired in the Khmer class, switching languages as necessary to communicate their meaning. For example, one student wrote me a thank-you note for finding her lost coat. She wrote the note in Khmer, because she was practicing her Khmer script. Knowing I could not read what she had written, she wrote in English below the Khmer script, "It means Thank you," as shown on page 10. Through the social practice of writing a thank-you note, she was not only gaining expertise in using Khmer script but also teaching me about her language. The note became a multilingual text, and the student became the expert.

### ***Preservation through Cultural Learning***

The Khmer language was used not only in written texts and oral language but also in concert with other modes of expression, such as dance and music. Students experienced their heritage language as a social and cultural process embedded in authentic and meaningful activities that solidified their identity as Khmer people. The Khmer language is embedded in other cultural forms of expression (Needham 2003), so that dance, for example, played an important role in maintaining Khmer

cultural heritage. The dance teacher, Sokhan, was a high school teaching assistant and is Cambodian. Sokhan remarked, "We have to use Khmer in the cultural dance. It is part of the dance and in the music" (field note, 1999). Although the students had mixed feelings about per-

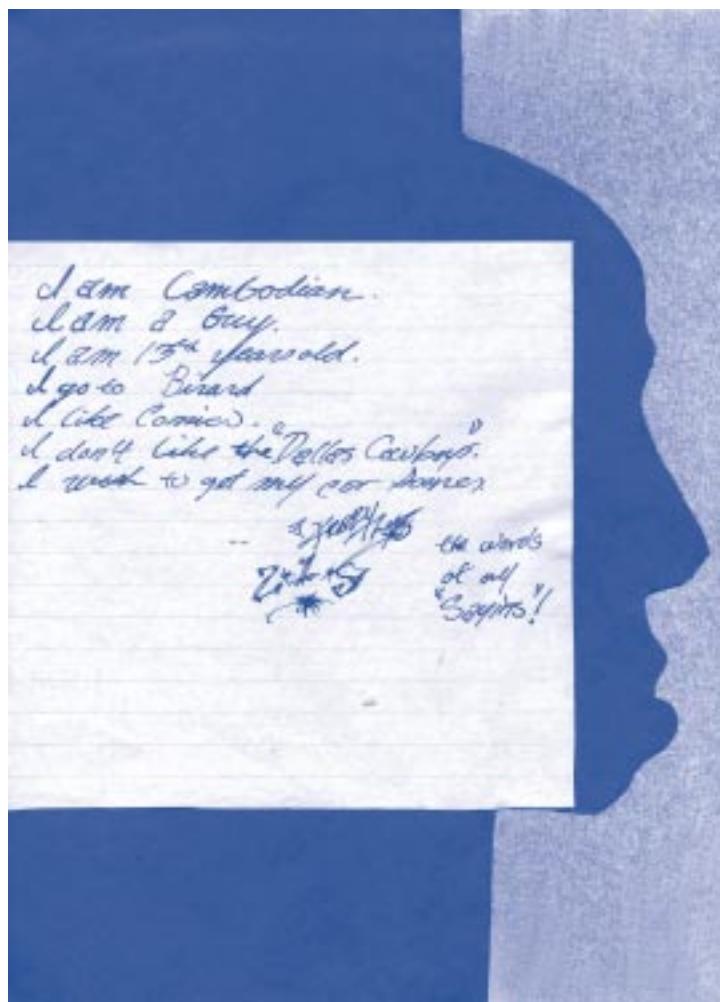
forming traditional dances, they recognized that these dances represent their Cambodian heritage. They felt they knew Cambodian culture because they knew the dances.

Students learned the dances both from the dance teacher and from videos of Cambodian professional dance companies like the one highlighted at the beginning of this article. The students watched and copied. Their movements followed the subtleties of the music, which was sung in Khmer. They placed their feet slowly and methodically, balancing as they moved from one foot to the other. Hands are an important focal point of Cambodian dance, so the students practiced fluid wrist and hand movements. If a student was out of place, Sokhan would walk over and physically move the student's body, repositioning the head or molding the hands into perfect form—a method used by many Cambodian dance teachers across the U.S. (Catlin, 1990).

Besides providing a means of using the Khmer language as part of a particular social and cultural context, traditional Cambodian dance also allowed students to connect with the larger Cambodian community in their city. The dance students described at the beginning of this article were practicing the Coconut Dance to perform at the annual New Year's street celebration. At this Cambodian celebration, families gather,

and so-called gang members dance alongside elderly women in traditional skirts.

The migrant education program creates educational practices and environments that support Khmer language and literacy use in dynamic ways; the use changes naturally



**Vantha's multimodal poem (see page 15)**

according to the purpose and context. Students engage in a variety of social and cultural practices in which the Khmer language is embedded. Through this support of Khmer language and cultural practices, the migrant education program provides a critical space for the youth to explore their Khmer identities.

### Multilingual and Multimodal Literacy Practices

As members of several overlapping communities, the Khmer youth have multi-layered identities; their Khmer identity is only part of who they are. Like their non-migrant peers, these Khmer youth spend hours playing video games, watching cartoons, reading comic books, and listening to music. Their world is saturated with popular culture. The culturally sensitive model of literacy employed in the migrant education program allowed these youth to explore their identities not only as Khmer but also as urban young people.

I assigned students in my class to write a poem about things that interested them, both as a way to help them generate ideas for writing and to help me get to know them better. The following examples illustrate how the youth were influenced by both Cambodian culture and urban youth culture.

I would like to write a poem about Cambodian New Year.

I would like to write a poem about family.

I would like to write a poem about friends.

I would like to write a poem about school.

Sary

I would like to write about break dancing and head spend

And I would like to write about doing flying in the air alaround.

Ratana



These examples show how the students' literacy practices were closely tied to their personal, social, and cultural realities.

The environment of the migrant education program also allowed students to write for their own purposes. Engaging in a wide range of self-generated literacy practices, they produced multimodal symbol systems shaped in part by urban youth culture. As Hodge and Kress (1988) point out, youth's meaning making draws from social and cultural contexts in which they are positioned as producers of texts in relation

to existing semiotic systems. Producing texts involves not only creating but also modifying texts these youth have appropriated from their experiences in their world.

**Engaging in a wide range of self-generated literacy practices, they produced multimodal symbol systems shaped in part by urban youth culture.**

At the beginning of this article, I described a small group of middle school boys drawing at a large table in the art room. These boys were bent over the table, diligently drawing pictures of video game and comic book figures. Using only pencil on white paper, they were drawing, in great detail, characters with well-defined muscles, large eyes, and spiky hair. They (re)created from memory exaggerated female forms with small waists and large chests. Then some boys wrote notes about girls on their drawings: "Chandrie"—a young adolescent boy in the program—"likes Sin"—a female comic book character.

At first glance, the boys might have appeared to be merely doodling. On the contrary, they were taking a transformative or "new-making" (Kress, 1997) stance toward the signs and symbols of video games. The pictures were their own creations. When they integrated written notes with their drawings of characters, they created multimodal texts. They even gave friends nicknames based on video game characters. Younger siblings imitated the sketching strokes of their older brothers in their own (re)creations of characters from games popular with younger children.

One seventh-grade boy, Prussia, began to design his own video game character, seeing this kind of design as a career possibility. He selected the features of his character from his own experience, from urban youth culture, and from video games. The character had large eyes like those of characters in Japanese cartoons and video games, but his physique was less exaggerated and more realistic than those of Prussia's popular culture models. Prussia dressed his character as he himself dressed: a popular brand-name T-shirt, a baseball cap, a peace sign—everyday wear for urban youth. When he finished drawing his character, Prussia cut the figure out and placed it, pop-up fashion, on a collage he was making about himself for a class. At the top of his collage, he wrote "Japanese." He told me, "I like Japanese video games, and I like Japanese things." He added more Japanese elements to his collage: a sketched map of Japan, pasted pictures of sushi, a Japanese lantern, and a Buddha. However, the character he created stood above the rest to become the focal point of his collage. Rather than being a mere copy of an existing video game character, Prussia's character was a creative transformation of characters he had known. Rather than creating a simple collage, Prussia systematically designed a multimodal semiotic presentation including art, words, and a paper sculpture. Making a pop-up of his character transformed it from flat representation to a concrete object with the apparent potential for action (Kress, 1997).

Such self-generated literacy practices reveal impressive innovation. The products are complex, intricate semiotic creations; multimodal presentation allows students to represent their multiple layers of identity and their varied interests. These productions are highly sophisticated signs and symbols that represent a dialogic relationship between the youth and their society (Bakhtin, 1981; Kress, 1997). By supporting students' choices of expression, the migrant education program allows the students to explore alternative modes of expression and their multilayered identities.

Another product illustrates how a multimodal, multilingual text can represent a youth's identity. Vantha, another middle school student, wrote the poem reproduced on page 13 and below following a formula assigned by one of his teachers in the program. The poem is a multilingual text because it mixes standard forms of English with non-standard forms connected to Vantha's urban neighbor-

hood and to hip-hop culture. It is a multimodal text because it was mounted on a self-portrait, integrating a visual text with a written text.

I am Cambodian.  
I am a Guy.  
I am 13th years old.  
I go to Birard.  
I like Comics.  
I don't like the Dallas Cowboys.  
I wish to get my car sooner.  
The words of my "Sayins!"

The content of the poem is clear: Vantha identifies as a Cambodian but also as an urban American teenager. Comics and cars are important to him. Appending the phrase "The words of my Sayins!" (sayings) adds a creative stance to the formulaic assignment. He has modified the assignment for his own purposes: to show that he is a "cool" Cambodian guy.

### Literacy, Language, Culture, and Identity

The literacy experiences presented in this article reflect only a small portion of the wide range of multilingual and multimodal literacy practices supported by the migrant education program. Taking a culturally sensitive stance toward literacy allows programs to create educational practices that allow for broadened notions of literacy. Such educational environments embed literacy in social and cultural processes, making the links among literacy, language, culture, and identity. More specifically, the literacy

experiences of the Khmer youth presented here demonstrate how these youth communicate through a range of modes and languages. The richness of their experience supports the need to open up narrow curricula to accept alternative models of literacy.

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Research into the fast-changing global culture has shown that the boundaries of differing social contexts are narrowing. Youth thus need to be able to negotiate their varying social contexts and communities (New London Group 2000). The Khmer youth in the migrant education program have begun to negotiate among uses and varieties of language. Their dif-

ferring uses of language and literacy are connected to their multiple-layered identities, so that, in changing their lan-

guage use, they may also change their presentations of self. For example, embedded in the traditional Cambodian dances are Khmer notions of women as kind, gentle, graceful, and refined (Ledgerwood, 1990). Similarly, the Khmer language requires the youth to understand levels of respect. However, the Khmer boys' comportment changes when they are engaged with their peers in the social activity of writing notes about girls. Their literacy practices reflect their different life worlds. Their practices reflect what it means to be Khmer youth living in urban America.

Along with negotiating across boundaries, youth in the global culture need the ability to "deal with a flow of multimodal sets of representations, to take a transformative stance with texts, and to be able to appreciate forms in ways that youth use them for their own purpose" (Gee, 2001). The Khmer youth described in this article engaged in practices that represent these necessary abilities. For instance, they interacted with the same popular story across various sets of representations: video game, comic book, movie. Then they used and adapted such forms to create their own representations, based on their interests, for their own purposes.

On a bus ride home from a field trip, we passed an abandoned building. A student asked the program director, "Why can't we make our own school for Cambodians?" The migrant education program has become a community for its students. It is a place where students can display, perform, and share their multimodal and multilingual expressions of their world. It is a place that opens up the possibility of full participation for all students and where privilege is not given to one language or one means of communication. It is a place where students can create symbolic sign systems that contribute to the construction of their interests and their identities. It is an educational institution whose culturally sensitive approach to literacy guides students to learn the many sociocultural aspects of language and literacy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Names of program participants are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> I have presented the writing and other artifacts in this article exactly as the young people created them.

# *co-constructing space for literacy and identity work* **with LGBTQ youth**

by Mollie V. Blackburn

Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), or are perceived as such, often suffer from neglect and abuse in schools. School personnel typically ignore the issues of LGBT youth in the academic curriculum and in extracurricular activities (Gray, 1999; Owens, 1998). Youth perceived as LGBT are often called derogatory names, harassed, or physically abused (Eaton, 1993; Gray, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Owens, 1998; Rofes, 1995).

This neglect and abuse hinders the education of these youth, as suggested by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 2001 nationwide school climate survey of 904 LGBT youth across the United States. According to the GLSEN report, 68.6 percent of these youth felt unsafe in their schools because of their sexual orientation, and 45.7 percent felt unsafe because of their gender expression (Kosciw, 2001). As a result, 31.9 percent had skipped a class, and 30.8 percent had missed an entire day of school in the month prior to the survey. Based on these findings, Kosciw (2001) concluded that the heterosexism and homophobia these young people experienced in schools hindered their academic learning.

More specifically, heterosexism and homophobia in schools impede both the literacy work and the identity work of students perceived to be LGBT. LGBT youth in schools are marginalized, according to Eli Goldblatt's (1995) definition of *marginalized* people as those "whose private lives are at odds with the dominant view of a proper public persona" (p. 152). Britzman (1997) further observes that "schools mediate the discourses of private and public work to leave intact the view that (homo)sexualities must be hidden" (p. 192). In his



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study of urban high school students, Goldblatt (1997) found that “a gap between private and public self creates an inhospitable climate for writing.... Writers who are alienated from or insecure within the institutional framework of their writing task will predictably have trouble composing texts for that institution” (p. 152). Thus, the heterosexism and homophobia that LGBT youth experience in schools is likely to hinder their literacy work.

These forms of oppression are also likely to obstruct identity work. By *identity work*, I mean the ways in which identities are formed in social evolutionary contexts and therefore, in some ways, are shaped by these contexts, as well as the ways in which individuals contribute to the work of identity formation: They have agency to interact in and with their contexts to form their identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). This work is particularly difficult for LGBT students because, as Britzman (1997) asserts, heterosexism and homophobia work to make sexualities invisible in schools so that lesbian and gay students often “have no opportunities to explore their identities” (p. 190) there.

Because schools tend to be heterosexist and homophobic institutions, I chose to examine the literacy and identity work in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ<sup>1</sup>) youth engage in an out-of-school context. I studied Story Time, a literacy group in a youth-run center for LGBTQ youth called The Attic. The LGBTQ youth with whom I worked used our reading and discussions of texts in Story Time to validate their identities and to envision ways in which they might work against heterosexism and homophobia.

### The Attic, Story Time, Youth, and Texts

The Attic, founded in 1993 in Center City Philadelphia, serves LGBTQ youth ranging in age from 12 to 23. According to The Attic’s statistics at the time I was there, the youth served were 45 percent African American, 40 percent European American, 5 percent Latino/a, and 4 percent Asian Pacific Islander; the other 6 percent were of other or mixed ethnicities. The statistics, which at that time failed to identify transgender youth, stated that 54 percent of the youth were male and 46 percent female. The participants were diverse in their gender, race, and class; almost all were from urban communities. Most had, at some point in their lives, been students in a district that, by the time they were adolescents, had a policy protecting the rights of LGBTQ youth. However, the youth with whom I worked rarely reported having experienced the implementation of this policy. In my experience, The Attic was most heavily used by African-American males. The Attic explicitly worked against heterosexism and homophobia in a variety of

ways. For example, it trained and hired youth to conduct outreach to young people and youth service providers on meeting the needs of LGBTQ youth. It also offered a wide array of services such as support groups, counseling, tutoring, and social activities.

When I first came to The Attic as a volunteer, the youth asked me to facilitate a group different from the existing support groups—something more recreational. I tried several groups—including “Out and About,” in which we did activities such as scavenger hunts outside of The Attic—but Story Time is the group that lasted. Story Time began meeting for approximately two hours once a week in the fall of 1998 and continued while I was there, through



August of 2001. After that, it was and continues to be facilitated by a youth who was an active participant. During one of my years with Story Time, July 1999 through July 2000, I formally collected data including field notes, audiotapes of two-thirds of the meetings<sup>2</sup>, and documents shared in the meetings. This data collection was a part of a larger ethnography of the ways in which LGBTQ youth use reading and writing for social change (Blackburn, 2001).

During this year, the group met 45 times; 93 youth attended at least once. Because the group was open, youth came and went as they chose, so that attendance was quite varied. A meeting of Story Time could include two young people or 18, but an average of nine youth came to each meeting: some quite regularly, others sporadically, and still others only once. The most regular participants were four youth who came to more than half of the meetings, and six more who came to over a quarter of the meetings. Of these, six self-identified as African-American male, three as African-American female, and one as white female.

Typically I began meetings by inviting youth to share any texts they had brought. Over the year of formal data collection, the youth shared texts at almost half of the meetings (47 percent). If they had not brought texts, I described the texts that I had brought and asked the group whether they would like to read any of them. Usually I had copies for all so that we could read the texts together; I often prepared them to be read as readers theatre (see Tierney & Readence, 2000), in which people in the group assume the roles of characters in the story and read the appropriate dialogue. I shared texts at 82 percent of the meetings. If the group seemed uninterested in reading the texts I had brought, I suggested that the group talk or use a book of questions to serve as a catalyst for conversation. We shared no texts, other than the stories we told about our lives, at three (7 percent) of the meetings.

Of the texts that the youth shared during the year of formal data collection, about two-thirds (67 percent) were written by the youth and one-third (33 percent) by someone outside The Attic. One text was a combination, a video created by a youth based on two published texts (see Blackburn, 2002–2003), and another was a love letter to one of the young men in the group. Of the texts that I brought, most (80 percent) were published by someone outside The Attic; 13 percent were either drafts related to this research. I also shared a few poems that my partner wrote and one piece from my journal.

Though the texts included a wide range of genres, most were traditional alphabetic texts. Of the 83 unique texts the youth shared, 67 were alphabetic, including poems, journal entries, excerpts from books, letters, short stories, a magazine, an excerpt from a poem, a commercial script, and an excerpt from the Bible. Non-alphabetic texts included song lyrics, audiotapes, videotapes, a piece of art, a photograph, and a scrapbook. I shared 43 unique texts, of which 33 were alphabetic: poems, short stories, articles in periodicals, excerpts from novels, vignettes, written data, a book of questions, and a 'zine (a magazine written, produced, and distributed by a young person for young people).

Other texts I shared included audiotapes, videotapes, picture books, and an excerpt from a graphic novel. Race and/or sexuality were central to many, but not all, of the texts we read and discussed at Story Time,

as will become apparent in my description of a particular meeting. In the supportive environment of The Attic, the youth and I co-constructed a unique space in which to engage in literacy and identity work.

### **Conceptualizing Space**

*Space* is a living, breathing context characterized by complexities and often by conflicts. Susan Talburt (2000) points to de Certeau's distinction between *place* and *space*, in which he asserts that *space* is a "practiced place" (p. 19). Talburt describes *spaces* as "emergent, incomplete, and unpredictable" (p. 19), as opposed to *places*, which she understands to be "an order of distributed relationships, location, and fixity, such as a given culture to be transmitted, an interpretation to be learned, or defined skills and methods of reasoning to be acquired" (p. 19). *Places* exist in and of themselves, but *spaces* are those places brought to life. I include in the concept of *space* the people within a place and the ways in which that place brings people to life. In other words, *space* is a dialogic between place and people.

Talburt acknowledges that "Certain discursive spaces encourage certain articulations of the self" (p. 17). I would add that when a particular space does not allow for a particular articulation of the self or performance of identities, then that place stops being a space for that articulation or performance. For example, The Attic is a place that makes space for LGBTQ youth to perform their sexual identities, while school may not be. School often offers these youth space to be students of a particular race or gender, such as African-American female, while not providing space for them to be students with sexual identities, such as lesbian. Thus, it is not that there simply is or is not space; rather, it is that there may be space for some aspects of individuals

and not for other aspects. Space can be squelched by the assumption that everyone shares a particular perspective, such as a heteronormative one. If a space does not allow for difference and controversy, then it is no longer space.

According to bell hooks (1994), space is:

a context where we can engage in open critical dialogue with one another, where we can debate and discuss without fear of emotional collapse, where we can hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of experience. (p. 110)

Although hooks is talking specifically about space among women, her notion is more broadly applicable. In this article, when I talk about *space*, I am talking about the space, or lack thereof, that LGBTQ youth find—or make—to explore their identities, particularly their sexual identities, in ways that often conflict with the heteronormative. Whether or not a space is safe enough for this kind of identity work can be determined only by a particular individual at a particular time. What is safe for me may not be safe for a young person, and what is safe for that young person may not be safe for another; further, what is safe for one person at one time may not be safe at another time. When I say that a space is safe enough for a given kind

of identity work, I am not asserting that such space is necessarily characteristic of the place; rather, I am describing what an individual can accomplish in that place at a particular time.

### **Co-Constructing a Safe Space in Story Time**

A close look at a single meeting of Story Time provides an illustration of this concept of a safe space. This meeting was representative of many others in terms of attendance, participation, and structure, but it was unique in that it was

particularly text-rich; we read and discussed a wider array of texts than usual. While I could draw from many meetings to create a collage of images of the literacy and identity work in which we engaged in Story Time, this single meeting offers a range of such images in a cohesive form.

#### **Description**

This meeting included ten youth, another adult staff member, and me. Seven of the youth and the adult staff member attended Story Time regularly. Of the three youth who were not regulars, one came both to Story Time and to The Attic sporadically during the study, another came only twice, and the other came once.

We began with a few announcements, and then I asked whether anyone had brought anything to share. Thunder<sup>3</sup>, a regular in the group, began talking about his collection of poems—some of which he had written, some of which were by other people. He read aloud one of his own poems from this collection. Entitled “In the heat,” the poem was gay male erotica. The group discussed the poem’s sexual nature, its powerful sensory images, its use of metaphor, and its similarity to a poem we had read in a previous meeting. Thunder then read another of his poems, “It is coming,” which was about revenge. The group

laughed and joked about the content of the poem. I affirmed his writing, saying it was “fabulous,” and pointed out his use of assonance, explaining what the term means. Thunder responded by saying that he got the technique from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven.” One of the youth said that he was thinking of that poem while Thunder was reading, and so we talked briefly about Poe.

Next, Karen spoke of a poem she had written about Mary, her sister who had died two months earlier of complications resulting from sickle cell anemia. She prefaced



her reading by saying that the poem was an incomplete draft and that she was not ready for critical feedback. I asked about the catalyst for the poem, and she told me that she wrote it because she was “feeling some kind of way.” She read the poem aloud. It was powerful in its evocation of Mary’s life, death, and funeral, and of the life Mary did not have. One of the youth commented on how “real” the images seemed, focusing on the images of life. We did not discuss Mary’s death.

Thunder invited another youth to share, but he declined. Karen talked about some of her poetry and read a poem she had shared before at Story Time. Next, Theo talked about his poetry and read aloud his poem “Stranger,” an account of a brief interaction between two people who run into each other at a coffee shop long after a one-night stand. He performed the poem’s dialogue and sang an excerpt from a song that was part of the poem. His word play was delightful, including such phrases as “traipse trippingly” and “feel our fickle fingers tickle our tongues.” He played with cliché by ending his poem with, “That which does not kill us makes us”—here he inserted a long pause—“stranger.” After he read, he told the story behind the poem. I pointed out the word play that appealed to me, as did others in the group.

Thunder invited me to share, and I told the group that I’d brought a children’s book by Chris Raschka (1999), *Like Likes Like*. It’s about a cat who is lonely in the world of “Two by two, he and she” until “Look! In luck. Looks like like likes like. Oh. How lucky.” I read it aloud and then asked whether group members thought the cats were gay. Karen said, “I think they’re homosexual kittens,” and Thunder said, “I think they’re kitties with homosexual tendencies.” I told them what one of my academic mentors had told me, that Raschka said that he wrote the book to honor same-sex relationships. Several people expressed their interest in the book.

At this point, approximately halfway into the meeting, Karen said, “You know what we didn’t do today, Mollie? We didn’t go around and say our names.” We didn’t always introduce ourselves, but since there were several participants who did not come regularly, I was glad she suggested it. Often when we introduced ourselves, we said our names and something about ourselves, so I asked for a topic. Karen suggested that we say our names and our favorite books or authors. As we went around the room, participants named Jeanette Winterson and E. Lynn Harris, among others. Once the introductions were complete, the large group discussion dissipated into smaller conversations, until I said, “We can

talk if you want, but I want to tell you some other things that I brought just in case you want to read them.” I said that I had copies of a poem that Karen had repeatedly referred to as “the nature poem” throughout the meeting, and that I had also brought a transcript of a previous meeting of Story Time in which we had read and discussed this poem. I mentioned other options as well, but Karen said, “You know what I want to read? … I want to read the nature poem.... I want to read the transcripts too.” From previous discussions, Thunder, Karen, and I knew that the poem made Quentin uncomfortable. I asked Quentin whether he was OK with reading it, whether he’d stay for the reading, and Thunder said, for Quentin, “He will stay.” I asked Quentin to move so that I could see his face during the reading to see how he was reacting. Quentin moved, and I distributed copies of the poem and the transcript. The youth negotiated among themselves who would read the various parts of the transcript, and a young woman who had recently joined us agreed to read the poem.

The “nature poem” was Ellen Bass’ (1993) “For Barbara, who said she couldn’t visualize two women together.” During the reading, two of the young women responded audibly to the sexual nature of the poem, mostly with “uhmmms.” After the reading, the group responded fervently and chaotically to the poem. Then Karen began reading the transcript of our previous discussion of the same poem, in which the group talked about whether the poem was about sex or about nature. After reading the transcript, Quentin said he finally saw the poem as sexual. When Thunder said

the poem got his “testosterone flowing,” Karen reminded him of the sexuality in his own poetry, and in Theo’s, by quoting poetry shared in today’s meeting.

Since it was now time for the group to end, I asked Karen to bring to the next meeting a text she had mentioned earlier, and she agreed. Again the large-group discussion dissipated into smaller conversations as people departed.

### **Analysis**

This meeting of Story Time was typical in that the youth decided whether to attend and what to do when they came. Although I had an agenda for the meeting, they did also, so that together we negotiated the space and its use. First, the youth shared the texts they had brought; after that, I introduced the texts I had brought, from which the youth selected the ones they wanted to read together. We read a wide array

of genres, including poetry, a children's book, and data, referring along the way to other works. The texts touched on many topics, including revenge, loss, and love. The youth both represented themselves in their own writing and sought representations they could recognize or claim in the writing of others. Although our discussion of our reading was valuable in and of itself—in that it provided an out-of-school space in which these LGBTQ youth could validate their identities—it also served to help these youth imagine spaces for themselves as LGBTQ youth in schools.

Together, in Story Time, we juxtaposed school-sanctioned literacy work and unsanctioned sexual identity work. By talking about poetic devices such as imagery, metaphor, assonance, and alliteration in the context of (homo)sexually explicit poetry, we considered what it might be like to talk about sex—particularly non-heterosexual sex—in schools, which some naively imagine to be asexual. We confirmed that sexual texts can be analyzed in a scholastic fashion. We also did intertextual work by comparing and contrasting poems, in terms both of content and of style and structure: Karen compared the content of the Bass poem to that of Thunder's and Theo's poems, and we compared the style of Thunder's poem to Poe's. We talked about favorite authors and authors who inspired us, as Poe inspired Thunder. Although much of the literature in this particular meeting was about sex, the reading of *Like Likes Like* served to disrupt the notion that non-heterosexual identities are only about sex. The book illustrated that literature offers a way to talk about non-heterosexual identities in ways that are *not* about sex and that are accessible to youth, even young children. In these ways, these LGBTQ youth and I co-constructed a space in which literacy work and identity work came together.

Constructing such a space involved safety and risk. When Karen stated that she was not prepared for critique of her poem about her recently deceased sister, the group honored her need for safety by responding primarily to the content of the poem and responding to the form only with praise. Karen communicated that she was vulnerable, and the group responded in a supportive manner. Further, after reading and discussing this poem, she shared another poem, one that the group had praised on a previous reading. In these ways, Karen constructed a safe space for herself, with the help of the group. Still, the group could be as

risky as it was safe. When Karen asked to read a poem that she knew made Quentin uncomfortable, and Thunder insisted that Quentin stay for the reading, both were challenging Quentin, all but demanding that he sacrifice his comfort in order to expand his notion of what was acceptable. This challenge was a risk, but in the end it was worth it, as Quentin came to a new understanding of a poem that initially caused him discomfort. Thus, in Story Time, we worked together to co-construct a space where the youth felt safe enough to take risks.

## Considering School

The Story Time space, where youth engaged in literacy and identity work in ways that were both safe and risky, offers a vision of what schools could be like for LGBTQ youth. By engaging in sexual identity work via school-sanctioned practices, the youth could imagine that such work might be possible in school. The balance of safety and risk showed them what it would take to make engaging in sexual identity work in schools possible: It would take a safe place where youth could communicate their vulnerability and expect to be supported. Simultaneously, it would also take a space for pushing and pulling, a space where LGBTQ youth could challenge the heteronormative by expanding the curriculum to include their identities. It would take acknowledging people's discomfort and asking them to listen, to hear, and to try to understand.

In the first meeting of Story Time, after we read "Am I Blue?" (Coville, 1994) a short story about a young man who is abused because he is perceived to be gay, I asked the youth to imagine what it would be like to read this story in school. Star said, "It'll make me feel comfortable to let everybody else read what people like me go through and everything, so, like, they could get a better understanding" (audiotape, October 1998). The following summer, after we read "For Barbara," (Bass, 1993) the lesbian love poem mentioned earlier, Star said that he wanted a copy: "I'll give it to my English teacher, and say, 'What do you think about this?'" (audiotape, August 1999). Although Star did not give the poem to his teacher and probably never intended to, he was able to imagine doing so as a possibility. By offering a model of one school-sanctioned way of engaging in literacy and identity work, Story Time helped youth to imagine doing similar kinds of work in school that would help them make space for themselves as LGBTQ

youth. They began to see ways that they could be agents against heterosexism and homophobia, agents for social change. Though they could not necessarily enact these possibilities while they were still coping with the heterosexism and homophobia of most schools, they did learn to imagine how school could become a safe space for them.

## Implications for Afterschool Practice

Afterschool programs can nurture such imaginings and facilitate their actualization by creating space for LGBTQ youth to engage in the kind of literacy work sanctioned by schools while simultaneously engaging in the unsanctioned work of developing their sexual identity. This space, remember, is not merely a room in a building, but rather a place in which people allow for complexity, conflict, and difference; promote debate and discussion; and “encourage certain articulations of the self” (Talburt, 2000, p. 17). These “articulations of the self” must include those that are marginalized in other places, such as school classrooms. In order for a space to accomplish the kind of work I am advocating, it needs to include people who understand and value the kind of literacy work that is valued in schools, such as discussion of various genres of literature and specific literary devices. At the same time, these people also need to understand and value young people and the kinds of identity work in which they are likely to engage, including, but not limited to, non-heterosexual identity work. Creating such a space may require anti-heterosexism and homophobia training, in which facilitators come to know the experiences of LGBTQ youth and have opportunities to ask questions of such youth—the kind of training The Attic hired its youth to offer to youth and youth service providers, including adult facilitators in afterschool programs. When they understand literacy and identity work, adult facilitators in afterschool programs can co-construct a space with LGBTQ youth in which the youth can validate themselves and work against heterosexism and homophobia through their reading and discussion of texts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I began this article using the acronym *LGBT* because it is the one most often used in the literature. Here I add *Q*, for *questioning*. I use *LGBTQ* unless referring to a source that uses *LGBT*, in which case I respect the author's choice of acronym.

<sup>2</sup> I was always prepared to audiotape Story Time, but there were times I did not: when there was a new youth whom I perceived to be uncomfortable or when I thought the group dynamics were tenuous and worried that taping would stifle rather than stimulate conversation. I also lost two audiotapes to technological errors.

<sup>3</sup> All names of people in this article are pseudonyms.

# *Fabulous* **Fashions**

Links to Learning, Literacy, and Life

by Anne L. Thompson

"I feel famous," Margarita<sup>1</sup> exclaimed as she rushed to her family in her short, light blue dress, her tiara and high heels. "You look beautiful!" her mother said. Her father added, "You did a great job! We're proud of you." Margarita beamed.

All around the auditorium, scenes like this were playing out. Forty girls who participated in the Fabulous Fashions program at the M.S. 127 Champions Academics Sports & Arts Club in the Bronx, New York, had just completed a 1970s-themed fashion show. The girls chose a theme, researched the era, traveled to a fashion museum, sketched designs, sewed their clothes, and staged a full-scale fashion show, complete with pounding music and the middle school version of a catwalk. The girls knew they had done something special. They knew Fabulous Fashions had taught them valuable lessons in how to design and create clothes. But they had little idea that their work in the fashion class had also enhanced their literacy skills.

Much of the research over the past century or more on how to make students more receptive to learning

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supports the hypothesis that a program such as Fabulous Fashions can help students learn in the classroom and beyond. After a description of the program and my research design, this article will briefly examine some of this research, discussing the possibility that arts instruction enhances traditional academics. It will also address the roles of interest, emotion, motivation, and self-esteem in enhancing student engagement. That this program focuses on fashion is important not only because middle school girls are immersed in the topic but also because of its potential as a future career and its authenticity. Fashion can function as a sign system in and of itself, creating links to other sign systems including reading and writing activities. In sum, this article shows how a single class such as Fabulous Fashions can significantly affect students' lives.

## Program Context

M.S. 127, in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx, serves fifth through eighth graders, 50 percent of whom are Hispanic, 34 percent African American, 14 percent Asian, and 2 percent white, according to the 2002–2003 Annual School Report. It is considered a high-need school: 81 percent of students are eligible for free lunch. The school is at 113 percent of capacity. The average suspension rate for city schools is 43 per 1,000 students; at M.S. 127, the rate is 180 per 1,000. Crimes requiring police involvement are more than double the city average. Seventy-three percent of fifth through seventh graders fail to meet state English Language Arts standards, as do 77 percent of eighth graders (2002–2003 Annual School Report). Students enrolled in Fabulous Fashions are typical of students at the school. Some are enrolled in the college preparation program, but many are poor students who are failing one or more subjects or have disciplinary problems.

In 1998, the Sports & Arts in School Foundation, a nonprofit organization that today provides afterschool and summer programs to 152 New York City schools, instituted the Champions Academics Sports & Arts Club at M.S. 127. This comprehensive afterschool program runs for three hours every school day, serving 300 students. The After-School Corporation (TASC) provides much of the funding. Staff include teachers and paraprofessionals from the school, as well as adults and college students from the community, sports specialists, and parent volunteers.

Each day, after a group snack, fifth and sixth graders spend their first period engaged in sports and arts activities ranging from judo to "car art" to tennis, while the

seventh and eighth graders participate in homework help and academic enrichment. Homework help groups are led by college honors students and supervised by a teacher from the school. At 4:30, the students "flip": fifth and sixth graders move to homework help while seventh and eighth graders proceed to sports and arts.

Sports and arts activities are led by subject specialists or occasionally by teachers from the school. Each activity meets two or three times a week. Students choose their sports and arts activities, though they are generally required to remain in the activity they choose for a full season, which lasts approximately three months. With three such seasons each year, students can explore activities in depth, while still trying a variety of activities.

## Program Design

In 2000, fashion design was added to the sports and arts offerings. Looking specifically for ways to engage girls, the site director spoke with program participants about their likes and dislikes, and nearly all the girls raved about fashion. Fashion design is offered three times a week; students who enroll are required to attend all three sessions. In keeping with the "flip" model, younger students attend first and then go to homework help as the older students come into the fashion program. As a fashion show nears, students might all work together for the entire three-hour block of time. Students may participate in as many seasons of fashion as they choose.

## Instructor

Fabulous Fashions has been led by the same instructor since its inception. Monique Martin is a professional fashion designer, not a teacher. Her relationship with her students is of particular importance to the success of Fabulous Fashions. Program participants adore her, although she is not warm or motherly toward them. She treats them as professionals and discusses little but fashion with them. She sets very high standards and expects all students to meet them. She helps students when they need it, but expects them to take charge of their work and produce their own outfits for the show.

Underneath her professional demeanor, Ms. Martin is a fierce advocate for Fabulous Fashions. She constantly lobbies the site director, Sports & Arts, and funders for more money, more fabric, and more sewing machines. On her own time and often unpaid, she takes students on trips around the city to museums or fashion exhibitions. She helps girls who are interested in design high schools to prepare their portfolios and calls schools on their behalf.

## **Content and Activities**

Since Fabulous Fashions began, Ms. Martin's program model has changed. In the early days of the program, she spent a great deal of time on sewing, as opposed to true fashion design, using simple projects such as pincushions and hand-sewn fabric roses to teach basic skills. However, she realized that students were most interested in clothes, so now, while they may do one introductory project, they practice the rudiments of sewing on simple skirts or tube tops, moving quickly to more advanced clothing designs. She also spent a great deal of time early on teaching students how to work the program's six sewing machines safely. Now that she always has a base of students who know how to use sewing machines, she simply offers a brief overview of machine safety and lets older students mentor newer ones.

Early each season, Ms. Martin meets with students from all four grades to decide on a theme for their fashion show at the end of the season. Past themes include the 1960s, the 1970s, Hawaiian wear, patriotism, formal wear, and hip-hop. Ms. Martin reserves veto power; every year she turns down requests for a swimwear show. Once the theme is selected, students gather information about fashions related to the theme. They use the Internet to find articles and scour fashion magazines for pictures; topics such as the 1970s are also a great opportunity for parents to share their experience. For example, one student based her white swingy dress design on a picture of her father in a white outfit like the one John Travolta wore in *Saturday Night Fever*. Ms. Martin also brings in readings, pictures from her personal collection, and her own designs. Research and reading continue throughout the season as students refine their ideas.

Once students have some design ideas, Ms. Martin gives each student a croque, a sketch of the body. Students draw their designs onto the figure, and she gives them feedback. She helps students compose a detailed picture of a fashion design they want to create, determining the proportions, colors, and style. Ms. Martin then brings in fabric she has been acquiring. With her help, students examine the fabric choices and decide which are the most appropriate for their designs. Ms. Martin helps student make or use patterns, measure, and cut their fabric, which they then sew by hand or on a machine. Depending on their design, students might be making buttonholes, sewing zippers, casing elastic, and performing other complex tasks.

The atmosphere is both social and intensely serious. Students work in small groups at their own pace, talking a bit to their friends. Although they have the opportunity to goof off, few do. In fact, students I spoke with said they did not like one student because she was often talking and fooling around, rather than working on her sewing. Student work is almost completely self-directed, in contrast to their teacher-directed work during the school day.

As they create their outfits, students are also planning their fashion show. They choose the music and create the backdrop. Ms. Martin discusses how to model to best show off clothes, and students practice. They then choreograph the entire elaborate production. All students who complete their outfits are in the show, which provides a strong incentive to finish their work. The rare student who does not want to be in the show can work backstage or hand out programs. Finally, students present the show to families, friends, classmates, the principal, and the PTA.

## **Because students are busy enjoying Fabulous Fashions, they do not realize that they are learning valuable academic skills.**

As director of special projects for the Sports & Arts in Schools Foundation, I observed Fabulous Fashions since shortly after its inception. I worked with Ms. Martin to strengthen the program's academic connections and prepared the written curriculum described below. In preparation for this article, I prepared a survey asking participants about their experiences in the program and at school; I also asked about their likes and dislikes, reading habits, school attendance, school discipline problems, self-confidence, expectations, and visions of the future. Most questions could be answered yes or no, although some had space for students to write comments. Twenty-seven students completed the questionnaire. I also conducted two focus groups each with fifth and sixth graders and with seventh and eighth graders. The groups covered most of the topics addressed in the surveys but gave participants the opportunity to expand on their comments. I also conducted individual interviews with several girls. Quotations in this article come from the focus groups and interviews. I talked with Ms. Martin and the site director about program design and attended several fashion shows. After the 1970s show in spring 2004, I went backstage to talk with participants and their parents.

## **Links to Literacy**

Students enjoy participating in Fabulous Fashions and are extremely proud of their work. When I asked stu-



dents in focus groups whether they liked the activity and why, their responses included “It is fun,” “It makes me feel happy,” “I feel different, like nobody else,” and “I feel like I have a special talent.” All 26 students who answered the survey question on whether they enjoyed the class said that they did; all 25 who answered the question agreed that they were proud of themselves for what they had accomplished. Fabulous Fashions has a high rate of re-enrollment; nine of the 27 students surveyed had participated for more than three seasons. As one student said in her interview, “I can’t wait to get school over with so I can get to fashion.”

Because students are busy enjoying Fabulous Fashions, they do not realize that they are learning valuable academic skills. To gather information about their fashion show theme, students must carry out research, which involves reading, analysis, and discussion. They examine historical trends in fashion, learning the circumstances that, for example, led to long or short skirts. When measuring and cutting fabric, students learn that math is not simply hypothetical. When, in focus groups, I pointed out to students that they were engaged in math

and history, they shrugged. Nupur said, “Sort of, but we’re really just learning about fashion.”

Fabulous Fashions also has a written curriculum I designed to enhance academic skills. It consists of 15 lessons that address such topics as the history of fashion in the 20th century, street fashion as observed in the *New York Times*, how fashion changes show the evolution of women’s roles, types of fashion shows, elements of design, marketing and merchandising, and fashion careers. Since the Champions Club tries not to overwhelm students with academics, the teacher and homework tutors implement this curriculum selectively, based on the academic backgrounds and interests of Fabulous Fashion students.

### ***The Arts and Academics***

Many educators, artists, and policymakers argue that training in the arts enhances academic performance. For example, Americans for

the Arts (2002) noted that young people who regularly participated in arts activities were more likely to win awards for academic achievement, attendance, or writing activities; to be elected to a class office; and to participate in a math and science fair than were students who did not participate in the arts. Other studies that found links between arts education and academic performance have assessed low-income students who receive art instruction after school (Brice Heath, 1998), examined low-income students in arts-integrated schools (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999), and assessed standardized test scores of both higher- and lower-income students with high or low levels of exposure to the arts (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). However, some researchers argue against a causal relationship between arts education and academic achievement. Winner and Cooper (2002), for example, explained the correlation by concluding that higher-achieving, more motivated students are drawn to the arts and other extracurricular activities. I do not believe, however, that this is true of Fabulous Fashions, whose participants were typical of students in this high-need school.

### **Fashion Design and Academics**

The arts addressed in these studies included visual arts, drama, dance, and music, but not fashion design. Instead of being classified as an art, fashion design is more likely to be included in the vocational track of studies. Fashion is indeed a vocational subject in that it requires hands-on activity and specialized training that students can apply immediately to jobs after high school. Yet fashion design is also an art. It is similar to the visual arts in that fashion designers must master such visual elements as color theory, perspective, proportion, and design; the result is a personal, creative expression in fabric rather than on paper or canvas. In addition, fashion shows display elements of both dance and drama.

Because of its hybrid nature, fashion's potential for enhancing literacy has been largely unexplored. But the combination of higher-order thinking and visualization skills required by fashion design, coupled with the fact that today's youth particularly value clothing, makes fashion a potent springboard for student learning. Simply put, if fashion design provides students with opportunities to read, write, do math, or learn history, then it is helping to improve students' literacy skills. I have no hard data showing a causal link between fashion and academic performance. I can't say that Fabulous Fashions added an extra five points to participants' grades or improved their test scores. I can say that when the topic was fashion, students indicated that they were receptive to reading, writing, and other traditional literacy activities. In my survey, 89 percent of students said they used problem-solving skills in Fabulous Fashions; 89 percent read fashion magazines sometimes or often. They were interested in learning about the business and financial side of fashion (89 percent) and in learning about the history of fashion (70 percent). For students who told me how much they disliked school and groaned particularly loudly when I mentioned writing, this level of interest was impressive. As one student said in a focus group, "It's more fun to write about what you like—it could be basketball or puppets or fashion, it doesn't matter what." Students will apply themselves to literacy activities in the right context. The trick is to get students to focus on content they are interested in, such as fashion, rather than on a particular academic discipline, such as writing.

### **Why Fabulous Fashions Fosters Learning**

A major reason students will engage in academic activities in the context of fashion is, simply, that they like



fashion. They dress fashionably, watch fashion TV, and talk about fashion. When surveyed, 27 out of 27 participants said they were excited to be in Fabulous Fashions and that they tried to behave well so they could stay in the class. Research on the role of interest and emotion on brain development, on the roles of motivation and self-esteem in learning, and on the importance of alternative sign systems and multiple intelligences

shows why the students' level of interest is crucial to their literacy learning in Fabulous Fashions.

### **Interest, Emotion, and Brain Development**

Interest in a subject leads to active engagement of the brain. Such active engagement, in turn, leads to increased connections among neurons (Wilson & Wilson Horch, 2002). Emotion, too, triggers brain activity. Strong emotional experiences produce strong memories that reinforce related neural pathways (Wolfe & Brandt, 1998; Sylwester, 2000). If a student is interested in fashion or sports, math or history, those are the connections that will be reinforced.

Sensorimotor experiences, in which both senses and motor skills are engaged, increase attention, interest, and emotion, thus improving neural connections (Wilson & Wilson Horch, 2002). Fabulous Fashions provides fully integrated sensorimotor experiences. Students must visualize how their projects will look before they begin to measure fabric; they manipulate materials with their hands; they move around the room from the magazine corner to the sewing machines. This hands-on work appeals to many students; as Sareen noted in a focus group, "In fashion, Ms. Martin shows us how to do work. In school they don't show you, they tell you."

### **Motivation**

Interest in and emotional feelings about an activity lead to increased intrinsic motivation (Graham & Weiner, 1996). Intrinsic motivation means engaging in a task simply because one enjoys it. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is doing something to obtain a reward such as a good grade or parental praise. The problem with extrinsic motivation is that, when rewards are eliminated, students may stop working. Students who are intrinsically motivated continue to work for their own enjoyment.

Most students in Fabulous Fashions are intrinsically motivated. They do not receive grades for their designs. Of the 23 students who explained in my survey their reasons for working hard, only four gave reasons that might be considered extrinsic. The rest gave reasons such as "Because I want to," "To make my stuff better," "So I can learn," and "So I can finish." Margarita said in an interview, "I push myself because I like it."

Creating intrinsic motivation in an afterschool program can be a starting point for developing student initiative to work and to learn in the classroom. "Classroom instructional practices that sustain children's natural curiosity and intrinsic interest in learning no doubt contribute to their perception of learning as something that is enjoyable and nurture their desire to engage in learning tasks in other settings" (Stipek, 1996, p. 96). Through Fabulous Fashions, participants learn that thinking and literacy activities can be enjoyable, so they may approach at least some school-day projects with increased interest and motivation.

### **Students will apply themselves to literacy activities in the right context. The trick is to get students to focus on content they are interested in, such as fashion, rather than on a particular academic discipline, such as writing.**

### **Self-esteem**

Mastering moderately difficult tasks and creating high-quality products lead to feelings of competence and pride among Fabulous Fashions students. Some students in the program had grown accustomed to failure;

many who showed me their report cards were happy that they had failed only one subject. In contrast, students felt successful in Fabulous Fashions. Of 25 children who responded to the survey question, 24 felt they had done a good job in the class. Anyone who attends the fashion show can see that students feel good about themselves, as illustrated in the vignette that opens this article.

Students were proud of the way the clothing they made demonstrated their mastery of fashion design. To determine the quality of their work, students compared it with their expectations, decided whether it looked and hung correctly, determined whether the stitching was correct, and so on. What they did not do was to compare their clothes to those made by other students. This mastery standard for success, as opposed to one where students judge their worth by comparing themselves to others, is linked to positive student achievement (Stipek, 1996).

Despite the importance of a mastery standard, peer recognition also furthers confidence and pride. Many Fabulous Fashion students talked about peer reaction to their fashion show. In focus groups, participants said they sometimes felt like celebrities in school the day after a show. While parents and teachers may have appreciated how hard students worked, their peers were the ones who most appreciated the finished product—the clothes. Fabulous Fashion students were showing peers that they could excel in a category near and dear to middle school students' hearts.

Student pride was reinforced by family reaction. At the fashion show, parents cheered from the minute the first student took the stage to the finale. Afterward, families rushed backstage to praise the students. After the 1970s show, I heard comments that included “I’m proud of you,” “Nice work,” and “You looked like a professional designer.” In the survey, participants said these comments made them feel “proud and pleased,” “even more confident,” “happy I did this work for something,” “like a professional,” and “confident, pretty, and that I should not give up.” Since middle school is a difficult time for children, particularly girls (Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1992), such family reaction is especially critical.

### **Many Literacies, Many Intelligences**

Fashion design can also function as a non-language-based “sign system.” Researchers point out that reading, writing, and other traditional literacy activities are not the only sign systems for knowing about and communicating with the world. Sign systems such as music, math, and art provide different ways to understand the world. Students can use the sign systems with which they are most comfortable to “wiggle” this world so it makes sense to them (Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000). Once students have gained some perspective, they can integrate sign systems, including those most accepted by adult culture, such as language, with those most relevant to them, such as fashion.

Howard Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences helps explain why different sign systems work better for different children. Gardner posits the existence of seven types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. All people possess all seven intelligences, but in different degrees (Gardner, 1983). By engaging many of Gardner’s intelligences, Fabulous Fashions provides entry for students with widely diverging aptitudes. Students with strong logical-mathematical intelligence, who search for patterns and are more comfortable when things are quantified, flourish on the measurements and patterns needed in fashion design. Students with keen spatial intelligence, who see visual images when they close eyes their eyes and like to draw, do well with the visualization and sketching in Fabulous Fashions. Students with strong bodily-kinesthetic intel-

ligence, who need to touch things to learn about them and would rather practice a skill than read about it, thrive on the fact that they have to be out of their seats, manipulating fabric and sewing. Fabulous Fashions helps those students who learn best interpersonally through its social setting and the focus on producing a show collaboratively, yet students who learn best intrapersonally can work alone at their own pace. Finally, Fabulous Fashions calls on participants to bring together all of their multiple intelligences to look at problems in a variety of ways.

### **Clearly, the students were interested in history—if it was presented in a context that interested them and in ways that they could touch and recreate.**

The “realness” or authenticity of fashion to students is key to the impact of Fabulous Fashions. Fashion design is real in that students can wear the clothes they make; it is authentic in that its hands-on training can lead to a specific career, or at least create a pattern of thinking toward the future.

### **Authenticity**

The practical, hands-on nature of fashion design creates strong learning opportunities. John Dewey, the progressive educator, was an early proponent of integrating vocational work with traditional academics.

There is nothing which strikes more oddly upon the average intelligent visitor than to see boys as well as girls of ten, twelve, and thirteen years of age engaged in sewing and weaving. If we look at this from the standpoint of preparation of the boys for sewing on buttons and making patches, we get a narrow and utilitarian concept—a basis that hardly justifies giving prominence to this sort of work in the school. But if we look at it from another side, we find that this work gives the point of departure from which the child can trace and follow the progress of mankind in history, getting an insight also into the materials used and the mechanical principles involved. In connection with these occupations the historic development of man is recapitulated. (Dewey, 1915, p. 14)

Dewey believed that school was too divorced from the reality of students’ lives, but that purely technical training was too limited in a world where jobs rapidly become obsolete. He argued that the skills students need

to thrive in the world are adaptability, ingenuity, creativity, and the like, and that such skills are most likely to arise from a combination of hands-on and theoretical approaches. True vocational education, Dewey wrote, involves a “balance between the intellectual and practical phases of experience” (Dewey, 1915, p. 83).

To achieve this balance, Fabulous Fashions uses sewing as a basis for exploration on the part of students for whom traditional classroom literacy approaches have not worked well. For example, many students told me in focus groups that history was their worst subject, that it was “dumb” and “boring.” Yet after students picked the 1970s theme, they engaged in significant historical research. They visited the Fashion Institute of Technology to view clothes from that era. They visited a designer who makes historical clothing for movies and Broadway shows. Students tried on the clothes and incorporated ideas they encountered into their own fashion projects. They discussed why clothing in the past was different from what people wear today. Clearly, the students were interested in history—if it was presented in a context that interested them and in ways that they could touch and recreate.

### ***Readiness for the Future***

Most students in Fabulous Fashions are thinking about future schools and careers. Twenty-six out of 27 students surveyed had thought about high school, even though the fifth and sixth graders were years away from the prospect. Of these, seven were interested in fashion high schools, and six in arts-related high schools. Participants had also thought beyond high school. Having visited the Fashion Institute of Technology, many hoped to attend there. They



were also aware of other specialized colleges such as Parsons School of Design, Ms. Martin’s alma mater.

In discussing their career plans, 11 students said they plan to be fashion designers and six to be models. Eleven students said they intend to pursue other arts such as dancing, acting, and singing. One student planned to open her own fashion design shop. In fact, she had planned her career down to the details, as she wrote in a paper for one of her school-day classes:

If I had a business I would have a fashion company. It would be named Fashions by Kathy. I really don’t think I will hire more than 14 people to work at my company. Some of the people I hire will be family members because some also want to be fashion designers. My business will be in a very big space where everybody can see it. Also I will design anything you can think of, but it will have to be Kathy’s way or another’s way. I would want to be famous because of what I do and because of my store.

Of course, the careers young people eventually pursue are not necessarily the ones they consider in middle school. The important point is that Fabulous Fashions students are strategizing about and visualizing their future. One of the most important results of Fabulous Fashions may be the fact that 93 percent of participants polled—students who live in a high-crime area and attend a high-need school, students whose parents have generally not attended college and have unfulfilling jobs—felt hopeful about the future. By making academic and career options a part of everyday conversation, Fabulous Fashions provides students with a vision of a successful, productive future.

## Reaching Students

Fabulous Fashions takes a topic that adults might consider “fluff,” but that students value highly, and transforms it into a educational tool. The class fosters critical thinking skills, motivation, self-esteem, and planning for the future in students whom traditional methods have failed to reach. By placing learning in a context that students can see, touch, and enjoy, Fabulous Fashions provides them with greater enthusiasm and capacity for achievement both after and during school.

In our increasingly standards-based world, afterschool programs such as Fabulous Fashions remain havens where children can develop their own interests and strengths, which may not coincide with those valued in school. The trick is to endow such afterschool experiences with meaning: to go beyond the catwalk to use student curiosity, interest, and motivation to cultivate literacy in all of its incarnations. If we equip students with tools to use in a context they enjoy and enable them to feel confident about their abilities, we will both foster their success in traditional academics and allow them to explore their world in personally meaningful ways.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Names of program participants are pseudonyms.

# **embedding seeds** *for better learning*

## Sneaking up on Education in a Youth Gardening Program

by Jrène Rahm and Kenneth Grimes

Tamara is about to plant Swiss chard in a small pot filled with potting soil. She calls out, "I need a ruler." Buddy, who is busily potting his own seeds, asks, "Why do you need a ruler?" Tamara responds, "Because it said half-thirteen millimeter. That's a lot deep!" Tarr, who just finished potting his seeds, has some advice: "Just stick your finger in there and see!" Tamara wondered, "My finger? The first one? Not including my finger nail?"<sup>1</sup>

(field notes, June 1996)

This vignette and others were gleaned from an evaluation project, "Ways of Talking and Thinking about Science in a Garden" (Rahm, 1998; Rahm, 2002), a study of the 4-H Young Entrepreneur Garden Program (4-H YEGP) in Denver, Colorado. As the story shows, planting seeds—an essential activity and component of 4-H YEGP—was new to most of the youth participants. Here, Tamara is learning from one of her peers how to plant without using exact measurements. While Tamara appears puzzled by such an inexact way of working, Tarr has already mastered this common gardening practice. 4-H YEGP intentionally implements a policy that Kenneth Grimes, one of the authors of this article and director of Denver 4-H Programs, calls "sneaking up on education." On the surface, the program seems merely to be a summer job for young adolescents who are too old for day-care but too young for full-time employment. Youth who are on summer vacation have often had their fill of traditional classroom structures and modes of instruction.



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**KENNETH GRIMES** received his master's degree in community education from Colorado State University (CSU). He has been director of 4-H Youth Development Programs for CSU Denver Cooperative Extension since 1994. Cooperative Extension, the outreach arm of the university, is part of the largest outreach education system in the world. His focus is on reaching new audiences, particularly in low-income neighborhoods where access to university curricula and technical assistance is limited. Mr. Grimes also has a background with high-risk youth, having served as education coordinator for New Pride (now Fresh Start), an agency serving felony offenders.

In 4-H YEGP, teaching and science knowledge is embedded in the work participants do. The fact that Tamara was learning not only how to plant seeds but also how to measure most likely escaped her. Embedding learning in meaningful activities and interaction makes it much more motivating than “doing school.”

This article offers a description of an innovative youth program that embeds learning in a practical setting: a gardening program in which youth plant, harvest, and market their own produce. As an outgrowth of the gardening project, participants also interviewed scientists about their jobs in a way that underscored the practical use of science learning. These interviews are one example of the way in which community collaborations came to help define the gardening program. This article will also underline three components of the program that made it a valuable educational context for youth participants: openness to youths’ questions, possibility for ownership, and support of multiple forms of participation. We conclude with a summary of components of best practices as well as challenges the program faces. This article is essentially a synthesis of the observational and interview data Jrène Rahm collected in two individual qualitative case studies of the program in 1996 and 2001 (Rahm, 1998; Rahm & Downey, 2002) together with data drawn from informal conversations with youth and from our involvement in the program, with Jrène Rahm as researcher and Kenneth Grimes as program director.

## Learning through Meaningful Work

What makes 4-H YEGP unique is its emphasis on entrepreneurship, within which science learning is embedded. The program offers youth the chance to develop many work skills. Because they receive a weekly stipend for participating, the young people also learn work ethics such as being on time and taking one’s job seriously. This all gets accomplished as youth rotate among four simple learning themes:

- Nurturing
- Harvesting
- Marketing
- Special projects

Youth 11 to 15 years old rotate through these cycles in teams of six or seven with their adult team leader. Two

volunteer master gardeners step in where needed to support work on these themes. The **nurturing** curriculum centers on plant science and basic gardening skills such as planting. **Harvesting** focuses on when and how to harvest, preparing plants for market, using and calculating weights and measures, how to package products, labeling, industry requirements, and more.

While the program could not exist without nurturing and harvesting activities, **marketing** activities connect the program with the community. As the youth explore what makes a business succeed or fail, they interact with area business owners, restaurateurs, caterers, store owners, gardening supply managers, green industry executives, chefs, and others. They even talk with presidents and vice presidents of banks as they market their products or seek start-up and business funding. One year, after the youth solicited the help of Frontier Airlines, they met the company’s president in his office. He shared

his philosophy of success with them and then gave them four airline tickets to raise additional funds for their business.

**Special projects** offer the most varied means to take the garden into the neighborhood and to bring the neighborhood into the garden. Youth often track their neighborhoods not only to see who lives there but also to determine what businesses, schools, churches, community centers, and industries make up the neighborhood. The entrepreneurs learn the importance of “giving back” by providing garden tours for other youth groups or by teaching preschoolers how to plant seeds. A community garden affiliated with a senior center offers opportunities for the youth to manage a farmer’s market and to conduct oral history projects with the elders. On other occasions, they may decorate the garden, led by community artists. One year, they learned all about Ndebele art. An artist in the neighborhood had been to South Africa and had helped the female artists she visited there to paint their adobe home in their Ndebele tradition. This artist shared what she had learned with the youth, each team doing its part to create garden murals in this distinctive art form.

4-H YEGP is a grassroots program whose goal is to connect community and youth development efforts in ways that empower youth while also helping them build



**The on-the-job education  
“infiltrates” the youth as they do  
what they need to do to tend the  
garden and run their business.**

Willie and the sunflower he grew from seed

meaningful connections with their community. This goal has given the program direction as it has evolved into its current form. 4-H YEGP started as an adult-run garden program in which adults marketed some of their produce to restaurants in the community. A desire to incorporate youth into the program led in 1994 to a pilot project with seven neighborhood children for whom stipends could be found. These seven were the real pioneers, enduring hardships to make it work. The hardships included not only one of the hottest summers on record but also the fact that the program lacked structure in its first year. The following year, more partners were sought to support the program, the number of youth was increased to 20, and the concept of rotating teams helped provide structure. In the second year, program leaders learned more about relating to the community and training team leaders; they also addressed the question of how many participants the garden could reasonably accommodate.

Inner-city youth gardening programs like 4-H YEGP have gained popularity. The Berkeley Youth Alternative, for example, is a youth employment program that teaches landscaping skills. It includes a community garden that offers youth “employment, a safe social scene, and a venue for rethinking their future” (Lawson & McNally, 1995, p. 211). Such initiatives share broad educational goals and are often seen as prevention programs for at-risk youth. Yet what makes them important and unique is best understood by looking at what happens in a given program day by day.

Learning by doing is a hallmark of 4-H YEGP. The on-the-job education “infiltrates” the youth as they do what they need to do to tend the garden and run their business. The youth described below are harvesting salad leaves for a sale at the Denver Black Arts Festival,

which typically sees two hundred thousand participants during a three-day weekend.

Tarr was asked to harvest green salad leaves. After some thought, Christine, a team leader, advised him, “Actually, pull out the Valeria lettuce,” because it was approaching the end of its harvesting season. Will was about to do the same with the Simpson lettuce, but Christine stopped him just in time. “I don’t want you to pull them out. What you have to do is go down [to the root] and then pick out the leaves. I know it is kind of tedious.” Christine demonstrated what she meant and added, “Remember how I told you to pick the whole leaf?” That was important in order for the product to be marketable. Marti, another student, had completed his task with spinach, so Christine asked him to harvest some collard greens: “Let’s do about ten leaves” per plant. Tarr asked about the looks of a salad leaf. Christine reminded him, “You don’t want it jagged.” She picked up a good leaf and held it up for Tarr to see. “You see this one is nice and round all over. You want *that* rather than *this*,” she said as she picked up another leaf, a bad model. She held them both in the air side by side. (field notes, July 1996)

Tara, Will, Marti, and the other youth were excited to be running their own café at the festival. Knowing that their products would be on display before a large public helped them to take ownership when their team leader, Christine, provided instruction. Here, they were learning to differentiate kinds of lettuces and to judge the appropriateness of leaves for sale at an important market for the business. As she showed them how to harvest salad leaves, Christine was also demonstrating quality control and teaching science. That some plants



Daniel and Marti displaying their zucchini

continue to produce if left in the ground was clearly news to Tarr and Will. An innocent near-mistake gave Christine an opportunity to explain why some greens have only one harvesting cycle while others keep producing—a lesson in plant identification and differentiation. Because the learning emerged from their work rather than being an end in itself, the youth embraced the attention to detail this learning required; they saw that this care would show in the products they presented to the public.

### Science Learning beyond the Garden

Youth programs' broadly defined educational goals often yield learning environments that truly matter to youth (Heath, 2001; Schable, Beane, Coates, Martin, & Sterling, 1996). In 4-H YEGP, new learning environments also often emerged through community collaborations. For instance, in the summer of 2001, the financial support of the University of Northern Colorado enabled Jrène Rahm to work with a group of seven young peo-

ple to conduct oral histories of scientists in the community. These students, who were in the garden for their second summer, volunteered for this project.

Rahm's initial study made it clear that the world of scientists was inaccessible to the youth. When we spent our first meeting brainstorming about the kinds of scientists to contact, the youth said they wanted to meet scientists "who freeze bodies, look at brains," develop "robots" or are involved in "breeding animals" and can "talk about genes and cloning." That is, their interests were driven by images of scientists and science from movies and current news.

Our next step was to develop questions for the interviews, including:

- What are some positive and negative things about what you study?
- Did you enjoy science in school?
- Do you have children, and, if so, would you like them to be scientists?
- What would you do if there were no science?

The youth decided to conduct the interviews collaboratively, each asking at least one question.

### Learning about Science

Once we were actually in the scientists' workplaces, most interviews turned into friendly conversations, so that the youth could insert spontaneous questions on topics of specific interest. For instance, in the laboratory of Susan, an atmospheric scientist, a nitrogen bottle that was ejecting steam immediately led the youth to ask, "What's that?"

*Susan:* Well, that's a good question. This is a big tank that has liquid nitrogen in it, and we had just taken some out of here. And liquid nitrogen is extremely cold, it's the coldest liquid you can find. And so, it's minus 195 centigrade. I am not sure what that is in Fahrenheit, but really cold.

**Michael:** What's all the ice on the pipe up there?

**Susan:** Well, what this is, this is normally a brass pipe, but what happens here is because this is so cold, the moisture that's in the air condenses on this right away. It's like, if you have a glass and you put ice in it and you put water in it and it's real humid outside, after a while you get water on the glass, on the outside of the glass. The same process is happening here: It's just really cold and the water just condenses on it because it is so cold. So that's why it's white like that. Normally, the pipe, I don't wanna touch it because it is really cold, but normally it would be like this pipe. [Points to another pipe] It's just water that's condensed outside.

**Troy:** .... If you would stick your finger in it, can it kill you?

**Susan:** [giggles] If you would stick your finger in it, you would probably freeze yourself. It's extremely cold. (video transcript, August 4, 2000)

The young people learned about the chemicals Susan works with in a concrete way. In response to their observation of the ice on the pipe, Susan explained the coldness of liquid nitrogen. Then she gave a physical demonstration, pouring some of the nitrogen on the floor without touching it. The youths' continuing interest in her lab gave Susan the opportunity to give them more scientific information; she explained that atmospheric scientists use liquid nitrogen to freeze air samples collected from the outer stratosphere in metal bottles. The air samples are frozen on slides that Susan can examine under a microscope. Reinforcing the lesson, she took the youth to a back room to show them the "bathtub" she and her co-workers had constructed for cleaning air-sample bottles.

### **Learning about the World of Work**

All the scientists shared their passion for the work they were involved in and emphasized the value of scientific literacy. For example, George, a geologist, gave the following reply to the question, "How does it feel to be a scientist?"

Well, that is a hard question. I think the word *scientist* is an extremely large word. It covers a lot of ground. But I think the biggest feeling you have is the ability to understand what people are doing and why they're doing it. And I would not understand all the makings of an atomic bomb, for instance, but a physicist would understand. But I can read about it, keep up with the field, and know what's going on all the time. (video transcript, July 12, 2000)

All the scientists demonstrated their fascination with science while being realistic about the demands of their profession. Susan, the atmospheric chemist, noted that she often worked nine hours a day, even longer when in the field. Carl, a horticulturist, shared that he had struggled with parts of his education: "When I studied organic chemistry and biochemistry and all that stuff, it wasn't really thrilling to me, but I knew I had to do it to get where I wanted to get."

Conducting the oral histories created opportunities for the youth to reflect on and revise long-held notions of science, as shown in the following exchange about our visit with George:

**Tracer:** I used to think that geologists had a boring job but he made it seem fun. If you make it fun and stuff like that... And he says whatever you get into, make sure you enjoy the stuff. You don't go do a job every—five days a week, basically for the rest of your life, in case you don't get fired.

**Cianna:** My mom doesn't enjoy her job.

**Tracer:** Yes, that's the point. And she comes home, she comes home depressed and everything, doesn't she? (video transcript, July 21, 2000)

Interestingly, the scientists' passion for their work left the youth with the notion that work can be more than work, that it can be something one can enjoy. Thus, conducting the oral histories had pedagogical implications well beyond the science concepts the youth learned.

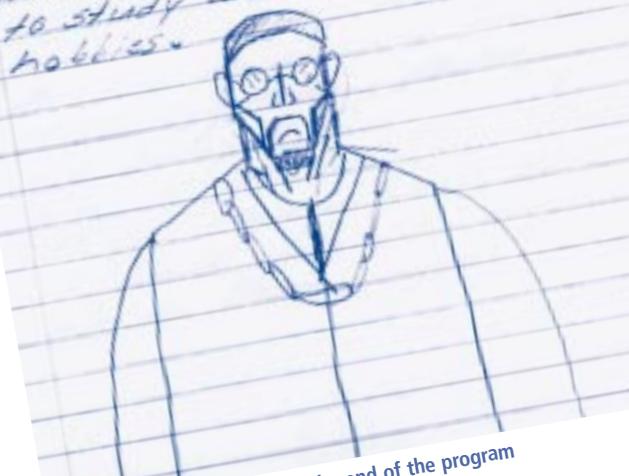
That these visits mattered to the youth is apparent from their reactions in interviews and journals:

I thought science was dumb until I learned I was doing it. (student journal, August 2000)

I liked how we got to have people tell us, instead of us having to look at a textbook... and I enjoyed the fact that we got to meet them, that we got to visit them and look at things that we haven't even known existed. (interview, August 2000)

Three of the seven youth who participated in the oral history project took steps to enter college in science-related fields. The extent to which the project led them to develop an interest in science or to confirm a prior interest is difficult to determine without a longitudinal study, but it is clear that this special project benefited the youth who participated.

The way I can describe a scientist is a regular person with a lot of knowledge of what they study. Some characteristics of a scientist are that it is someone is a person with a social life, etc to study and have different hobbies.



A student journal entry from the end of the program

The scientists' passion for their work left the youth with the notion that work can be more than work, that it can be something one can enjoy.

**Marc:** Actually, they do play a good part in the ecology. They are food for other animals like birds and other insects. And they also help break down old plant material and things like that.

**Will:** What do they eat?

**Marc:** Flies themselves probably don't eat much of anything. But their larvae, the maggots, get into all kind of decaying material and it will decay faster. You can find maggots in the compost piles.

**Will:** Are we gonna make a compost?

**Marc:** Yes, everybody is gonna take a part in it.

**Will:** I did compost but I didn't see any maggots.

**Marc:** Actually, most of the time you won't see them much; they hide in places where nobody can see them like on the edge of the pile and stuff.

(video transcript, June 26, 1996)

## Components That Facilitate Learning

In 1998, the National Youth Entrepreneur Symposium recognized 4-H YEGP for its unique blend of workforce preparation and education. The award further recognized the program for providing a variety of learning opportunities connected to gardening and entrepreneurship, as well as occasions for these mostly inner-city youth to expand their horizons. What makes this award-winning program work? A variety of factors contribute, including taking all questions seriously, promoting participant ownership of the work and learning, and permitting multiple forms of participation that meet the individual student's needs.

### Taking All Questions Seriously

Analysis of talk about science in 4-H YEGP revealed that—in contrast to what frequently happens in school—the youth were in charge of posing questions. The youth's active questioning not only showed their interest in the program but also led to unintended opportunities for science learning (Rahm, 2002). Take, for instance, the following dialogue about flies between a student and a master gardener:

**Will:** What are flies really good for?

**Marc:** Flies? Well, they pollinate some flowers for us. They teach us patience....[giggle] What else can I think of?

**Will:** They get on people's nerves!

Will's initial question elicits two answers from Marc that impart scientific knowledge about flies. A follow-up question gives Marc the opportunity to present another fact about flies and to link this learning to gardening with the comment about maggots in compost piles. Will's next question is specifically about program activities, which Marc answers on the same level. Then Will's comment about his observation of the compost gives Marc another opportunity to link scientific fact to the hands-on work Will and his peers are doing. In the structure of 4-H YEGP, having master gardeners work next to the youth facilitated discussion of such complex ideas. This entire dialogue came out of a simple complaint—in the form of a question—about flies. That such questions were taken seriously not only provided learning opportunities but also helped youth take ownership of the program.

### The Importance of Ownership

Besides allowing youth to help direct their own learning, 4-H YEGP also encouraged ownership by providing them with individual gardening plots. Jrène Rahm's (1998) study showed that youth came to "adopt" the seeds they planted. The next logical step for the following year was to assign each young person an individual plot. Before, plants were considered part of the business; now, the garden held both business plots and personal plots in which

each participant could choose what to plant. Personalizing their responsibility for plants provided an opportunity to teach more gardening skills; the individual plots became an incentive to spend extra time in the garden after program hours. More time in the garden brought more questions, which program staff could answer in more depth.

In some instances, the individual plots even became an incentive to return to the program in subsequent years. For instance, Miles said in an informal conversation in the garden, "I really wanted to plant a melon, see how a melon grows, and so I could do that. It made it worth it for me to come back." He then displayed his garden plot, which contained a watermelon plant with many blossoms. He recalled that he "had a melon growing which was about the size of a grape, but, unfortunately, it fell off." Miles was planning to come back after the program was over to check on his melons, especially since his whole family liked melon.

Miles also noticed that the flowers in his plot weren't growing as well as they had the previous year because someone had put too much water on them. Another youth, who had better luck with her flowers, was ready to trade flowers for a watermelon. So Miles was ready to try a new skill: "Maybe I am even gonna try to transplant some of her flowers into my plot." Miles's ownership of his own plot not only taught him increased responsibility but also encouraged him to work collaboratively with his peers.

### ***Supporting Multiple Forms of Participation***

Though 4-H YEGP has an unprecedented return rate, some young people have struggled to become fully integrated members. Working outside in the hot sun is not easy. 4-H YEGP supports youth both by providing many different avenues for participation and by articulating a strong expectation that the youth must take responsibility for their work.

Marti's story illustrates the importance of this support. Marti's application form read: "I'm interested in working because I want to be a responsible person and this is a good way to start. I enjoy meeting people. I am also willing to learn." Once in the program, however, Marti never volunteered for an activity, never asked questions, and never wrote anything in his notebook or journal. When put to task, he put most of his effort into looking busy. In an interview Marti shared that he hated science and had failed science in school. Judging from the assortment of T-shirts he wore, which marketed various remedial education programs, one could see why Marti might not have much faith 4-H YEGP, miscon-

struing it as yet another remedial science program like the ones he had experienced before.

Over the eight weeks of the program, however, he realized that resistance was not an option. Instead, participants were responsible for making their experience work. Program leaders underline that the garden is the youths' business, so that participant should put their best effort into everything they put their name on. Only in the last two weeks did Marti come around, as the culmination of a gradual process. When asked why he changed, he said, "When I started getting, like, 30 dollars." When asked whether it was the money that made the difference, he added, "Yeah, but also other stuff, like working on the compost, working in the garden, getting more involved." Somehow, Marti was able to see the value of gardening and learning to participate, as one team leader summarized:

You know, it felt like Marti was coming out of his shell and, from inside my group, what I was noticing was Marti was, like, talking to everyone and he was really into, like, the art thing. I mean the art thing was cool to him. You know, he could do it, and, like, the next thing I noticed, like, we were resetting the stone path, he's resetting the stones, he's being more assertive, like the rest of the group is not working but he is resetting the stones. I think he really changed. (interview, August 20, 1996)

Marti's identity change was brought about by many factors: the kinds of activities the program provided, the team concept the program promoted, and the multiple forms of participation, such as the art project, that the program made available. His case demonstrates that failure to participate is not necessarily an end; it can also be a means for further development, if the program supports it. Marti ended up participating in the program for five consecutive summers, most recently as a team leader at the same time that he held a job at a local fast-food chain. He now says, "I have lots of experiences in weeding and watering, working in the garden. I know the names of plants now, even some scientific names." The program has also affected Marti's ways of acting in the community: "I am a better person, I have more friends and I talk a lot more to people." Participation led Marti to think of himself "as very positive and outgoing, and [as] having friends." Marti's mother noted, "The program became like an additional family to him, a place that helped him grow up and support him in ways I couldn't." Marti is currently attending a local community college and is still in touch with the program. The program helped Marti "grow up" in his attitude toward work and toward other people.

## **Lessons Learned**

These stories not only show what happened in 4-H YEGP but also underline the wide variety of learning opportunities typical of afterschool and community programs (Delgado, 2002; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Though we have specifically drawn out only a few of the best practices typical of community-based afterschool programs in this article, 4-H YEGP exemplified many components that support and enable youth development; see the box on this page.

If, as we hope, this description inspires other community-based organizations to adopt similar practices, such organizations should be aware of some of the challenges 4-H YEGP faced. A primary consideration must be the development of shared expectations, values, and goals among youth, staff, and community members. 4-H YEGP managed this process by training youth and staff, but it remained a challenge. A similarly important challenge is assessing long-term effects of program participation. Interviews with the youth made it clear that the young people perceived the science of gardening to be very different from school science. It would be interesting to know whether youth ever applied what they learned about science from the program in school or elsewhere, as well as what impact the program might have on youths' everyday life and future aspirations.

Furthermore, gardening is not for everyone. According to the program director, though boys are initially more reluctant to participate than girls, boys were more likely to return to the program. Once in the garden, boys and girls need to be given equal opportunities to participate, despite any unconsciously held gendered notions of physical work and gardening, such as that girls plant flowers while boys dig in dirt. Finally, program leaders must remember that what matters is not the herbs and

## **BEST PRACTICES**

### **in the 4-H Young Entrepreneur Garden Program**

- Questions are encouraged, and people are available to facilitate the discovery of answers.
- Community involvement is initiated from the beginning of the program. Community members who were involved in 4-H YEGP included researchers, community organizations, educational institutions, and families.
- A collaborative framework is instituted to promote the value of working together for mutual benefit.
- Youth and community are viewed as assets.
- Youth voices are as valued and respected as are adult voices.
- Program structure allows for flexibility within well-defined borders.
- Training of adults and youth encourages everyone to share the same expectations, values, and goals.
- Learning is grounded in experiential activities and in the needs and interests of participants.
- Openness to new or unorthodox ideas recognizes that such ideas can bring opportunity.
- Improvement comes from looking back at what worked and what didn't. Input from participants is vital for making improvements.
- Program leaders do not give up on youth, even when they are reluctant to participate at first.
- Programs "sneak up" on learning, conducting education in non-traditional ways that do not evoke negative reactions from learners.

vegetables but the youths' participation. For instance, in 4-H YEGP, some participants engaged in rather sophisticated conversations about subjects that mattered to

them such as sexual identity and racism (Rahm & Tracy, 2003). Though these conversations were not “on topic” and were not always appreciated by team leaders, they were certainly crucial for youth development (Delgado, 2002).

The rewards of negotiating these and other challenges can include positive outcomes for participants, as this paper has illustrated. Yet the rewards are not the only reason to undertake a program such as the one described here. The process itself is worthwhile: Youth and adults alike consider learning in 4-H YEGP to be an ongoing adventure.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this vignette, as in all others, names of participants have been changed. Quotations reflect the actual words participants used.

# *“Doing Hair” and Literacy*

in an Afterschool Reading and Writing Workshop for African-American Adolescent Girls

by Daneell Edwards

The term “doing hair” is utterly familiar. However, while the term can refer to simple acts of combing, brushing, washing, and styling hair, in the culture of adolescent African-American girls, doing hair is a social practice that represents power, creativity, and sometimes popularity.

This article describes a three-month afterschool reading and writing workshop for African-American adolescent girls that focused on doing hair. The workshop, which I facilitated as part of the research study described below, had four main objectives:

- To provide African-American adolescent girls with the opportunity to talk, read, and write about a cultural topic that is typically not sanctioned in school
- To promote critical thinking by inviting the girls to examine why hair matters to them and to view hair from cultural, historical, and socio-political perspectives
- To encourage the girls to reflect on their reading and writing experiences about hair
- To give the girls an opportunity to share their knowledge with others

In the process of meeting these goals, the workshop provided participants with the opportunity to engage in literacy activities centered around a topic near and dear to their hearts. When allowed, at least partially, to direct their own reading and writing around a topic that mattered to them, the girls showed clear interest and engagement in such activities, to an extent that suggests



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that school educators, community members, and after-school providers would do well to acknowledge the interest of African-American girls in doing hair.

## Why Hair Matters

Why is hair so important to African-American women and girls? According to Banks (2000), scholars relate the importance of doing hair to its connections to “Africa, construction of race, enslavement, skin color, self esteem, ritual, esthetics, appropriate grooming practices, images of beauty, politics, identity, and the intersection of race and gender” (p. 7). Some African-American women associate doing hair with cherished rituals (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; hooks, 2001; Rooks, 1996). For example, cultural critic bell hooks (2001) states that hair pressing, a process for straightening hair, was a ritual in African-American women’s culture in the period before the civil rights movement. She says that “pressing hair [was] not a sign of [Black girls’] longing to be White...[or their] quest to be beautiful... It was a sign of [their] desire to be women” (p. 111). She describes this rite as “an exclusive moment when Black women (even those who did not know one another well) might meet at home or in the beauty parlor to talk with one another, to listen to the talk” (p. 111).

For others, African-American hair practices are significant because they are ways to contest “mainstream notions of beauty” (Banks, 2000, p. 28). The popularity of the Afro in the 1960s was a political statement that represented authenticity and pride in the African-American community (Rooks, 1996). In the 1980s, Black women in corporate America adopted cornrows and braids, traditionally worn by young children, to signify their African cultural heritage (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

While African-American adolescents in the 21st century may not identify with hair pressing as a ritual, many understand the social aspects of doing hair that bell hooks addresses: Doing hair allows them to bond with their friends by talking and listening to each other. While contemporary African-American girls may not view hair as a political statement as some did during the civil rights era, they understand the power of using hair “to express themselves” (Ferrell, 1999).

Though their peers often admire and respect this creative expression, African-American girls’ interest in

hair is rarely embraced in school or supported in out-of-school settings. Lisa Delpit (2002), a prominent African-American educator, argues that some African-American children are not motivated to learn because materials presented to them do not connect to their own interests. What would it look like if an afterschool program embedded literacy in a cultural practice that matters to many African-American adolescent girls?

## Situating Literacy in a Meaningful Cultural Practice

I conducted my study of a reading and workshop focused on hair in a community center located in a predominantly poor working-class African-American neighborhood in inner-city Nashville. Over a thousand neighborhood residents have been served by the center, which provides educational programs, arts and crafts, games, and athletic programs for young people.

## Workshop Participants

Two months before the workshop began, I attended a parent open house at the community center and two regular meetings with community leaders to solicit assistance in recruiting adolescent girls. I distributed colorful brochures describing the workshop and its benefits. In selecting participants, one of my main objectives was to choose girls who loved reading and writing. My second criterion was that they be interested in learning about hair. My first group of six girls, ages 13 and 14, expressed to me their love of reading and writing—which, as I will discuss below, turned out to be exaggerated—and their interest in hair.

Ultimately, 10 African-American adolescent girls, ages 12 to 16, participated in the workshop sessions; five of these participated regularly. The one-hour sessions took place on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the community center’s conference room. Most of the girls regularly attended afterschool programs at the community center before the project began. Most attended a public school close to the community center; eight were in middle school and two in high school. Over half said in interviews that they had scored below average in the reading component of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test and were therefore required to take a remedial literacy course.

The five regular participants chose their own pseudonyms and frequently used them during workshop sessions. Shanika and Sheteria, 13-year-old seventh graders, were in the same science class and ate lunch together every day at school. Mia, a 12-year-old sixth grader in the same middle school, joined after the fourth workshop session. All three had started attending the community center afterschool program six months earlier. Sheteria told me that her mother had begun to punish her for visiting the community center daily, so she decided to come only on Tuesdays and Thursdays so that she could participate in the workshop. Aquanisha, a 15-year-old ninth grader, originally told me she was 14 years old because she thought she would not be able to participate if I knew her actual age.

The oldest participant was Montrice, who was 16 and in the eleventh grade. I met Montrice in summer 2003, when I volunteered to facilitate a dramatic play at the community center. Montrice was not a participant in the play but occasionally assisted me with the younger kids. She seldom spoke more than a few words to me. Therefore, I was surprised when she asked, after the fourth session, if she could attend the hair workshop. I told her supervisor in the community center's Youth at Work program that Montrice wanted to participate. The supervisor responded, "Montrice? You mean Montrice Apple? Are you sure Montrice wants to join?" I assured her that, yes, we were talking about the same Montrice. The supervisor later mentioned how pleased she was that Montrice had chosen to be a part of the study. Initially Montrice was to serve as my assistant, as she had during the summer, but she soon decided to be a full participant with the other girls, limiting the assistant role to occasional help with setting up and storing the camcorder and other equipment.

### **Data Collection**

In this research study, I collected data on participants over an academic semester, a three-month period in spring 2004. Methods included observations of participants, field notes, journal entries composed by the participants, audiotapes of interviews with the girls, and videotapes of all components of the workshop.

### **Workshop Components**

The reading and writing workshop included the components of a "focus unit" (Moss, 1995) with modifications to meet my four objectives. A focus unit "is a series of literary experiences organized around a central focus (a literary theme, genre, author, topic, or narrative element or device)" (Moss, 1995, p. 53). In the original design of the reading and writing workshop, the focus unit consisted of four components:

- A read-aloud experience
- Self-selected literary experiences
- Journal writing
- Creation of an original text

As will be seen below, over time, participants modified parts of this design to match their own interests.

In early workshop sessions, the first 30 minutes were

set aside for reading aloud followed by group discussion. Most of the passages I read to the girls came from *Tenderheaded: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories* (Harris & Johnson, 2001), a book of poems, stories, comics, and folktales about hair. The purpose of the read-aloud experience was to model fluent reading and to encourage the girls to relate the text to their lived experiences, to question the authors' stances, and to stretch their thinking.

After the read-aloud experience, approximately 15 minutes

were designated for independent or buddy reading. The girls generally chose picture books, chapter books, and colorfully illustrated nonfiction books about hair care. They rarely selected the nonfiction books that emphasized the historical, social, cultural, and political aspects of Black hair because, as two girls told me, these books had "over ten chapters" and no illustrations.

For the journal-writing component, I gave each girl a decorated notebook in which she could respond to questions and ideas from the previous components. This component was included to help the adolescents reflect on their workshop experiences. The amount of time set aside for journal writing varied from session to session; the girls also had the opportunity to write during the first two components and during the last fifteen minutes of each session. Toward the end of each session, the girls typically read their journal entries to the group.

The final component of the focus unit was designed to allow the adolescents to share their knowledge with others. The original text the girls chose to create was a commercial set in a beauty shop, which served to inform others about what they had learned in their rich discussions about hair. The girls brainstormed and exchanged ideas, wrote their lines, and rehearsed in the last four workshop sessions. The girls presented their commercial on the last day of the workshop, named "Thank-You Day" by one of the girls to let me, as facilitator, know that she appreciated her three-month experience.

In planning this reading and writing workshop, I selected a thematic topic that was meaningful and inviting to adolescent girls. Building on the works of such writers as Alvermann, Young, Green, and Wisenbaker (1999), Delpit (2002), Lee (1993), and Mahiri (1998), I developed a literacy program designed to legitimize participants' cultural practices. One of the reasons African-American girls love doing hair is that it provides them social control. I tried to mirror this principle in designing the workshop, so that most components allowed the girls to share control with me. The one component I controlled almost exclusively, the read-aloud experience, changed over time as I learned more about the girls' motivations for participating in the workshop and their ways of doing literacy.

### Tapping into Participants' Motivations

In group discussions and interviews, workshop participants gave explicit and implicit reasons for participating in this voluntary activity. The fact that the workshop was designed to feed into these motivations helped ensure that the girls remained with the workshop long enough to benefit from it.

### To Do Hair

As I expected, most of the girls' initial motivation for participating in the workshop was their interest in hair.



In informal conversations and interviews, the girls said that they had envisioned the workshop as similar to cosmetology school; they expected to learn to do a variety of hairstyles on mannequins and be graded on their performance. Starting with the fifth session, I included a mannequin with real hair in the workshop. The mannequin came with the name "Miss Jenny" written on its neck. Montrice told the girls that this was the name of the hair, not of the mannequin. After an intense voting session, the girls agreed to name the mannequin Tia Lafred. In the following session, they proudly expanded the name to Princessa Tia Lafred. As this naming process shows, the girls adopted the mannequin as their mascot. They rarely argued over who would have access to a book, but I often saw them negotiating over who would style Princessa's hair and for how long.

The environment sometimes resembled a beauty shop filled with books. For example, in the seventh session, the girls replaced my read-aloud experience with round-robin style reading, with each girl reading aloud one chapter of *Junie B. Jones Is a Beauty Shop Guy* (Park, 1998). As they took turns reading, they co-constructed the conference room into a beauty shop. Mia braided Princessa's hair, stopping only to read aloud her self-assigned chapter. Girls who were not reading from the book were styling each other's hair. As the two copies of the book circulated among the girls, so did the girls' roles in the workshop, as they served as readers, hairstylists, clients, fashion critics, talkers, and listeners.

### To Learn

When I asked the girls why they came to the workshop sessions, two said, "to learn." Aquanesha stated in an interview that she came because she wanted to learn how to do hair. When I asked some participants to write in their journals about what they had learned in the

workshop, Aquanesha wrote that she learned about how her hair is different from white people's hair. Montrice responded that she attended the workshop to become "culturistic." When one of the girls asked her to clarify, she stated, "to get to know more about our culture." Similarly, Mia said that she attended the workshop to learn about "Black people."

Although I repeatedly used the term *workshop*, the girls consistently referred to the workshop as *class*. They regarded me as the teacher of this class; in the beginning, they seldom said my name but simply called me "the teacher." Later, more of them began calling me "Ms. Daneell" as well as "the hair teacher." This notion of each workshop as class and me as the teacher suggests that learning is one reason the girls came to the workshop. However, my observations suggest that reading and writing were not the main reasons the girls continued to participate. Although they read and wrote in every workshop session, most of the girls would not reach for a book until I said something like "Break off and get a book" or "It's time to read." In "class," reading was an assignment initiated by "the teacher."

### **To "Carve Out Free Spaces"**

Elaine Richardson (2003) argues that African American literacies are "created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as the classroom" (p. 76). The girls invoked such agency in our workshop sessions by producing a "class" centered around their interests and needs. For instance, they created space to talk about topics that interested them, including some that were unrelated to hair, such as methods of birth control and their relationships with boys.

They also expected answers to questions that they were unable to obtain in other institutional spaces. In doing so, they found ways to carve out free spaces. For example, I overheard Shanika telling a group of girls that the movie *Bring It On* left her with a question, which she whispered to the group: "What's an uber-dyke?" When Shanika found that her peers didn't know, she told me she had a question, and the following exchange (video-tape, April 6, 2004) ensued.

*Shanika:* (Looking directly at me) I be tryin' to express my feelings and I can't expr.... Like, this is a hair class, right, and it ain't but like all girls in here.

*Aquanesha:* Boys be in here too.

*Shanika:* And you being an older lady. Not trying to say you old. You just look like...

*Montrice:* (Quickly turning to address me) That mean you should shut the door.

*Mia:* /She's an elder in here/

*Montrice:* Because her questions be like... (raised left hand with spread fingers to the left side of face) Ah.

*Shanika:* Nah, I'm not for that today because she's a hair teacher. I asked my teen living teacher and she looked at me and she said get out of her classroom. (Montrice laughs.) But she a teen living teacher, though. And she should answer my question.

*Mia:* (Looking at me) What's a ouva-dyke?

*Shanika:* Girl, you loud. We gon' get put out.

*Montrice:* I told her to shut the door, and she didn't want to shut the door.

**It became clear in the course of  
the workshop that the girls'  
attitude toward reading  
depended in large part on the  
kind of reading in which they  
engaged—not only the texts  
they chose, but also the format  
for the reading.**

Shanika prefacing her question by letting me know that she attempts to express her feelings without success. Though she does not mention the social context or institutional space that keeps her from expressing herself, she does immediately refer to the "hair class" as a space that may allow her to ask her question and have it answered. Montrice aids Shanika in carving this space by telling me to shut the door. The need to physically separate their free space from the influence of those who have the authority to silence them is evident in Shanika's retort to Mia, "We gon' get put out."

In carving out free spaces, the girls created, in some cases, an adolescent-directed "class." Montrice directed me, the adult facilitator, to shut the door and later expressed her disappointment that I did not obey her orders. In other incidents, the girls commanded their peers to answer their questions, to listen to them, and even to leave the room if one of them acted or spoke inappropriately according to their implicit rules. Sheteria suggested to me that if a girl missed a certain number of classes, then she should be barred from participating in the study. The girls also changed the format of the read-aloud component during the course of the workshop, as discussed below.

## Attitudes toward Reading

Though all the girls expressed their love for reading and writing during the recruitment process, these initial responses were different from their responses during interviews and informal talks after the workshop began. It became clear in the course of the workshop that the girls' attitude toward reading depended in large part on the kind of reading in which they engaged—not only the texts they chose, but also the format for the reading. As the workshop format gradually changed in response to their preferences, I saw that the girls actually had a relatively positive attitude toward reading.

### Expressed Attitudes

"I just don't like reading. I have to be honest; I hate it." Sheterica's earnest response to my interview question was echoed by many of her peers. Sheterica, Aquanesha, and Shatara (a participant who attended a few of the workshop sessions) all viewed reading as a boring, laborious activity that involved trudging through lots of small print. Even participants who professed to enjoy reading typically regarded it as an assignment, certainly not a top priority. Shanika, who said that she liked "everything about reading," also said that she would choose talking with friends or watching a wrestling match on television over reading a book. Through interviews and observations in the workshop sessions, I learned that less than half of the girls actually liked to read. Most liked to talk, and all loved to do hair.

"I'm perfectly fine with [reading]." Careful analyses of the reading logs, interview transcripts, and field notes show that many of the girls were, as Montrice expressed, "perfectly fine" with reading particular texts, particularly in a social context. During the self-selected literary component of the third workshop session, I told the three girls participating that day that they had the option to

write on poster paper posted on the wall, write in journals, or read. Sheterica and Aquanesha began writing on the poster paper, while Shanika began to read *Kids Talk Hair: An Instruction Book for Grown-ups and Kids* (Ferrell, 1999), a hair-care book filled with colorful illustrations of hairstyles. When she read a passage about the harm chemicals can do to hair, she stopped reading to warn the other two girls about the effects of chemical relaxers.

She commanded Sheterica to read that portion in the book. Sheterica stopped writing to read the few sentences aloud, ending with, "and that's not cool." Shanika corrected her: "cute, not cool," and Sheterica laughed at her miscue. Shanika then began reading excerpts of the book to both of the other girls, frequently stopping to make comments. Sheterica also voluntarily read sections aloud. When they finished that book, Sheterica and Aquanesha reached for other hair-care books and began reading both silently and aloud. The girls talked about the pictures in the texts and related passages to cartoon characters, neighbors, friends, and themselves. The girls collectively read from seven books in that session. This incident showed that the girls were "perfectly fine" with reading when they could read together at their leisure and discuss texts from their own perspective. There were many other sessions in which the

girls read aloud to each other and talked about texts, particularly when I, as facilitator, phased out of the group.



### Reading Practices That Engage Adolescent Girls

Changes gradually developed in the read-aloud component of the workshop as I learned more about the girls' attitudes and perceptions about reading. In the first workshop sessions, as I read aloud, most of the girls were engaging in surreptitious talk rather than showing signs of engagement such as leaning forward in their seats. I

# RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON HAIR

## Picture or Literature Books

- DeJoie, P. (1997). *My hair is beautiful . . . because it's mine*. Berkeley, CA: Group West.
- Deveaux, A. (1987). *An enchanted hair tale*. New York: HarperTrophy.
- Grimes, N. (1997). *Wild, wild hair*. New York: Scholastic.
- Herron, C. (1997) *Nappy hair*. New York: Dragonfly Books.
- hooks, b. (1999). *Happy to be nappy*. New York: Hyperion Books.
- Tarpley, N. A. (1998). *I love my hair*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Yarbrough, C. (1979). *Cornrows*. New York: Putnam & Grosset.

## Books on Hair Care and Maintenance

- Bonner, L. B. (1990). *Good hair: For colored girls who've considered weaves when the chemicals became too ruff*. Oakland, CA: Sapphire Publications.
- Collison, M. N-K. (2002). *It's all good hair: The guide to styling and grooming Black children's hair*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ferrell, P. (1999). *Kids talk hair: An instruction book for grown-ups & kids*. Washington: Cornrows & Co.
- Ferrell, P. (1996). *Let's talk hair: Every Black woman's personal consultation for healthy growing hair*. Washington: Cornrows & Co.
- Fletcher, B. (2000). *Why are Black women losing their hair?* Seat Pleasant, MD: Unity Publishers.

## Young Adult Nonfiction

- Banks, I. (1999). *Hair matters: Beauty, power, and Black women's consciousness*. New York: New York Press.
- Bryd, A. (2001). *Hair story: Untangling the roots of Black hair in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Rooks, N. (1996). *Hair raising: Beauty, culture, and African American women*. Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

was surprised, because my former elementary and middle school students had often enjoyed my read-alouds.

Having observed that talking was a more popular activity than reading, I began the third session by asking the girls to share what they wanted to know about hair. In response to one of their questions, I read a short folktale on why African-American hair texture is typically different from that of Caucasian and Asian people. Though the girls were more receptive to the read-aloud, they did not engage in deep discussion. So then in the fourth session, I not only gave the girls the opportunity to talk in the beginning of the workshop but also initiated shared reading. The girls formed a circle and chorally read the lyrics to the song "Straight and Nappy: Good and Bad Hair," written by Bill Lee (1988) for Spike Lee's movie, *School Daze*. The girls were highly engaged in this activity.

Though the girls appeared to enjoy choral reading, the type of reading they initiated on their own was round-robin reading, with each girl taking a turn reading aloud to the group. Round-robin reading has been cast unfavorably in literacy research (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998), but the girls had distinct reasons for favoring this format. All the girls, even those who said they hated to read, stated that they liked to read out loud. A number of them admitted that they like the way they sound when they read and like to have others listen to them. The girls sought to take center stage (Goffman, 1959) and to perform for each other, even if they did not read fluently.

Besides offering a chance to perform, round-robin reading is also a social activity. When I asked in a focus group whether the girls liked to have adults read to them, several said they did. Sheteria and Aquanesha said, since adults read faster than young people, they can get through the book more quickly when an adult reads aloud. So I then asked them why they hadn't invited me to join when the group read the Junie B. Jones book in the seventh session. The girls emphatically replied that the book was "foul," very good, so that they wanted to read it. Sheteria said that they had created "a line" that they didn't want broken. A line can be a link; the round-robin reading allowed the girls to form a social connection. A line can also be boundary, in this case a boundary that excluded the authority figure, "the teacher." The girls, rather than the teacher, owned the round-robin reading. Though some girls liked having adults read so that the book could be finished quickly, when the text was something they liked, they wanted to savor it like a good meal in the company of friends.

The ways in which the girls chose to do literacy was in many ways different from what I had planned. They preferred to discuss first and then read, and then they preferred to read to each other rather than to listen to me or to read silently. These literacy practices gave them the opportunity to perform literacy—to bring it to life—with their peers.

## Evaluation

I designed this afterschool reading and writing workshop in the hope of providing African-American adolescent girls with a "free space" in which they could learn about a topic important to them by reading, writing, talking, and thinking critically about hair. As I read and reread field notes, viewed and reviewed videotapes, and

listened carefully to audiotaped interviews, I concluded that the workshop met, to varying extents, the four goals outlined at the beginning of this article.

**Goal 1. To provide African-American adolescent girls with the opportunity to talk, read, and write about a cultural topic that is typically not sanctioned in school**

Throughout the workshop, the girls had opportunities to engage in dialogue about hair and other topics. When the workshop format changed slightly to begin each session with group discussion, the girls often asked each other—and me—probing questions. They also engaged in reading and writing activities centered around hair, not all of which were part of my original plan. The Junie B. Jones book was not part of my original collection, and round-robin reading was not part of my workshop format. After reading books—collectively, more often than not—the girls would usually write a few sentences in their journals summarizing what they read. Toward the end of the workshop, I began to challenge the girls to expand on their writing; I would ask them a question based on a point that was made in a previous session and ask them to elaborate in their journals. Most of the girls appreciated this dialogue approach to writing.

**Goal 2. To promote critical thinking by inviting the girls to examine why hair matters to them and to view hair from cultural, historical, and socio-political perspectives**

The girls were challenged to go to the root of the social and cultural phenomenon of hair by exploring the many factors that influenced their ideas and beliefs. For example, they discussed how commercialism has influenced the way African-American women and girls talk and think about hair. At times, such discussions created tension, because the girls had to question and examine their beliefs, as was the case after they read Bill Lee's "Straight and Nappy" (1988). I presented texts that contradicted their views, encouraged them to hold multiple perspectives, and consistently challenged them to explain why they held certain viewpoints. As the workshop progressed, their discussions became more illuminating as they continued to develop and evaluate their own positions on the topic of hair.

**Goal 3. To encourage the girls to reflect on their reading and writing experiences about hair**

I wanted the girls to think about their literacy experiences and what they did as readers and writers. In the journal-writing component of one session, I gave each girl a reading log listing most of the books available in the workshop. The girls checked off the books they had read alone or with others, those they had not read but wanted to, and those they did not want to read. We then discussed why most of them read picture books and colorfully illustrated hair-care books but avoided longer nonfiction books. Besides encouraging them to think about their reading experience, I also gave them opportunities to reflect on their writing, most often by approaching them one-on-one and asking them questions about it.

**Goal 4. To give the girls an opportunity to share their knowledge with others**

The method of knowledge sharing the girls chose was a commercial that stressed ethnic pride. In the beginning of the workshop, some girls thought that the fact that some African-American people's hair does not grow as long as that of most white people was a sign of inferiority. After they learned about the tightly coiled follicles of most African-American hair and the advantages of this texture, I would often hear them exclaim that they were "happy to be nappy" (hooks, 1999). The commercial was videotaped so the girls could share copies with family and friends. At least one participant continued to

share her knowledge: A few months after the workshop, I spoke briefly with Shanika. She said that she often talked about hair with her grandmother, who had recently asked her how she knew so much about hair. Shanika said, "I learned it from the hair class."

**Implications**

Though over half of the girls in the workshop were relegated to a remedial literacy class in school, and though few were truly interested in reading, five of them held sustained interest in a reading and writing workshop over a three-month period. One reason for this interest is that the reading and writing workshop validated the girls' interest in doing hair. The workshop was successful not only because the topic was interesting to the girls, but also

because actually doing hair was one of the activities available along with reading and writing. Delpit (2002) convincingly argues that educators' negative responses to children's language often result in the children's "rejection of the school language and everything they have to offer" (p. 47). If authority figures in institutional settings do not embrace adolescents' social and cultural practices, they should not expect adolescents to accept willingly the social practices adults value, such as reading and writing.

Another reason the girls continued to be involved in the workshop is that they had opportunities to take ownership of it. Atwell (1988) says that learners need ownership, or control and power, over a space. The girls viewed the workshop as a "class" of their own. They were free to talk, to create and modify rules, to offer me suggestions on how to conduct the workshop, and to keep their peers in check. Fostering African-American adolescent girls' sense of ownership may require allowing them to co-design workshops with an adult facilitator. As was the case when the girls in the hair workshop chose to read round-robin style, other girls, working with an adult facilitator, may be able to co-construct a learning environment that meets their interests and satisfies their expectations.

Ingrid Banks (2000), a professor of Black studies, argues that African-American females discuss hair more than any other topic. Inviting this social and cultural topic into a reading and writing workshop in which all participants were African-American females afforded them a safe environment where they could learn with and from each other and from me. They appropriated and modified school-like practices to meet their needs and interests. My findings suggest that afterschool programs can and should use adolescents' cultural practices and interests to empower young people to engage in literacy practices while allowing participants to choose the kinds of practices that best meet their needs.

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## Afterschool Matters Initiative

The Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF), seeking to have a long-term and substantial effect on the field of out-of-school education, launched several new initiatives to accomplish this mission. Afterschool Matters is one of the initiatives, the goals of which are to:

- Generate and disseminate research about community-based organizations serving youth during out-of-school hours
- Build a network of scholars studying community-based organizations serving youth
- Contribute to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice and policy in the area of community-based youth programs

## Afterschool Matters/Occasional Papers

One of the projects of the Afterschool Matters Initiative is the journal *Afterschool Matters*, a national, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism, scholarship, and consciousness of the field of afterschool education. The journal serves those involved in developing and running programs for youth during the out-of-school hours, in addition to those engaged in research and in shaping policy. Articles for the journals are solicited from the field, and a range of academic perspectives are considered along with personal or inspirational narratives and essays, book reviews, artwork, and photographs.

The RBF Occasional Papers is a peer-reviewed series published twice a year. The goal of the Occasional Papers is to provide a venue for publishing research that explores key issues and topics in the practice and theory of afterschool programming, youth development, and learning during the non-school hours. In addition, the Occasional Papers address key policy issues in the area of youth development. The intended audience for this series includes researchers, university staff, afterschool program managers and practitioners, and policy makers. Prospective papers are solicited by the RBF.

Copies of both *Afterschool Matters* and the Occasional Papers are available on the RBF website, [www.robertbownefoundation.org](http://www.robertbownefoundation.org).

## Research Grants/Research Fellowship

The RBF sponsors a national Research Grant competition. Four grants of \$10,000 are awarded to support either original empirical research in or about community-based youth programs during the non-school hours or research syntheses or policy analyses of community-based youth programs.

Now in its third year, the RBF Research Fellowship is dedicated to building the capacity of youth program staff to design and conduct research in the areas of youth

development and education during the out-of-school hours. The goals of the Research Fellowship include generating and disseminating research in the area of education in community-based organizations serving youth during the out-of-school hours, building a network of scholars, contributing to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice, and informing policy in the area of community-based youth programs.

For more information about the RBF Afterschool Matters Initiative, contact:

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## Art credit

The Center for Arts Education is committed to restoring, stimulating and sustaining quality arts education as an essential part of every child's education. It identifies, funds, and supports exemplary partnerships and programs that demonstrate how the arts contribute to learning and student achievement. Since 1996, the Center has awarded more than \$28 million in private and public funding to support arts education partnerships and programs, joining over 275 public schools with more than 200 cultural and community-based organizations, colleges and universities in New York City. For further information, please visit the Center's web site at [www.cae-nyc.org](http://www.cae-nyc.org).

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## Your Program in Art

Does your youth development program have children's art that you would like to contribute to *Afterschool Matters*? If so, please submit high-resolution image files to:

Sara Hill, Ed.D., Research Officer  
Robert Bowne Foundation  
345 Hudson Street  
New York, NY 10014  
[sara.hill@bowne.com](mailto:sara.hill@bowne.com)

We will ask you to fill out a form indicating that you have the artists' permission to publish the works in *Afterschool Matters*.

# Afterschool Matters

**Spring 2006: Community-Based Youth Programs and Democracy in Action**

## Call for Papers

**Afterschool Matters**, a national, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism, scholarship, and consciousness in the field of afterschool education, is seeking material for the spring 2006 issue. Published by the Robert Bowne Foundation, the journal serves those involved in developing and running programs for youth during the out-of-school hours, in addition to those engaged in research and in shaping youth development policy.

**Afterschool Matters** seeks scholarly work, from a variety of disciplines, that can be applied to or is based on the afterschool arena. The journal also welcomes submissions that explore practical ideas for working with young people during the out-of-school hours. Articles from a range of academic perspectives will be considered, along with personal or inspirational narratives and essays, review essays, artwork and photographs. Articles should connect to current theory and practice in the field by relating to previously published research.

The theme for the 2006 issue is *Community-Based Youth Programs and Democracy in Action*.

Suggested topics aligned with the theme include:

- Analyses of community-based youth organizations as institutions that support democracy in action
- Descriptions and analyses of activities at community-based programs that engage youth in democracy in action in a range of areas, including, for example, the environment, civil rights, or political processes
- Exploration of ways that youth organizations have created networks and organized around social issues, and any subsequent effects on social policy

### **Submission guidelines**

- Deadline is May 16, 2005, for the fifth issue of *Afterschool Matters*, to be published in January 2006.
- Submissions should be double-spaced in 12-point font, including quotations and references, and submitted electronically or on a disk in Microsoft Word or Rich Text format.
- Submissions should not exceed 5,000 words.
- Include a cover sheet with the manuscript title, authors' names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses.
- The names of the authors should not appear on the text, as submissions are reviewed anonymously by peers.
- Follow the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th Edition, for reference style guidelines. Present important information in the text and do not use extensive footnotes or endnotes.

Inquiries about possible articles or topics are welcome.

To inquire or to submit articles, contact:

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