A Tale
from the
Youth Field

Using Stories to Understand Community-Based Youth Programs

by Sara Hill

A Program Tale: "Cupcakes for the Class"

In the tutoring room of the Franklin Houses[1] Youth Center's after school program, I was sitting with roughly ten children, ranging in age from seven to fourteen, and a college-age tutor working individually with a child. Throughout the afternoon, people came and went through the room en route to the office of Fen, the center director. I had noticed that several of the kids regularly hung out there each afternoon, sitting in chairs along the wall observing Fen's interactions with tutors, staff, parents, housing authority workers, and a variety of other visitors.

I asked the children around the table if anyone would like help with homework. Rose, a little girl of seven, leaned over and asked me to read a paper she held in her hand. It was a daily report from her teacher. I read it aloud to her. It said that Rose had not done her work adequately, especially during the reading lesson that day.

After I read it, Rose appeared scared in a wide-eyed, quiet way. I questioned her about what had happened. She told her story haltingly, but I made out that she had gotten stuck in her work during reading lesson, and, not knowing what to do, had stopped. Another incident occurred during the lesson, Rose explained, when she was sharing a book with a friend and the teacher grabbed it out of her hand. Rose said she was going to get "whupped" when her mother came to pick her up from the program and saw the note.

I was at a complete loss. It appeared to me that Rose's teacher was not taking the time to find out what was going on with her, and furthermore, was downright rude. I was also aware that my knowledge of what had actually happened in the classroom was limited, and I wanted to reserve judgment until I knew more. I had the sense that Rose, a fairly quiet, shy girl, didn't articulate her side of things very well, at least to adults.

Fen, the center director, walked in, greeted me, and went to his office. I mentioned the situation with Rose and told him that I didn't know how to respond. Could he make a suggestion? Fen shook his head, saying that Rose's mother "flies off the handle," and that it was a problem.

When I re-entered the tutoring room, Rose's cousin was reading to her from a book in the "Berenstein Bears" series. An older girl walked in, turned on one of the computers and began revising a school essay. Another girl peeped over her shoulder and made recommendations. Several girls grouped around a picture book, looking at and commenting on the illustrations. They regrouped and everyone moved on to something else. In Fen's office, a child of ten was giving a slightly younger child a lesson in the multiplication tables, drawing on the blackboard next to Fen's desk.

I asked Rose if she would like me to read to her. She assented, walked around the table to my

side, and we carved out a little corner for ourselves. I asked her what was going on in the story. She wasn't able to tell me. I asked her several more questions about the story and became alarmed that she could give me no answers—she didn't seem to comprehend what had been read to her. I began to read the book aloud to Rose, starting at the beginning and stopping every so often to talk about the story and ask her questions. She answered them all. I realized she had merely needed to become more personally engaged with the text (assuming she was interested in the story at all).

After I read a certain amount and we discussed it, I wrote down what Rose told me about the story in her own words. Then I read what I had written out loud, had Rose read it together with me, and then asked her to read it independently. Again, she did well, spontaneously pointing out that I'd written the word "neighbors" several times. This showed me that she could read words in isolation.

Suddenly, the children in the room were collectively alert; Rose's mother had arrived to pick her up. Rose, very scared, asked me if I could talk to her mother. I replied, "I'm new here, and I can't say anything because I don't know your mother. If you were my regular student, I would talk to your mom." The older cousin proceeded to ask everyone sitting around the table, "Do you hope Rose doesn't get whupped?" She included me in her survey, and I concurred with the rest of the children that Rose should not be beaten.

I had to leave to pick up my son from day care. As I walked through the hallway to the entrance of the building, I encountered Fen speaking to a woman I assumed was Rose's mother. Both looked very serious. I was surprised at how quickly Fen had headed her off before she reached the tutoring room. I nodded to both of them as I passed by, and Fen pulled me into the conversation. At his request, I re-told the story Rose had related to me that afternoon and gave my interpretation of the situation. At several points during the encounter, Fen said to the woman, "If you go in there hollering, they won't listen to you." The mom ended up saying that she would go to school that night to talk to the teacher.

Two days later Rose showed me another report from the teacher. On it was a thanks to her mother for bringing in cupcakes for the class.

This event occurred during a nine-month research project I was engaged in as part of a graduate course in educational ethnography. I completed this research at an after school youth program run by a community organization in public housing, where I was a participant-observer, tutoring a twelve-year-old girl two days a week. My approach to this study was to explore a simple, open-ended question: "What is education in this context?" The event lay fallow in my fieldwork notes for some time, and I did not include a description of it in my final project report. Later, however, it appeared more significant than I originally believed, so I reconstructed it into the shape of a story, or what is called an "impressionistic tale" (Van Maanen, 1988). I believe the tale serves as a window through which to view the unique people and activities that comprise a particular youth program. At the same time, the event is wholly atypical and dramatic, creating an opportunity to think about larger questions regarding the role of after school programs and their relationships to larger institutions such as universities, families, communities, youth, and public schools. This article provides a rationale for the use of such stories as interpretive vehicles to better understand community-based organizations serving youth.

Community-Based Organizations for Youth

In the United States there are more than 17,000 organizations serving youth during out-of-school time. These range from national organizations such as Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Ys, to settlement houses, museums, libraries, and neighborhood organizations sponsored by churches and independent grassroots organizations (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). Community-based organizations (CBOs) such as settlement houses, which are distinguished by having physical sites in neighborhood communities, were begun at the turn of the century to assimilate new immigrants. CBOs have ". . .broader missions than schools. . . . While there is wide variation, these organizations tend to be smaller and more loosely structured" (Pittman & Wright, 1991, iii).

Professional staff of CBOs usually do not have educational backgrounds *per se*, often coming with backgrounds in community organizing and advocacy or training in recreation, the arts, or social work. Other staff include community residents, youth workers, college and high school students, parents, or older youth who attended the program previously. CBOs offer a wide range of activities and events for youth and their families, including the arts, sports and athletics, employment and training programs, health care and mental health counseling (Carnegie, 1992; Cibulka & Kritek, 1996).

What is called "education" at CBOs consists at minimum of homework assistance and remedial tutoring for individual students with academic problems. Sometimes educational activities are offered to all students as extensions of the school day. In other cases, educational offerings are consciously crafted to diverge from school-like activities. Activities or projects at youth-serving CBOs

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often involve the creation of end products (plays, student publications, or photography display, for example) for wide audiences, including peers, community residents, parents, government officials, and/or funders.

Education itself is seldom the sole mission of youth programs at CBOs. Services for youth have historically been geared toward either behavior intervention, such as preventing teen pregnancy, or toward broad-based "youth development" (Pittman, 1991). Youth development programs encompass more general social, emotional, and civic aims rather than narrowly focusing on behavior change. Last, but not least, CBOs provide a space in which young people can simply socialize with their peers in a safe environment without any planned activity or adult involvement.

There is some indication that CBOs play a significant role in the lives of young people, particularly those organizations working with poor and urban youth (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, 1994; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Many CBOs provide young people with experiences that might not otherwise be available, "in which youngsters experience guided participation in social units that mirror the kind of social commitment expected from mainstream institutions in the areas of employment, government bureaucracy, medical care, and education" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, p. 9). These experiences include, among others, "caring" relationships with adults who often become mentors (Pittman & Cahill, 1992) and opportunities for youth to assume leadership roles and to be valued as resources and "positive forces" in their communities (Heath & McLaughlin, 1996, p. 70).

Such experiences are orchestrated by organizations that provide family-like supports, maintain strong links to the community, and act as "cultural bridges" between families and schools (Heath & McLaughlin, 1996). CBOs are organized in ways that reflect "a recognition of the importance of structure, belonging, and group membership to adolescents" (Pittman, 1991, p. 8). They are cited in studies of resiliency, which examine how young people growing up in environments in which they experience severe stress and adversity are able to become healthy, competent adults (Benard, 1991). In addition, CBOs are identified as important and separate contexts for socialization, primarily because many young people attend programs on a voluntary basis. Youth programs provide "nonrequired programs and activities" that create "a transitional link between the spontaneous play of childhood and the more disciplined activities of adulthood" (Wynn et al., 1987, p. 3).

The Setting for the Tale: The Center

The Center is located in the heart of the Franklin Houses, government housing built in the 1940s in a mid-sized city in the American South. The area is a low-income, African American neighborhood consisting of single-family homes mixed with subsidized housing. Historical African American colleges are prominent institutions in the neighborhood.

The presence of the universities may explain why the neighborhood, although low-income, is well kept. Houses are time-worn but freshly painted, with neat yards. However, as in many such areas, there is little visible outside economic investment: virtually no banks, supermarkets, or malls. The few locally-owned businesses are small understocked groceries and barbecue shacks. In this community, drug trafficking and gambling are active—and profitable—underground economies.

The Franklin Houses comprise four blocks of two-story red brick buildings. Each "house" contains two apartments whose entrances face a communal yard. One can stand in the entrance of one house and observe the entrances of all the other houses on the block. In fact, there is usually an older man or woman on at least one of the stoops during the day, sitting and observing people and events. A small satellite police station is situated in one of the project houses, and officers ride bicycles for community policing.

The center, an after school program under the aegis of a national youth organization, is located in the basement of one of the Franklin Houses

down the block from the police station. Started in 1988, the center currently has 136 children enrolled, all of whom are African American; 74, on average, attend each day. Most of these children live in the Franklin Houses, and most are from single-parent homes. Over half of the family incomes are below the federal poverty level (Franklin Youth Center, monthly report, March 1997).

The center is staffed by Fen, the director, and his assistant director, Perry, both African American men in their thirties, along with three junior staff members, two in their late teens and one in her early twenties. All three attended the center when they were younger. Two are high school seniors applying for college, and the third is currently a sophomore at a local state university. The center's cultural orientation is reflected both in the content of the curriculum (a heavy emphasis on culturally based offerings such as African drumming and dance courses) and in the center's relationship to other institutions. For example, the national sponsor recently instituted a new governing system whereby each site is able to establish its own board of directors. Fen has strategically developed his board by recruiting "up and coming" professionals of color who have begun to advocate for issues pertaining to black youth and issues specific to the community in which the center is located.

The center is replete with posters reflecting African Americans in history and motivational sayings pertaining to cultural pride; its small library has many books and magazines whose topics are African Americans and African American life. At a deeper level, the center reflects U.S. Southern African American culture[2]: there is great emphasis on family (nuclear or extended) and group cohesion. Young people assume a great deal of responsibility and are expected to take care of younger children. In addition, they are expected to be well-behaved and courteous, especially to their elders.
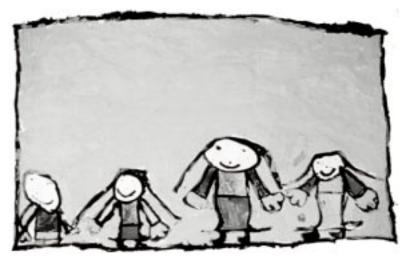
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Interpreting the Data

When I first began observing activities at the center, my particular focus was on how education was occurring, apropos to my research question. I viewed education through an extremely narrow lens. Based on my history in providing technical assistance for community-based youth programs, I initially believed the program wasn't up to snuff. The environment appeared chaotic and noisy. There weren't enough books or materials, nor were there the "right" books or materials. I didn't observe activities such as "book clubs," "lessons," or "workshops." Formal tutoring took

place only once a week, was sporadic, and was provided for only a handful of the neediest children. A group of children, however, came regularly to the center five days a week, often from 3:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m., many, if not most of whom needed some kind of academic support. Young people at the Center spent most of their time either under-supervised in the tutoring room or gameroom, or hanging around outside socializing with friends, or, if younger, playing on equipment in the yard.

This initial interpretation proved erroneous. The longer I participated as a tutor, observed interactions, and interviewed people, the more differently I began to perceive things. Although I had originally viewed the program as having many deficits, I began to sense that a good deal of teaching and learning was going on; I just wasn't sure what it was. The center was a full, busy, friendly place. Young people attended regularly and voluntarily and appeared to value what they got from it. In addition, although the children were "under-supervised" by adults, I observed few, if any, behavior problems. When things went beyond a certain point—a noise level, or another kind of behavior deemed unacceptable by Fen or one of the staff—a sharp word was enough to clear out the room. These observations challenged my prevailing notion of what constituted a good program and helped me build a theory that was better aligned with what I was observing. I had to cast about for a richer, more inclusive theoretical framework from which to understand the site, particularly, education in this context.

I realized at some point that I was operating from a culturally biased conception of teaching and learning and space-time organization. For one thing, I had been imposing a structure in which space and time are segmented into "activities" or discrete units, such as "lessons" or "workshops."

This idea came from a school-based conception of learning, one that is specific to formal instruction and quite different from the nonsegmented fluidity I observed. In addition, my sensitivity to the "noise" of the program, drawn from a framework of individualistic school-based learning in which students sit in isolation and quiet, obscured my ability to see that learning could take place in a different context. Once I accepted fluidity as endemic and realized that the "noise" was the sound of learning taking place in a group and collective modality, I was able to shift my attention away from a traditional school framework to attend to other ways of interpreting events. I began to seek more appropriate theoretical frameworks, such as those of the socio-historical tradition (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Luria, 1976; Leont'ev, 1978) and theories of "everyday" learning (Cole, Engestrom, & Vasquez, 1997; Lave, 1988; and Lave & Wenger, 1991).

There is, however, a third theoretical approach to the interpretation of data: the use of stories as a framework for analysis.

Culture, Stories, and Representation

Social science research has traditionally adopted a positivist "natural science" paradigm, in which the researcher's observations are taken unproblematically to be objective data from which universal laws and principles of social behavior can be deduced. Some basic premises at the heart of this paradigm have come under escalating criticism in recent years, one challenge emerging from the field of anthropology.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, for example, argued that social research, especially research on culture, is not ". . . an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). For Geertz, the work of the anthropologist is to interpret what he or she observes, to make sense of "facts" and render them meaningful. Cultures can be interpreted like text (Geertz, 1983), and his work explores the "blurred" boundaries between literary interpretation and cultural interpretation.

Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) extends the critique of the traditional paradigm, focusing on the role of social science researchers as writers. Contributors to this collection argue that researchers are not simply observers, but authors who craft texts to convince readers of their accounts of the social world. Culture is not a given; it is constructed and reconstructed by researcher-writers whose interpretations have important political and ethical consequences, especially for marginalized cultures.

Others have challenged the way in which social science represents subjects (McLaren, 1995), in which they are stripped of context. Michelle Fine, a critical feminist, has argued that in order to create an authoritative tone, researcher-authors present themselves as "transparent." They ". . . carry no voice, body, race, class, or gender and no interests in their writing" (Fine, 1994, p. 73).

Tales of the Field: On Writing Research

In *Tales of the Field* (1988) Max Van Maanen draws on such critiques to analyze the narrative forms in which social science research is presented, differentiating them on the basis of their underlying assumptions regarding representation. The "realist tales" of the positivist paradigm, he argues, assume that there is an objective world that can be adequately described "in a dispassionate, third-person voice."

In contrast are "impressionist tales which, rather than illustrate the typical or universal, are

about ". . . what rarely happens. . . . They reconstruct in dramatic form those periods the author regards as especially notable and hence reportable" (p. 102). Impressionist tales are "a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker's way of knowing it so that both can be jointly examined. . . it tries to keep both subject and object in constant view. The epistemological aim is then to braid the knower with the known" (p. 102).

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"Cupcakes for the Class"

The story with which I began this essay was crafted as an Impressionist tale. My intention was to join the voices of those I had observed myself, as a researcher and author, with the readers struggling to make sense of the story, creating the potential for multiple interpretations. My goal was to use this tale as a central metaphor for community-based youth organizations and to suggest what we may learn from them: their place in communities, the role of the staff who work in them, and the teaching and learning which takes place there.

CBOs and Communities

The role of staff at youth programs. One way to interpret this tale is to explore how it speaks to the key role staff at youth programs play in the lives of children and their families. Because youth practitioners often come from the community in which the agency is located, or have gone through the program as young people themselves, they are often well-positioned to be "cultural bridges" between families and other institutions such as schools. Youth program staff may know the best ways to approach or negotiate schools when there is a problem, as when Fen advised, "If you go in there hollering, they won't listen to you." Conversely, youth practitioners are good contacts for schools to approach in order to address problems with individual students or gain insight into community issues. Even if youth practitioners do not come from the community, they may have been at the program long enough to see and hear about the needs of youth in a relaxed, informal context.

The role of tutors and volunteers at youth programs. The story also points out the role of volunteers in youth programs. Many programs rely on unpaid volunteers to provide homework assistance and academic support, sometimes because severe funding constraints hinder programs from hiring full-time staff. Yet volunteers, like paid staff, can provide a bridge between programs, schools,

and families, or can negotiate and advocate on a young person's behalf, as when Fen drew me into his conversation with Rose's mother to provide my perspective on the situation. I also observed volunteers who made home visits or talked with classroom teachers on their tutees' behalf, held parties for youth at the center, and took their tutees on lunch dates and field trips.

Tutors, many of whom are of high school and college age, also provide peer guidance and nurturing relationships for youth who may be hard pressed to find comparable guidance and support in other relationships in their lives. They also offer a model of academic achievement; some of the college students bring their tutees to their home universities to use the library and other facilities.

Finally, a staff member of a youth organization who read this tale reminded me that sometimes the one-to-one relationship that tutors share with students is a good opportunity to gain insight into the academic and emotional needs of youth that may be overlooked in other group configurations. As I was able to point out to Rose's mother and Fen, Rose's poor performance with reading lessons in school seemed to stem more from her need to be personally engaged in the assignment than from a general difficulty reading and understanding the subject matter.

What Is "Taught" and What Is "Learned"

Peer education. Understanding "education" narrowly as the kind of formally structured activity that takes place in classroom settings (as I did initially during my time at the Franklin center) may obscure much of what is taught, and learned, in CBOs. The tale "Cupcakes" provides a clear example of the manifold ways that young people in youth programs may, and often do, engage in spontaneous peer education. For example, youth at the center huddle around a book and take turns reading it and supporting each others' reading process. Older children provide guidance to younger children in their reading attempts and also give the younger ones help in math and other academic subjects—recall the ten-year-old teaching multiplication tables in Fen's office. This peer education is not only stressed in the program design of the center, which has held peer group discussions in the past, but also reflects the cultural context in which the center is located. It inculcates the community value that youth are expected to take responsibility for younger members, which includes helping them with schoolwork. Being sensitive to and capitalizing on such positive cultural values in program design is a keystone of community-based education.

Career development/apprenticeship. The education taking place in CBOs may extend well beyond academic skills such as reading or math. Fen's office is a virtual "apprenticeship central station," where young people are welcome to hang out and observe him as he goes about the business of running the program. In the course of an afternoon, Fen regularly interacts with community residents and parents, housing authority workers, contractors and architects, government officials, and home office administrators. Fen displays a range of social and language skills during these interactions, which youth participate in from the periphery. This peripheral participation is key to the young people at the center becoming acculturated in a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), primarily that of the field of youth work. In addition, youth at the center are often asked to answer the telephone, run errands, make copies, and help with inventory at the small snack "store." All of these tasks are skills that will, in the future, aid them in any organizational or business-related vocations they may pursue.

At the most obvious level, the entire junior staff of the center is comprised of young people who have gone through the program as youth themselves. One of the staff members is now a college student, and two are high school students preparing to apply to college. In addition to being a vocational model and mentor, Fen provides a model of a "caring" person. As one junior worker mentioned to me in an interview, "Fen was like a daddy to me. I don't need him so much now, but I used to come to him when I had problems." Another junior worker said of Fen, "He used to observe me working with a group. And he used to be hard on me, telling me what I needed to improve." These junior staff members are crucial to the center and often comprise the bulk of staff at CBOs. Indeed, the center, and other CBOs like it, support overall community economic development; they provide career ladders for older youth and critically needed child care for working parents.

Conclusion

Impressionistic tales provide rich ground from which a harvest of multiple interpretations of events can lead to a fuller understanding of social institutions. "Cupcakes for the Class" illuminates community-based youth programs, their role in the community, and the people who work and participate in them. The story provides a basis for observing how young people learn in these kinds of organizations and what they may be gaining in terms of their social, intellectual, and emotional development. Since writing this tale I have shared it with many youth practitioners and colleagues, and, as a result, have gained new insights and generated new questions. I believe, the strongest rationale for using stories as interpretive vehicles is this: doing so deepens our understanding of the meaning of programs in the lives of children and families and helps us formulate a principled and research-driven framework for youth policy and program development.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

[2] While it is problematic to make statements about culture in homogeneous terms, this information was derived not only from my observations of the program, but from readers of this paper who are African American from the U.S. South. In addition, one of my readers, a doctoral student at my home university, grew up in the Franklin Houses, and is intimately familiar with the community.

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