The Art of Democracy / Democracy as Art:
Creative Learning in Afterschool Comic Book Clubs

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Executive Summary

Over the past three years, hundreds of community-based afterschool comic book clubs have been launched in cities across the United States. These clubs have drawn in thousands of underserved youths in grades 1–12. In these clubs, children plan, write, sketch, design, and produce original comic books and then publish and distribute their works for other children in the community to use as learning and motivational tools. This synthetic and analytic research project explores the dynamics, outcomes, and impacts of afterschool comic book clubs. The paper investigates the children's interpretations of and contributions to democracy, leadership, and civic engagement in their youth development organizations, in their communities, and in the world at large. The findings about the democratic principles at work in both the processes and the products of these comic book clubs have broad implications for afterschool educators who wish to foster children's social and academic progress.

John Dewey, the forefather of modern American education, said in 1897, "The only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (p. 77). Despite Dewey's century-old call for socially relevant education, many modern school curricula, materials, and instructional approaches are out of step with students' social environments. For underserved children on the losing side of the nation's education gap, school often becomes another burden in a life of difficult decisions; the difference between adjectives and adverbs can seem meaningless in the face of such burdens.

Authors, educators, and researchers have spent and will continue to spend a great deal of time studying disenfranchised students, frustrated teachers, and desperate parents in the nation's large urban public school systems. Institutions of higher education devote extensive research funds to investigating our educational dilemmas. Teachers College, the nation's oldest and largest school of education (and my institution), has recently altered its mission statement to "Educational equity—a moral imperative for the 21st century" (Teachers College, 2005). Yet despite uncountable conferences, books, and symposia devoted to the social costs of inadequate education, the crisis endures: Children are neither engaged in nor inspired by the learning process.

In the search for solutions, one could ask: "What would entice children to come to school and strive for success—even if they weren't required to show up?" The question is not hypothetical; in fact, afterschool practitioners wrestle with this conundrum every day. The rapidly growing field of afterschool education is founded on a paradox: Learning is mandatory, but attendance is not. Interestingly, afterschool youth developers have found an answer to the paradox in youth media production. By engaging children in creating and producing film, music, websites, and other media, afterschool programs are helping urban youths find innovative ways to build academic and social skills.

One of the most unlikely genres of youth media after school is also one of the most prevalent: comic books. In cities across the United States, afterschool practitioners are transforming classrooms into publishing houses where students plan, write, design, and distribute original comic books. Why comic books—an often-spurned medium regularly regarded as the "ninth art"?[1] One reason is financial. Whereas most youth media projects require expensive computers, digital recording devices, and professional training, comic books can be created with paper and a pencil. This low-tech focus makes comic book production attractive to nonprofit afterschool organizations. Equally important, comic books offer the opportunity

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for social relevance in education, transforming the theories of John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and many others into practice. In developing a comic book, the young author takes creative control. Youth are thereby encouraged to explore personal identities and social issues not only through traditional art and writing but also through contemporary media.

From a student's perspective, the opportunity to create a comic book makes an afterschool program alluring. Following a period of begrudged homework help, the fun begins. However, research indicates that learning takes place here, too. Engaging children in creating comic books reinforces many of the academic skills that school teachers so desperately struggle to instill. In creating a comic book, children plan the characters; outline a plot; draft a manuscript; consider elements of tone and atmosphere; revise and edit their writing; focus on character and story development; correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation; review peer work; share and discuss storylines; and present and publish finalized works. In essence, these students, who in any other setting might be labeled as "underachieving," thoroughly meet benchmark literacy standards, such as the New York State Learning Standards for English Language Arts (New York State Department of Education, 1996).

The effects of the comic book clubs are not only academic. A deeper look into the processes and products demonstrated by this unique form of youth media reveals a striking portrait of democracy in and out of the classroom. Children are critically thinking about their roles in society and community by developing creative stories about themselves, their neighborhoods, and their identities as urban youths—what they experience, how they view themselves, how they interact with peers, and how they struggle with daily hardships. Moreover, children are taking their stories to the streets, literally. Many afterschool programs use student-generated comic books to promote civic engagement and open dialogue about democracy and leadership—or lack thereof—in this country.

In this paper, I will explore the dynamics, outcomes, and impacts of afterschool comic book clubs in cities across the United States. Focusing on the children and their community-based organizations, I will investigate how the processes and results of making comic books represent a new path to creative learning, one that encourages children to interpret—and contribute to—democracy, leadership, and civic engagement in their youth development organizations, in their communities, and in the world at large. The broader context revolves around the very nature of afterschool education. My findings have implications for the role of afterschool education in children's academic and social lives.

COMIC BOOKS IN EDUCATION

More than ever comic books are at the forefront of educators' minds. The American Library Association recently embraced comic books as an ideal way to motivate young readers (Toppo, 2005). The Maryland State Department of Education (2005) has done the same by partnering with Diamond Comics, a distributor for Disney, to develop a comics-based curriculum for reluctant readers. Several organizations—including the National Association of Comics Art Educators (2006) and the New York City Comic Book Museum (2006)—are aligning with schools and teachers to promote the use of comic books in K–12 classrooms.

The idea of employing comic books as learning tools has a long history in the United States. In 1941, the Gilberton Company launched *Classic Comics*—novels such as *Ivanhoe* and *Moby Dick* in comic book form (see Duin & Richardson, 2003). The goal of the series was jarringly parallel to that of most current comics-based curricula: give children something colorful and hope they will read it. *Classic Comics* endured for 30 years, but two fundamental flaws impeded acceptance in mainstream schools. First, the children—particularly boys—who read comic books for pleasure considered *Classic Comics* boring, tedious, and downright insulting. Comics were their escape. To bastardize the burgeoning genre for educational purposes was nearly sacrilegious. Second, the children—particularly girls—who would never be caught reading a comic book considered *Classic Comics* (once again) boring, tedious, and downright insulting. They thought of comic books as puerile; to be seen reading them in school was unthinkable. In any case, the traction that *Classic Comics* might have garnered in the schools was squelched in the 1950s by congressional investigations into the relationship between comic books and juvenile delinquency (see U.S. Congress, 1955).

In some ways, *Classic Comics* is representative of a shortcoming in many modern curricula. "Edutainment"—entertainment modified for educational purposes—is usually a poorly constructed mask for bad education. The alternative is to bring authentic comic books (or hip-hop songs or video games) into the classroom. But unmodified versions of popular media aggravate ever-growing concerns of inappropriate content in the classroom. Consider, for example, the *manga* comic books so popular with youth today. In a recent edition of Kosuke Fujishima's *Oh My Goddess* (2004), a crazed robotics engineer goes great lengths to unearth the guarded secrets of a dreamland. The heroine protects herself with a "hypergolic propellant cartridge." Those are certainly mature words for young readers, who could bolster their vocabularies by connecting the words to visual clues in the comic, or perhaps by researching the exact meanings in a dictionary. But could a teacher safely (and legally) encourage students to read this truly graphic novel, full as it is of death, violence, and sexual innuendo?

Comic Books in Afterschool Programming

The approach to comic books after school has been noticeably different from the practice established during the school day. Afterschool programs typically engage children in *creating* comic books and then sharing those original works among themselves and with others. Though some in the afterschool community may not realize it, this practice is thoroughly supported by decades of research in arts education. The studies in Deasy (2002) demonstrate that active engagement in making art, rather than mere exposure or appreciation, leads to the richest opportunities for creative and higher-order thinking. Furthermore, sharing the products that result from an artistic process builds confidence, motivation, and self-esteem (Catterall, 2002; Gardner, 1999). For children in inner-city areas, where needs are diverse but resources are limited, authentic arts experiences can be lifelines to a better future (Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 1999).

Afterschool comic book clubs are documented as having emerged in 2002, although they surely existed earlier. In 2002, three important advocates for afterschool education in New York City—the Partnership for After-School Education, The After-School Corporation, and the Fund for the City of New York—implemented a pilot for the Comic Book Project, an arts-based literacy initiative I founded at Teachers College, Columbia University. The pilot involved over 700 children in 33 afterschool programs. Through the pilot program, children engaged in the process of writing, producing, and presenting comic books, which were then distributed throughout New York City as learning and motivational tools. The pilot demonstrated the positive academic and social possibilities of creating comic books in an afterschool setting (Bitz, 2004a, 2004b). The pilot also highlighted challenges, including two nagging problems in afterschool education: high rates of staff turnover and of student attrition.

The Comic Book Project has forged new clubs around the United States, but many afterschool programs have launched comic book initiatives on their own with much success. For example, the Kidmunity Komics Company in Baltimore, a program of the Collington Square Non-Profit Drug-Free Coalition, engages children in creating comic books for the purpose of drug prevention awareness. Khurana (2005) focused a case study on an afterschool program in New York City that employed a professional artist to help children write and design comic books. The Los Angeles Public Library has partnered with a graphic designer to produce a youth-generated comic book series titled *Tales from the Kids*. Many more examples have appeared over the past three years.

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The Context of Youth Media

Despite a close relationship to the creative arts, afterschool comic book clubs might be more properly placed in the context of youth media. The creative and performing arts play an important role in children's development, but it is popular media—from television to video games to the Internet—that have the most impact on youth. The documented influence of media on children's lives has led to a push for media literacy, defined generally as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms" (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993, p. 6). Media literacy emphasizes the skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creating media and technology messages that use language, moving images, music, sound effects, and other techniques (Masterman, 1985; Messaris, 1994). Hobbs

and Frost (2003) note that, though scholars have engaged in ongoing debates about the practices, pedagogies, and politics embedded in the concept of media literacy, a dominant paradigm is emerging that emphasizes constructivist, interdisciplinary, collaborative, nonhierarchical, and inquiry-based processes of learning.

Afterschool educators have embraced the most recent and unexplored element of media literacy: creating media. For urban youths, media creation has become a unique pathway to improving academic and social skills outside typical school environments (Goodman, 2003). Afterschool clubs capitalize on youth media in order to differentiate themselves from school and the negative connotations of "schooling" (Youniss et al., 2002). Moreover, afterschool practitioners have readily adopted youth media as tools for building traditional literacy skills, technology skills, and social awareness (Alvermann, et al., 2001).

Comic books remain relevant to youth media because of blockbuster movies based on comic book stories, such as *Spider-Man*, *Sin City*, *The Hulk*, and many others. However, it is the ongoing revolution of Japanese comic books (*manga*) and animation (*anime*) that has captivated today's youths. In Japan, *manga* represents a widespread phenomenon in which many children create their own stories and characters as expressions of identity (Toku, 2001; Wilson, 1988, 1999). One only need visit the graphic novel section of a bookstore to see how *manga* has stormed the United States. (Barnes & Noble even has its own *manga* imprint.) When children in inner cities create *manga*, the cultural cross-pollination of East Asian and urban American influences is fascinating, though not unprecedented. Many urban youths have been introduced to elements of Asian culture, such as the Samurai code, via the rap group Wu-Tang Clan, the influential movie *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, and several popular video game titles.

Figure 1

An important element of the influx of *manga* in American youth media is its impact on females. Unlike the majority of comic books created in the United States, many *manga* feature heroines and important female characters; a subgenre called *shojo manga* is written specifically for girls (see Toku, 2005). Moreover, many of these Japanese comic books are created by women. This female-centric aspect of *manga* has drawn many American girls into the medium. One ninth-grade African-American girl from an afterschool comic book club in New York City said: "*Manga* is my life. It represents who I am." Figure 1 is a page from her *manga*-style comic book.

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RESEARCH METHOD

Much of the research in the field of youth media focuses on products. After all, a child spends many hours creating a comic book; a researcher would certainly analyze its content to ascertain social, cultural, and academic implications. However, the *process* of creating that product is at least as important. Examining the process conveys a rich story about how children think and act and about how afterschool programs buttress children's creative thought and their ability to engage in community action. Therefore, my data collection and analysis spotlighted process *and* product. The combination allows for an in-depth investigation not only of outcomes but also of the contexts in which products are created.

Data Collection

I collected data using site observations, video documentation, and interviews.

Site observations

Between October of 2004 and June of 2005, observations of 129 afterschool comic book clubs were conducted in the following cities: New York City; Baltimore; Cleveland; Philadelphia; Chicago; Washington, DC; Hartford, CT; Bridgeport, CT; and New Brunswick, NJ. Almost all of the clubs were based in schools and were supported by nonprofit, community-based organizations. The purpose of the observations was to collect and organize a wide range of information about each club in order to identify patterns and themes and then compare the clubs with one another. The participants in the afterschool clubs were children in grades 1–12; the majority were in grades 4–8. Their instructors were typically college students or volunteers who guided children through the process of brainstorming, drafting, writing, designing, and publishing original comic books. The observations, which were summarized in written reports immediately following each observation session, were guided by the following questions:

- How did the afterschool comic book club begin at the site?
- Who initiated the process?
- What resources—time, personnel, funds, and so on—were made available, and by whom?
- Did site staff receive training specific to the initiative, and from whom?
- How were students recruited to participate in the initiative?
- Who participated? Who did not?
- How did students perceive the initiative, and how did perceptions change over time?
- How did students interact with each other and with teachers?
- What challenges did students and teachers encounter?
- How did students and teachers benefit or improve?

Following the initial round of observations, two or three focus sites in each city—a total of 22—were selected for further observations, video documentation, and interviews with students and staff. These sites were selected based on the following criteria:

- A comparatively high number of students—at least 20—were involved in the comic book initiative.
- The comic book initiative was an ongoing and integrated component of the site's activities.
- The site had assigned one or more instructors to the comic book club, and those instructors led the club whenever it met.

Video documentation

Digital video documentation was taken at the focus sites in each city. The purpose of the video documentation was to capture key components of the process:

- Introduction of the initiative
- Children's development of ideas and concepts
- Children's creation and production of comic books
- Children's presentation of comic books

Interviews

Interviews with students, teachers, and administrators were conducted at focus sites at the beginning and end of the comic book initiatives. The purpose was to capture interviewees' expectations and perceptions at the launch of the comic book club, and, at the conclusion, perceived successes and failures. The interviews were guided by a framework of questions but were open-ended to allow for comprehensive responses from the participants.

The student interviews, besides including questions specific to the processes and outcomes of a particular comic book club, focused on issues related to democracy, identity, and culture. Examples of student interview questions at the beginning of the process were:

- Why did you join this club?
- What do you think you will learn from your involvement?
- Have you ever created a comic book before?

The student interviews, besides including questions specific to the processes and outcomes of a particular comic book club, focused on issues related to democracy, identity, and culture.

- How important are comic books in your life?
- What do you think you will demonstrate about yourself by making a comic book?
- How will your comic book express ideas about leadership and democracy?

Examples of student questions at the end of the process were:

- What did you like most about the process?
- What did you find most challenging?
- What did you learn about yourself through this process?
- What did you learn about your culture or other cultures?
- How do you think your involvement will affect the way you think and act in the future?

Teacher interviews encompassed not only what the teachers believed students had gained or learned, but also what the teachers themselves drew from the experience. Administrator interviews concentrated on the effects of the initiative on the site as a whole, as well as on perceived effects on parents and community members.

Data Analysis

The analysis of this data led to identification of emergent themes in the afterschool comic book clubs. The themes were not predetermined; rather they emerged from the data based on the analyses described below (see Patton, 1990).

Observation and video analysis

The video documentation and observation reports were analyzed by creating a codebook of themes, actions, and phenomena evident in the data. The codebook was hierarchical though flexible, and it expanded as the data were analyzed. Table 1 is an excerpt from the codebook, based on the emergent theme of *democracy*.

TABLE 1. CODEBOOK EXCERPT

1. Democracy
    1.1. Democracy in the classroom
        1.1.1. Students
            1.1.1.1. Have decision-making power
            1.1.1.2. Have say in direction of club
            1.1.1.3. Compromise with peers
            1.1.1.4. Compromise with instructors
            1.1.1.5. Respect opinions of others
            1.1.1.6. Voice/demonstrate political views
        1.1.2. Instructors
            1.1.2.1. Give students decision-making power
            1.1.2.2. Give students say in club direction
            1.1.2.3. Compromise with students
            1.1.2.4. Compromise with other instructors
            1.1.2.5. Respect opinions of others
            1.1.2.6. Voice/demonstrate political views
        1.1.3. Administrators
            1.1.3.1. Give students decision-making power
            1.1.3.2. Give instructors decision-making power
            1.1.3.3. Voice/demonstrate political views
    1.2. Democracy outside the classroom
        1.2.1. In the United States
            1.2.1.1. The Presidency
                1.2.1.1.1. President Bush
                1.2.1.1.2. President Clinton
            1.2.1.2. The administration
                1.2.1.2.1. Vice President Cheney
            1.2.1.3. Elections
            1.2.1.4. Effect on citizenry
            1.2.1.5. Corruption
        1.2.2. In the city
            1.2.2.1. The mayor
            1.2.2.2. City Council
            1.2.2.3. Community representatives
        1.2.3. Around the world
            1.2.3.1. Iraq
                1.2.3.1.1. War in Iraq
            1.2.3.2. Afghanistan
            1.2.3.3. Mexico
            1.2.3.4. China
    1.3. Democratic concepts
        1.3.1. Civil rights
            1.3.1.1. Free speech
            1.3.1.2. Right to protest
            1.3.1.3. Nondiscrimination
            1.3.1.4. Intellectual freedom
        1.3.2. Rule by the people
        1.3.3. Civic engagement
            1.3.3.1. Importance of
            1.3.3.2. Ability to make change through

After the initial development of the codebook, NVivo data analysis software was used to code the digital video footage and observation reports. The data were sorted by code and cross-referenced to allow conclusions to be drawn about the individual cases and comparisons to be made between cases.

Interview analysis

To analyze the interview responses, a second codebook was created, parallel to the one from the observation and video analysis. NVivo was again used to code the interview transcripts, and the data were sorted by code and cross-referenced. When analysis of interview data highlighted trends, themes, or phenomena that were unclear or needed more detail, additional telephone or e-mail interviews were conducted.

Content analysis

The student-generated comic books were analyzed by creating a third parallel codebook. The same software was used to code the comic books. The data were once again sorted and cross-referenced in order to provide tangible examples of outcomes of the afterschool comic book clubs.

Emergent Themes

The data analysis and development of the codebooks revealed a wide range of emergent themes that bridged the observations, interviews, video footage, and student comic books. Twenty broad themes emerged from the data, listed here in alphabetical order:

bullying	money
community	police
crime	race
democracy	religion
the environment	self-image
family	school
friends	sex
gangs	social injustice
health	superheroes
leadership	villains

Each theme had several emergent sub-themes, as demonstrated by the excerpt in Table 1.

MANY CITIES, MANY MODELS

While it would be tempting to identify a single paradigm for afterschool comic book clubs, my data revealed that many models exist. Even in cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia that featured an organized initiative with centralized training workshops and common materials, afterschool programs regularly adapted resources to meet their specific needs. The comic book club at Woodbridge Vocational High School in New Jersey was focused on bilingual literacy reinforcement; hence, its student comic books were written in English and Spanish. The afterschool program at Martin Luther King, Jr., High School in New York City emphasized technology; those students scanned their comic books into Photoshop and col-

While it would be tempting to identify a single paradigm for afterschool comic book clubs, my data revealed that many models exist.

orized them digitally. The varied approaches to comic book clubs are indicative of not only the diversity in afterschool education but also the diverse needs of the communities served.

Rather than exploring every aspect of all the clubs observed, I will concentrate on a select few. The following profiles of afterschool comic book clubs in New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, and Chicago are based on frequent observations of the clubs in action, along with interviews and video documentation of students, instructors, and administrators. The data were collected between October and June of the 2004–2005 school year and were analyzed in the summer of 2005. This targeted spotlight highlights the uniqueness of the clubs and their approaches to making comic books. The processes adopted and products produced at these clubs are representative of unique paths to creative learning in the realms of literacy, visual art, social development, civic engagement, and more.

New York City

The afterschool comic book club at Martin Luther King, Jr., High School might best be described as "controlled chaos." It was a whirlwind of activity in which students sprang between workstations and team members exuberantly shared ideas, with a steady musical beat driving the activities. With approximately 30 members ranging from freshmen to juniors, the club had an equal ratio of boys and girls from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The club was led by one of the school's art teachers, a comic book enthusiast himself, who volunteered his time every Thursday afternoon.

Figure 2

The process at this club generally began with sketchbooks. Children drew original characters in pencil and then gave those characters names and bits of dialogue. Almost all of the work was reminiscent of *manga*; some of the students even donned Japanese nicknames such as Sayuri and Jury. Their sketches eventually evolved into stories as the characters took action on the page. The entire planning process—unlike that in most comic book clubs—was realized through art. These students did not plan or outline their stories by writing, with the exception of one male student who filled several notebooks with fanta-sized stories of heroes fighting to save the world. Because the teacher was well-versed in comic books, this club focused on the details of comic book design. Students constructed their pages from scratch and spent extensive time "inking" their pencil drawings with dark pens. Once the master pages were complete, club members scanned the work and then used Photoshop and other design software to apply color. Figure 2 is a one-page description of their process by a ninth-grade male and the club instructor.

The instructor of this club was very much a mentor. He never lectured and rarely provided direct instruction; rather, the students came to him for advice regarding character design, panel construction, pencil type, and so on. His typical response was, "What do you think?" Students usually walked away having answered their own questions. Any observer of this club would recognize the level of trust and respect established between the teacher and his students. He demanded effort, and they put it forth willingly. The students seemed reluctant to take a break for a snack, and many could be found working on their comic books outside scheduled club hours.

This element of trust established the comic book club as a safe haven for students. Some participants lived with aunts, grandparents, or foster parents; most struggled with their academic work; and all were faced with a myriad of opportunities for trouble inside and outside school walls, ranging from gangs to drugs to sex. The comic book club was a place for camaraderie and support. The voluntary aspect of the afterschool setting intensified the students' dedication to each other and the work they produced.

Philadelphia

The comic book club at Our Mother of Sorrows School in Philadelphia was geared for academic intervention. The seventh- and eighth-graders—approximately 15 African-American boys and girls—met every day in the resource room to work on their comic books in order to build their literacy skills. The comic books began with written paragraphs: Who is the story about, and what do the characters learn? The writing was checked for grammar, spelling, and mechanics before the students began character sketches and page layouts. The young people worked in assigned pairs to edit and

revise each other's writing, as well as to provide critiques of artistic decisions and plot development. Each step along the way, the students presented their work to the other club members; the teacher and peers critiqued their presentations.

The club leader was the school's resource room advisor, a full-time educator who never had interest in, or use for, comic books before she took the helm of this club. She was not an artist, nor a writer. She was a teacher. Her dedication to her students surmounted any inexperience with their medium. Creativity reigned; it mattered little to her whether students were making comic books the "right" way. Rather, the teacher used comic books to help her students generate an extraordinary amount of writing while working together and sharing ideas. The comic book club provided an opportunity for students to take risks in learning and gave struggling students a chance to improve their reading and skills in a fun, project-oriented setting.

Although the club focused on creativity, the planning process was highly structured. The students wrote their plans by hand and then used word-processing software to re-create and revise them. All this occurred before any artwork was created. Below is the written plan for a seventh-grade boy's comic book.[2]

> *Setting*– The story takes place in school, at the beginning of the school year.
>
> *Conflict*– The conflict in the story is that Christopher needs to stop being a bully (external: man vs. man).
>
> *Plot*– Christopher feels like he runs everything and everyone. Robert feels like Christopher just needs to stop talking about people and to stop hitting them. Scott gets mad when Christopher hits him everyday. Sometimes he feels like killing himself. Kelly feels like going up to Christopher and telling him about himself and telling him that he needs to stop acting like a bully.
>
> *Middle*– Symbolism: Scott has a stick for blind people that help him get around. Scott is a very good person. Robert always has his pen and pencils nice and neat. He always has his hair done everyday. Christopher is fat and sloppy. He also has acne. Kelly is smart, popular and brave. She is also nice to other people.
>
> *Climax*– The high point of the story is when Christopher turns his whole life around. At first Christopher picks on people, but one day he finds out that he doesn't have any friends.

Since this club was centered on writing, the impact of making the comic books is best represented by a piece of reflective writing by one of the students. The paragraph below was written by a seventh-grade girl.

> "Hello!" My name is Amera and I'm going to tell you a bit about my comic book that I worked on with a boy named George. While we were working on our comic book, "The Others Take the Lead", we learned a lot. Well, I don't even know where to start. So I'm going to start with the rough draft of our comic. That part was easy because my partner and I decided to basically divide our project into two separate parts. George is a hard person to work with, but I still tried to manage. Some days I came in very mad and I took it out on George, and I want to apologize to him. When we finished the rough draft we thought everything was going to be easy from there on. We found out that the rough draft was the easiest part. Our comic book is about four little children with the names of Amera (me), George (my partner), Tosha (made up), and Hassan (also made up). Amera plays a mean little nasty girl in the comic. She thinks that she is the leader of the group and she is always picking on the little children that are having fun in the playground. George, Tosha and Hassan always talk about Amera when she is not around. One day, they decided not to speak to her any more. Amera found out that they weren't speaking to her and she cried her eyes out. Amera decides to talk to her mother. Her mother decides that she should talk to her friends. It takes a while for her friends to forgive her. In order for them to forgive her, she has to be nice to the little children at the playground and stop trying to be the boss of everyone. Amera managed to do everything she had to do to become their friend again. I think our comic book came out very appealing.

The teacher used comic books to help her students generate an extraordinary amount of writing while working together and sharing ideas.

Washington

The group at the William E. Doar, Jr., Public Charter School for the Arts was bubbling with excitement on the day of its site observation. For several months these second-graders (ten African-American boys and girls and one Caucasian girl) had been planning a story as a group; now it was time to create the comic book. Their plan was to work together on a communal

Figure 3

The children conversed openly using words and ideas rarely heard from the mouths of seven- and eight-year-olds. They talked about their lives and their neighborhoods. They had unusually mature discussions about race and class, wondering why only one white student was in the class.

comic book while simultaneously creating individual works. The communal comic book was about a hero named Toothpick. Toothpick is an African-American child, abandoned at birth, who learns the way of the Samurai: honor, patience, and justice. He comes back to his neighborhood in Washington to battle corruption and hate. The forces of evil are strong, but Toothpick's convictions are stronger. He is a leader, and the neighborhood looks to him for guidance.

The group was led by a dynamic artist and art teacher. He engaged the children in discussions about the character, and he asked thought-provoking questions: "What should happen to Toothpick next?" "How does Toothpick overcome adversity?" "Which of your own qualities do you see in Toothpick?" The children conversed openly using words and ideas rarely heard from the mouths of seven- and eight-year-olds. They talked about their lives and their neighborhoods. They had unusually mature discussions about race and class, wondering why only one white student was in the class. Their ideas were transformed into story lines, as Toothpick took on identities defined by the children. The teacher drew the images, and children shouted out ideas: "No, not like that!" "Give him a bigger Afro!" "Make that villain look meaner!" The teacher smiled and made the adjustments.

Perhaps the most fascinating element of this comic book club was the words in the communal comic book. Rather than typical comic book dialogue and captions, the class decided to turn the comic book into a rap—a hip-hop exposition in comic book format. The beginning of the comic book reads:

In the streets of D.C. Toothpick was born,
Before he's knee high all his peace was torn.
Soon replaced by violence and wrecks
Crucial problems and the loss of respect.
Toothpick was abandoned on the carry out front steps
And slowly but surely, there was no love left.
So Toothpick was saved and shipped off by Asians.
Before he goes back home he learns Kung-Fu and patience,
Because home is different than it is in your dream
Lead by example to form your team.
TV says that this town is riddled with negative thoughts and hopes have shriveled,
Believe me, look at this crap,
It's a bogus world where mice eat cats,
Where role models are evil and suckas praised
Where good is not seen and all the leaders are in graves.

Figure 3 is an excerpt from the Washington students' comic book.

Chicago

The afterschool comic book club at Fenger High School was launched with a shaky start. The 25 high school students—African-American boys and girls—who signed up for the club were designated "apprentices": They were compensated $25 per class. In

return, they honed their craft and used it to help and inspire others in the community. While a comic book seemed ideal for spreading a positive message, students stared blankly at each other ten minutes into the first class. Where do we begin? How do we undertake such a large task? The teachers—two artists—were well-versed in drawing fantastic comic book characters, full of scrupulous details such as snarling teeth and shimmering eyes. Yet when it came to working with high school students, the teachers were much less experienced. Both had difficulty expressing the process and techniques that had become second nature to them. Furthermore, some students who had never considered themselves artists were unsure as to how they would fit into this environment. It seemed as though the comic book club would disintegrate.

The solution came from a student. He said, "Why don't we form teams? Some of us can draw. Some of us want to write. Some of us want to work on computers. If we can put it all together, then we can make a comic book." His statement was like the starting gun of a race. Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity. Desks shifted from the typical classroom rows to stations. Students organized themselves into departments: writing, art, editing, and layout. Each department assigned itself a representative to communicate with other departments. Interestingly, the teachers found a role for themselves, too. Rather than "teaching"—something they assumed should entail an authority figure in front of a silent class—they became mentors. They used their art to demonstrate ideas, which the children synthesized and then integrated into their work. By the end of the first club session, the comic book club had formed a production team that had a clear plan and was exuberant about the possibilities of what they could accomplish together.

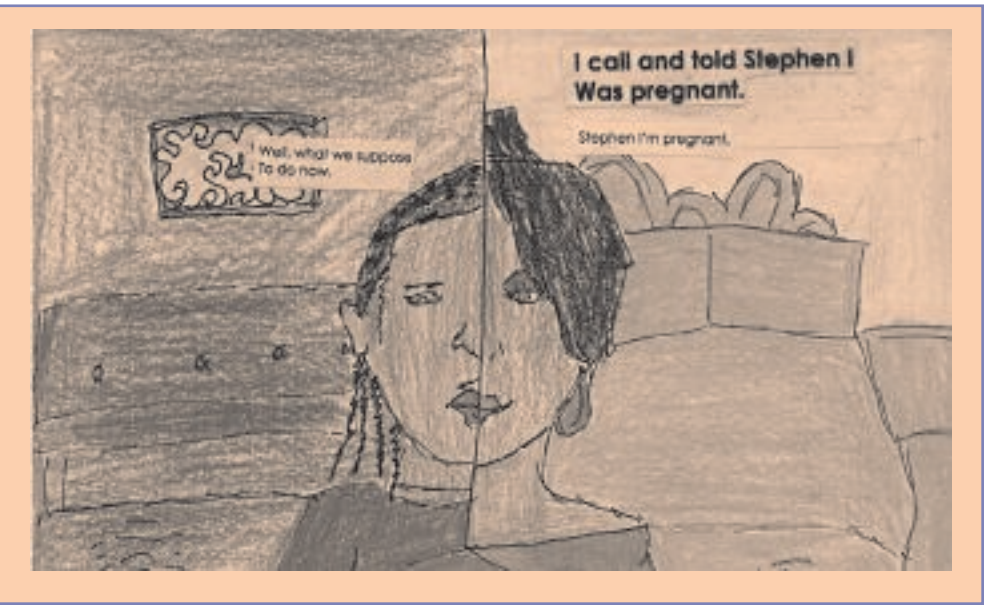
One of the most exciting aspects of this Chicago club is how it evolved over time. In the course of a month, the four production departments melded into three new teams, each with writers, artists, editors, and layout designers. The new formation resulted from creative differences over story lines. Rather than compromising their ideas to satisfy one story, the teams worked separately on three stories that resulted in three different comic books. However, the teams were not completely isolated, nor did they compete with each other. They shared ideas and resources; they felt comfortable enough to give and accept critiques of the work being produced. Moreover, all the students came to rely on the excellent advice of their two teachers. In allowing the club to take on this new shape, the teachers ensured that the voice of every student would be heard. No one got lost in the shuffle, and every opinion had merit.

The three comic books produced in this comic book club are very different. *The Last Shot* is about members of a basketball team who discover the importance of helping each other as well as those around them. The main character helps his teammates realize that there is more to life than what happens on the court (Figure 4, next page). *Teenage Abuse / I Am* is a strong statement about domestic abuse. Each panel begins with the statement, "I am an African American woman who…" (Figure 5). Finally, *What We Going to Do* is a realistic story about teen pregnancy (Figure 6).

THE ART OF DEMOCRACY

In all the data across the sites, one theme emerges as a notable common thread in both process and product—democracy. Although the models of afterschool comic book clubs were manifold, their processes in particular represented democracy in education. To be sure, the processes transcended simple democratic slogans such as "rule by the people" or "equal rights for all." Rather, the clubs embodied democracy at its most fundamental level by promoting intellectual freedom in one of the most undemocratic settings in the United States: a public school classroom. As opposed to the sometimes dictatorial relationship between teacher and student often found in school settings, the afterschool comic book clubs subverted that standard by valuing the voice of every individual among the whole. In fact, I can track the democratic element of these clubs by weighing their processes with the principal text on the subject, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916). In the sections that follow, portions of Dewey's seminal work frame my research findings on the democratic processes I documented in the afterschool comic book clubs. I will provide codes in parentheses (e.g., 1.1.1.1, Students have decision-making power) for various findings corresponding to the codebook excerpt in Table 1.

The solution came from a student. He said, "Why don't we form teams? Some of us can draw. Some of us want to write. Some of us want to work on computers. If we can put it all together, then we can make a comic book."



Figures 4, 5, and 6

Although the models of afterschool comic book clubs were manifold, their processes in particular represented democracy in education.

Education and Communication

"Society not only continues to exist by *transmission,* by *communication, but it may fairly be said to exist* in *transmission,* in *communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication"* (Dewey, 1916, p. 5).

At the core of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* is the role of communication as a function and goal of education. Through communication, societies transmit ideas, values, and histories; without communication, societies do not exist. Not coincidentally, communication was a primary function and goal of the afterschool comic book clubs I studied. Participating children communicated in numerous ways throughout the creative process. First was communication through speaking and listening. Discussions abounded on many subjects, ranging from the style of a particular comic book series to race relations in the neighborhood. These open, frank discussions were student-driven and often multilingual. They were impassioned discussions, simultaneously serious and entertaining, about life, school, and society. Observations consistently revealed students respecting each other's opinions in these discussions (1.1.1.5, Students respect opinions of others).

Next was communication through writing. Children did an extraordinary amount of writing as they planned their characters, outlined their plots, and wrote dialogue for their comic book panels. Sometimes the writing was freeform, as sketchbooks overflowed with clips of ideas and dialogue banked for future use. Other times the writing was structured, such as a manuscript that carried a comic book story from beginning to end. In many observed cases, teachers allowed students to choose how they would write the comic book (1.1.2.1, Instructors give students decision-making power).

Of course, artistic communication is central to the process of making comic books. The students' comic book panels represent identities, fictional and real. Figure 7, on page 13, shows a comic book panel by a fifth-grade girl in Baltimore. The character's expression conveys the student's feelings and experience in a unique and profound way. The viewer immediately recognizes anger and frustration, conveyed through simply drawn lines as steam rises from the character's

Figure 7

head. Yet the background also establishes the sentiment. The student consciously used a red background to bolster the anger conveyed by the creature in the foreground.

Unique to the process of making comic books is communication through an intertwining of art and writing. Students had to consider both throughout the entire process, as shortcomings in either the art or the writing would lead to a less successful product. Invariably, some students wrote first while others sketched first, depending on their skills and interests, but at some point the other communicative mode had to come into play. Artists had to become writers; writers were forced to consider art. The marriage of art and writing was most noticeable in what has been labeled "word art": illustrations of words to convey meaning beyond the words themselves. In designing word art, children considered the meanings that a word communicates, and then enhanced that meaning through visual impact. Figure 8 from a sixth-grade boy in New York City and Figure 9 from an eighth-grade boy in Cleveland (page 14) are prime examples.

Education as a Social Function

"A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account. For they are the indispensable conditions of the realization of his tendencies. When he moves he stirs them and reciprocally" (Dewey, 1916, p. 14).

Dewey's examination of the elements of socialization in classrooms is relevant to modern schooling. Many teachers attempt to discipline students by giving commands for proper behavior and then rewarding proper behavior with praise, material items such as stickers or candy, or special privileges. This approach tends to socialize individual children without encouraging them to consider the effect of their actions on others. The afterschool comic book clubs bucked this trend, as students had to consider their own actions in light of those around them. Because most children created their comic books collaboratively, a child could not simply begin to create a story. The child had to express ideas, communicate the meaning behind those ideas, and then—most importantly—figure out how those ideas corresponded with the ideas of other children in the group. Compromise was key, and code 1.1.1.3, Students compromise with peers, often marks the data.

This social process led to problem solving, an integral life skill that continues to elude educators. A variety of problem-solving methods was observed at the various comic book sites. At one site, children assigned each of their group members a different character in the comic book. A student was responsible for how his or her character looked, spoke, and acted. If another student was opposed to something in the story, the character, rather than the student, put forth the opposition and worked it into the story line. In another setting, students threw dice to decide how the story would progress. Each of the three group members would devise an idea for the next part of the story and pick a number; then the group rolled the dice

Because most children created their comic books collaboratively, a child could not simply begin to create a story. The child had to express ideas, communicate the meaning behind those ideas, and then—most importantly—figure out how those ideas corresponded with the ideas of other children in the group.

Figures 8 and 9

until one of the selected numbers came up—a random but fair way of giving group members equal influence in the decision-making process.

The excerpt below from a site observation illustrates how group problem solving transpired in the comic book clubs. The three comic book makers were seventh-graders in New York City—two males and one female.

John: Let's have the villain come down from Mars and take over the city.
Frank: No, from a planet that nobody's ever heard of.
Lucy: But I just said the villain was a cop. He's bad and does crime and stuff, remember?
John: But I drew this cool guy, with all these arms. See?
Frank: I know, let's have the bad cop turn into this monster whenever he's gonna do something bad.
John: Yeah!
Lucy: Um, OK. But I can't draw that thing.
John: No, you draw him when he's the cop, and I'll draw him when he turns into the monster.
Lucy: OK, yeah.

Interest and Discipline

"The problem of instruction is thus that of finding material which will engage a person in specific activities having an aim or purpose of moment or interest to him, and dealing with things not as gymnastic appliances but as conditions for the attainment of ends" (Dewey, 1916, p. 155).

Dewey was skeptical of "soft" pedagogy, in which instruction and materials play to a student's interests without improving academic disciplines. However, Dewey appreciated the fact that many student interests can be parlayed to develop academic learning and basic skills. In fact, if children use their personal interests as tools for learning, they often learn much more than they do when a teacher mandates every aspect of the lesson. This democratic element of learning was essential to the success of the afterschool comic book clubs. To begin with, the children chose to be there. They *wanted* to make comic books, *wanted* to write their stories and make art, *wanted* to present and publish their works. Because they were interested in the process, the learning extended from their interest.

Yet within the context of desire to make a comic book, children have many diverse interests. The afterschool clubs cultivated those interests as fodder for the content of the comic books. For example, in one class of fifth graders, two comic books, both by girls, were in progress on the day of the site observation. One comic book, titled *Glow Cheetah* (Figure 10), is a fantasy about a girl with telekinetic powers who defeats a sludge monster out to destroy the environment. The superhero Glow Cheetah flies through the air, reads minds, and battles a giant pink blob. It is a story about good versus evil, about doing the right thing. In contrast, *Cheerleading Choices* (Figure 11),

which was coming into form one desk over, is a story about a cheerleading squad featuring the very three girls who created the comic book. Here the main characters have to decide whether joining the cheerleading squad is worth turning their backs on another friend who is not pretty enough to make the team. In the end, the girls decide that their friendship is more valuable than popularity. This too is a story about good versus evil, about doing the right thing.

Despite the different interests exhibited by these two comic books, they both demonstrate how creating comic books can help advance academic skills. *Glow Cheetah's* creators had the monster say, "I think I will make them my *prisonors*." This was a chance for the teacher to reinforce spelling skills. The same occurred in *Cheerleading Choices* when a cheerleader said: "I can't wait to go to *practise* tomorrow." When the heroine of *Glow Cheetah* said, "*Its* for the best," and a character in *Cheerleading Choices* said, "*Its* going to be fun," the teacher reviewed *its* and *it's* with the entire class. In another instance, the students in both groups decided to split one of their larger panels into three parts. They had to figure out how to divide their drawing into thirds—the teacher put the fraction 1/3 on the board and then compared it to 2/3 and 3/3. Clearly, academic skills were advanced in this afterschool setting. The students' interests were what kept them there, so that they could learn—actively, willingly, critically, and democratically (1.1.1.1, Students have decision-making power; 1.1.2.1, Instructors give students decision-making power).

The Individual and the World

"A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures" (Dewey, 1916, p. 357).

Dewey espoused individualism as an extremely important factor in a democratic society's educational system. Yet schools often fail to foster individualism. After all, schools are measured by student performance on a *standardized* test. Each question on that test has one correct answer, and generally there is one proper way to arrive at that answer. Individualism is a drawback, not an asset, in this situation. For this reason, some of the world's greatest thinkers—from Einstein to Edison—had difficulty in school. Fortunately, individualism is not squelched in afterschool settings; the

Figures 10 and 11

Because they were interested in the process, the learning extended from their interest.

comic book clubs are populated by many creative, thoughtful individuals.

Interviews with children in one Philadelphia club demonstrate just how individual a child can be if

given intellectual freedom. One girl wrote a comic book about a mermaid who had to continue shedding her clothes because of rising water temperatures due to global warming. A boy created a comic book in which he, as the main character, played a video game only to realize that he was controlling his very own future on the screen—his decisions in the game affected events in his life. In another comic book, the male author entered a new universe every time he walked into his bedroom door. He could only return home via the alluring smell of his mother's fried chicken. When asked why he devised such a creative story, the student said, "I was allowed to" (1.1.1.1, Students have decision-making power; 1.3.1.4, Intellectual freedom).

Critical to this process were the afterschool instructors who allowed children to take these creative risks and become individual thinkers. Codes 1.1.2.1, Instructors give students decision-making power, and 1.1.2.2, Instructors give students say in club direction, appeared frequently in most data relating to instructors. In almost all the sites observed, the instructors had forged special relationships with their students—relationships of trust and friendship, of mutual respect and tolerance. The instructors guided

Figure 12

met by a "Sssh!!" However, the discussions behind the decibels were real and excited, with ideas bouncing from one student to the next. Clearly, these club settings represented safe places for learning, creating, and sharing.

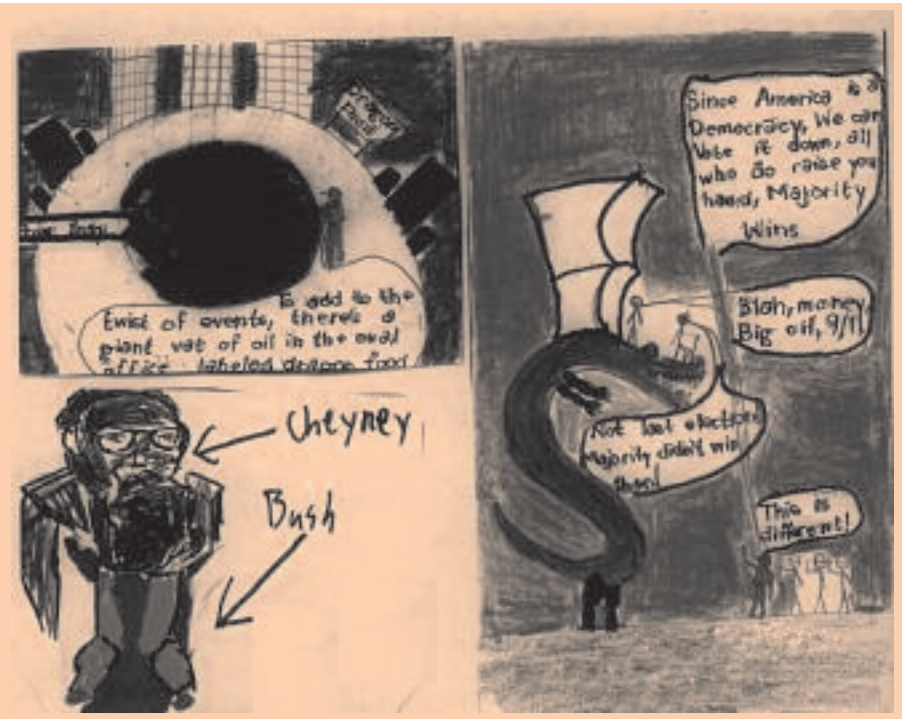
When asked why he devised such a creative story, the student said, "I was allowed to."

and mentored but rarely lectured. Occasionally, the class stopped for an instructor to demonstrate or to put forth a new idea, but these breaks in the flow were short and occasional. Of special note was the lack of behavioral problems in the observed classrooms. The instructors rarely admonished students. The children were buried deep in their stories or sketches. All the typical reasons for acting out, from academic shortfalls to personal conflicts, fell by the wayside. The cumulative class volume occasionally got too loud and was

PROCESS TO PRODUCT: DEMOCRACY AS ART

While the process of the comic book clubs represents democracy in education, the comic books themselves represent democracy at large. Many students created comic books about world leaders, social policies, and international conflicts. Their work embodies free speech: the ability to criticize people and events that shape the students' lives. These politically oriented comic books are often thoughtful, occasionally polemic, but always creative. A look at some of these works reveals the children's depth of understanding of, and personal investment in, democracy.

A prime example is a one-page comic book titled *The Plight of Tibet* by a ninth-grade boy in New York



Figures 13 and 14

City (Figure 12). The first panel introduces Tibet to the reader: "Tibet was a very peaceful, quiet place with no war. It is known as 'The Roof of the World.' There are three parts of Tibet (Amdo, Kham, and U'Tsang)." The student describes Tibet's bucolic setting—nomads traveling with yaks, pandas eating bamboo—but the scene changes as soldiers line up in rows. He writes: "In 1959 Chinese troops started taking over Tibet. They had planned it 10 years before." The next panels are graphic illustrations of Chinese soldiers killing unarmed Tibetan citizens. Perhaps the most chilling of the scenes is a depiction of snow-white mountains under a bright blue sky. The mountains are covered with tiny black dots. The student writes: "These tiny dots represent humans on the mountains. They are trying to escape the Chinese army. Most died on the way because it's too cold and theres not enough oxygen to breathe." The comic book ends with a call to action: "These horrible crimes are still going on today! FREE TIBET NOW!" (1.1.1.6, Students voice/demonstrate political views; 1.2.3.4, China; 1.3.1.1, Free speech; 1.3.1.2, Right to protest; 1.3.1.4, Intellectual freedom).

Another example of democracy as art is a comic book titled *Being President Isn't Everything* by a fifth-grade girl in Washington, DC (Figure 13). The day starts with the President in the Oval Office. It is a sunny, quiet day, but the President senses that something is amiss. Suddenly a green-faced villain named Money Stealburg bursts through the door, stuffs the President into a closet, and declares himself the nation's new leader. Life is good for Money Stealburg; he has money, a new office, and—most importantly—power. In a television address, Stealburg declares himself leader of not only the United States but the entire world. As the new leader takes over, citizens become disgruntled. One apathetic individual says, "Hmm, I see we have a new President. I need a new job." Soon the citizenry becomes angry and starts to riot. Stealburg flees, bags of money in hand, saying, "I quit! It's too much responsibility!" Eventually he is captured and imprisoned. The coup has failed, but the people have suffered immensely (1.1.1.6, Students voice/demonstrate political views; 1.2.1.1, The Presidency; 1.2.1.4, Effect on citizenry; 1.2.1.5, Corruption; 1.3.2, Rule by the people; 1.3.3.2, Ability to make change through civic engagement).

While the President in *Being President Isn't Everything* is nondescript, many student comic books revolved around President Bush. Without exception, all were critical of Bush and his cabinet. One comic book by an eighth-grade boy in Hartford shows President Bush in the Oval Office (Figure 14); there's a giant vat of oil in the middle of the room labeled "dragon food." Another panel shows President Bush and Vice-President Cheney superimposed into one Picasso-esque character. The last panel shows Bush and Cheney atop a fearsome dragon saying: "Blah, money, big oil, 9/11." A group of people below the dragon says, "Since America is a democracy, we can

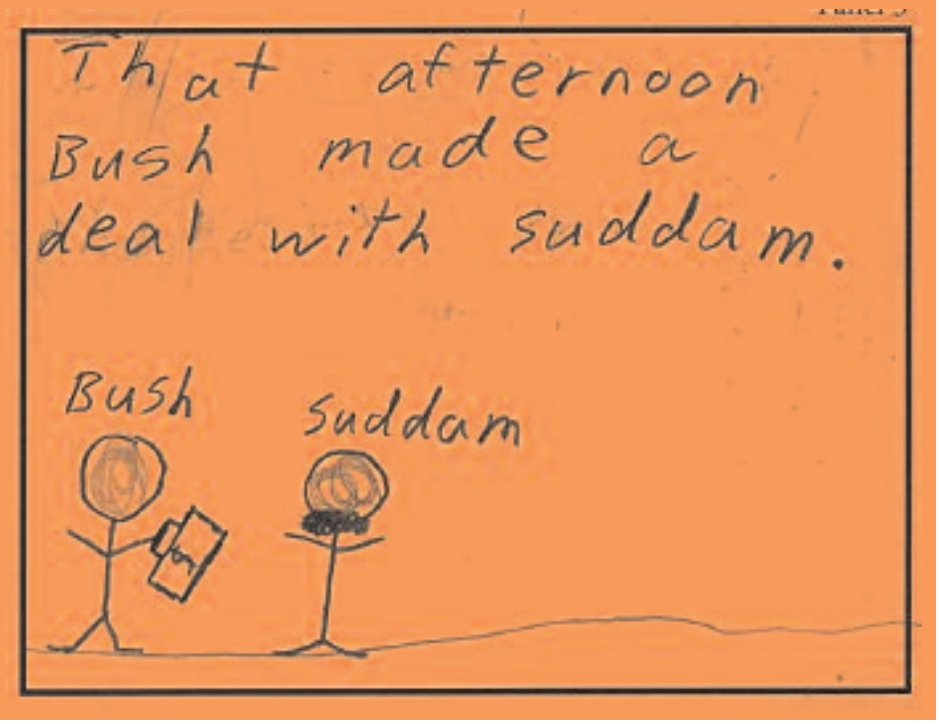


Figure 15

vote it down. All who do raise you hand. Majority wins." The President responds, "Not last election! Majority didn't win then!" The people are defiant: "This is different!" (1.1.1.6, Students voice/demonstrate political views; 1.2.1.1.1, President Bush; 1.2.1.2.1, Vice-President Cheney; 1.2.1.3, Elections; 1.2.1.4, Effect on citizenry; 1.2.1.5, Corruption; 1.2.3.1.1, War in Iraq; 1.3.1.1, Free speech).

The war in Iraq was another common theme. *The Big War in Iraq* by a fifth-grade boy in Philadelphia is a diatribe led by stick figures (Figure 15). It begins, "Today Bush is talking to the troops and makeing a war." Bush then flies to Iraq to make a deal with Saddam Hussein. Bush gives Hussein a million dollars for a gallon of oil before they celebrate over cigars. Each leader goes back to his respective troops and says, "Hey everybody, let's have a war." Once the war commences, the comic book features scorecards representing death tolls on each side. The war ends with nuclear blasts killing everyone on both sides (1.1.1.6, Students voice/demonstrate political views; 1.2.1.1.1, President Bush; 1.2.1.5, Corruption; 1.2.3.1.1, War in Iraq).

Students who elect to participate in these programs are encouraged to express themselves and to take risks in what they say, draw, and write.

Despite its clearly skewed political bent, *The Big War in Iraq,* like many other similar comic books, highlights an important facet of afterschool education related to civic engagement. Clearly, this student has something to say about world events. He is neither lackadaisical nor disinterested in politics. He may feel angry or even enraged—but it is important to note both that he is able to express those feelings and that he has an outlet in which to do so. Moreover, this student took the issues beyond the pages of his comic book. He organized a school rally against the war, using panels from his comic book as posters for the event. Soon after it was announced, the rally was squelched by the school administration; in its place the afterschool program held a debate featuring voices from both sides of the issue. With little doubt, the children in these comic book clubs—perhaps some of our future leaders—are civically engaged and excited by the democratic process.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION AT RISK

The story of afterschool comic book clubs is in many ways a story about afterschool education itself. Many advocates speak of afterschool programs as a safe place for children after school. However, afterschool programs offer more than mere physical safety; intellectual safety is fostered as well. Students who elect to participate in these programs are encouraged to express themselves and to take risks in what they say, draw, and write. They use creative methods to put their knowledge into practice and application. All of these things occur in the comic book clubs, but they occur in many other afterschool clubs as well: film production, hip-hop dance, slam poetry, and on and on.

Unfortunately, comic book clubs often fall victim to the ever-increasing constraints on afterschool programs. For example, the comic book club at MS 143 in Brooklyn produced some extraordinary middle school artists and writers. Of special note was a girl named Kennia who wrote a comic book titled *Keep the Water Clean!!* (Figure 16, page 19) about environmental awareness, community action, and leadership—all important elements of a well-informed democratic perspective. However, despite the incredible work put forth by Kennia and her fellow comic book creators, that afterschool comic book club no longer exists. It was replaced by a test preparation program.

Though the program was discontinued, Kennia's comic book remains as a testament to the power of

creativity in learning. The art is vivid, the writing clear. But the content of the work is what marks it as truly special. The characters take a stand against problems in their community. They rally, they protest, they speak out. In other words, the characters exercise their democratic freedoms, as the author did in creating her comic book. Despite the hardships that Kennia and the thousands of students like her may face, they have clear voices inspired by their experiences and knowledge. They are using comic books and other forms of youth media to make their voices heard; their afterschool programs are providing the stage and increasing the volume. While John Dewey would be proud of what these children have accomplished, it would be more satisfying to know that educators around the world have embraced comic book clubs and similar creative programs as examples of learning at its best and most authentic. We can only hope that the afterschool programs will survive to tell the story.

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Figure 16

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NOTES

[1] The term "ninth art" originates from French author Claude Beylie's 1964 extension of Manifesto of the Seven Arts by Italian film theoretician Ricciotto Canudo. Canudo developed a list of the seven most important arts; architecture was first and cinema seventh. Beylie added television and comics.

[2] All excerpts from students' writing are presented without corrections.