

Acts of Invention: The Afterschool Program as a Site for Building Community¹

by Kirsten Cole

Adira² sits up straight and speaks firmly: “When somebody tells me to shut up, it makes me feel mad. It makes me feel like they don’t care about what I’m saying.”

Nodding in assent, Luke adds, “You feel disrespected.”

“Yeah, it makes me mad. It makes me feel like punching them,” says Stacey, leaning forward on the edge of her seat for emphasis.

Around the circle kids mutter and nod in agreement. On this night, as on many other nights, we are talking about how we want to be treated—or, more often, how we don’t want to be treated. Each night our community meeting revisits this conversation in some form, with the goal of arriving at some consensus about how we want the after-school community to look and feel. Today, for some reason, “Shut up” was flung more than usual, so after dinner I decided to focus the meeting around a discussion of that phrase and its meaning.

“Okay,” I say, “So it makes us all feel really bad when people say ‘Shut up.’ But sometimes people say things that hurt our feelings, and we need to be able to ask them to stop talking in a way that hurts us. What are some other ways that you could let people know that what they’re saying is not okay?”

After a pause, Ginger ventures, “You could say, ‘Be quiet.’” Pilar jumps in, animated: “You could tell them, ‘Mind your business!’” “How ’bout that tone, though, Pilar?” my co-worker Assata follows up. “When you use that voice, do you think you might make them feel the same way as when you say, ‘Shut up’?”

Some nights the community meeting feels amazingly redundant to me. When we asked at the opening of the meeting last night if anyone had anything they wanted to talk about, Ryan asked if we could talk about the problem of people talking about other people’s mamas. The night before, Najwa wanted to talk about people not minding their business. The topics change, but the underlying themes are often the same: issues of respect and feelings of anger that come from feeling disrespected. Some nights when I go home, I can’t believe we have had to hold yet another community meeting around the problem of making fun of people’s clothes. If we all know how badly it makes us feel to be disrespected, why can’t we just agree to stop doing it?

¹ Cole, K. (2004). *Acts of Invention: The Afterschool Program as a Site for Building Community Afterschool Matters*.

² All names have been changed.

Back around the circle, we continue to work together to identify appropriate alternatives to “Shut up.”

“You could use a nice voice.”

“You could ignore them.”

“You could say, ‘You’re hurting my feelings.’”

“You could tell a teacher.”

As we talk the problem out together, participants’ voices range from tentative and questioning to firm and assertive. Some speak with a gentle tone, while others are agitated or ebullient. I may be frustrated by the recurrence of common themes in our community meeting, but, if I listen closely, I can hear another layer to our nightly conversation. When I realize that in different ways each individual is trying to find his or her own voice in this forum, I can marvel at how we are working collectively to address issues that even most adults find challenging.

A Space for Building Community

The FUN (Family University) Afterschool Program is housed at the Learning Center for Educators and Families (LCEF), part of the School of Education at Long Island University. At LCEF, the School of Education offers undergraduate and graduate education courses, tutoring programs for children from the surrounding neighborhood, and our afterschool program, which serves the children of low-income students at the university. Approximately 80 percent of the families we serve are African-American (many Caribbean-American), and 20 percent Latino/a (many Puerto Rican and Dominican). The children in the program are 6 to 12 years old; all of our activities engage children across this age range. Our operating budget is a large grant through the federal Department of Education’s CCAMPIS (Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools) Program. This funding allows us to offer the program free of charge to all participants. We serve a substantial healthy snack when the kids arrive and a nutritious dinner later in the evening. We have an ample budget for art supplies, books, games, and computers. When the staff faces a challenge with a particular child, from adding fractions to anger and alienation, we meet with education faculty who have expertise in that area to get assistance in developing strategies to address the issue. Perhaps most importantly, we have a consistently low ratio of adults to children, usually no more than 1:4.

I have worked with the program since its inception in January 2002, first as a teaching artist and now as director. Other program staff are Assata and Jamal, who work part time, 28 and 25 hours a week respectively. They are with the children for all activities throughout the program day and have time before children arrive each afternoon for planning and set-up. Assata, the education coordinator, oversees all academic aspects of the program and supervises the staff of 4–6 college work-study students who provide tutoring during two homework help sessions each day. Jamal, the teaching artist, oversees

all the creative arts activities. I am a European-American woman, Assata is an African-American woman, and Jamal is a Caribbean-American man. Though we wear different hats in the program, we all identify ourselves as artists and work collaboratively in planning and executing all creative arts activities with the children. Each week we have an hour and a half allotted for our regular staff meeting, when we discuss questions we are having about specific children and address such larger issues as working toward an anti-bias curriculum or learning effective conflict resolution skills. In addition to our regular staff meetings, we often chat informally at the beginning of each day while setting up art materials and snack, sharing anecdotes from the previous day or observations about a particular child. I am often struck by how well we know these kids. Each child feels strongly connected to at least one, if not all, of the adults in the program.

Staff and college student tutors participate in all activities alongside the children, from painting to ball games, from journal writing to eating dinner. Throughout all these activities, we share stories, engage in active debates, and very often make each other laugh. Each night after dinner, we all participate in a community meeting, which Assata, Jamal, or I facilitate. The format of the meeting is loosely scripted. The facilitator may open the meeting by pointing out something that has happened in the community during the day, posing a question about that issue, for example, “How does it make you feel when someone tells you to shut up?” Some days the issue for discussion is identified by the staff; other days the facilitator opens the floor to see if any of the children have a pressing issue that they would like to bring to the group. The facilitator then makes time for each child and adult in the circle to respond to the question. This initial go-round is followed by further discussion of the issue with the goal of arriving at consensus about how we want to address the issue in the future.

Fostering Civility in an Uncivil Society

With the suggestions of alternatives to “Shut up,” we seem to be reaching a natural end to the nightly meeting. Then Hector raises his hand. “But I have a question,” he begins. “What if you’re in school and the teacher tells the kids to ‘shut up?’ What are you to do if the teacher says it?”

I shake my head and say, “Wow, well, Hector, I’m really sorry that happened to you. I personally don’t ever think it’s okay for a teacher to say ‘Shut up’ to a student, because of all the reasons we just talked about, about how it makes you feel when anyone says ‘Shut up.’” Knowing that Hector’s mother is a vocal advocate for her children, I suggest, “If I were you I would make sure and tell your mom that the teacher is speaking to you that way. Then maybe she could talk to the principal about it.”

Around me, kids are bursting to speak. “Yeah,” volunteers Miguel “There was a teacher at my old school who told the kids to ‘Shut the H-E-double-L up.’ If that was my teacher I woulda popped him.”

“But, Miguel, that’s not cool either. Do you know that if you hit a teacher you could get yourself in a lot of trouble?” Assata says in a voice that is simultaneously stern and gentle.

“Naw, naw, son. Nobody’s gonna do me like that. My cousin’s in the army. He could come to my school and. . . .” Miguel slams his right fist into his left palm.

“Okay, first of all, don’t call me ‘son.’ But you know what, though, it’s true. You and your cousin could get in a lot of trouble. We really need to talk about an appropriate response to that kind of situation,” Assata emphasizes. “I want to follow up on Hector’s question. Another thing you could do is wait, maybe until the next day, and then you could speak to your teacher in private, without a whole audience and when they’ve had a chance to cool down. You could let them know how it made you feel when they talked to you that way, that it makes you feel bad. Maybe you could make suggestions to your teacher about other ways they could ask the class to be quiet.”

The kids are excited now. One after another they want to volunteer stories of teachers who yell and curse at their students, teachers who make the class do squats when they’re “being bad,” teachers who throw erasers in class, and a few who have hit students. I glance up at the clock and see that it’s time to move on to homework and other activities, but, each time I try to wrap things up, three more hands shoot up. As we talk, I realize that some of the stories seem to be embellished for the audience, especially those that begin, “My friend had this teacher. . . .” Yet, in many of the stories, the tellers still feel keenly the painful impact of the events.

I leave the meeting feeling depressed. Ironically, the children seem more affable than usual. Jamal observed, after we had a community teach-in to talk about the children’s understandings and experiences of the “nword,” that, when we talk about difficult subjects, the kids seem to respond as if a weight has been lifted off their shoulders. As adults who are involved in their lives, we listen to the tales of injustice they’ve suffered and feel incredibly demoralized. But the fact that someone has listened and said to them, “The way you were treated was wrong,” seems to empower and enliven them. For the rest of the night there is a little bit more sharing, a little bit less teasing, and a lightness in the things we do together.

In his book *Making Play Work: The Promise of After-School Programs for Low Income Children*, researcher and educator Robert Halpern studies the historical development of afterschool program and compares a broad range of present-day incarnations, documenting the qualities of “programs that reflect ideals for the field” (Halpern, 2003, p. 125). Many of Halpern’s conclusions about the qualities of successful after-school programs have to do with ways that program staff make space for children in their programming, from working with an emergent curriculum to allowing ample time for children’s voices to be heard. Halpern explains that in these programs,

Staff created settings in which children felt safe and valued and yet could also explore who they were and where they fit. The programs focused on

relationships as well as tasks, making time for conversation about life as well as for talk about the work at hand. . . . Staff recognized the importance of affirming for children that they had something to contribute, to say, while also recognizing that some children were reluctant to take risks associated with creativity and engagement itself (Halpern, 2003, p. 131).

When I ask myself again, “Why does it seem that every day we have to revisit the conversation about the many ways we could be more respectful with each other?” I realize I know the answer: because every day kids are encountering forces that challenge the notion of community we are trying to foster. In moments of frustration, our discussions look to me like nothing more than cyclical rehashing of old issues. What these discussions really show, though, is the critical space we’re opening for children at the FUN Program—the space Halpern describes, where children are given room to find their voice and where they feel that adults support them in expressing their concerns and articulating the kind of world they want to build together.

In a film about anti-bias curricula, teacher-researcher Vivian Gussin Paley asserts, “The teacher, I think, is in the preeminent position, more so than the doctor, the lawyer or any other profession I can think of, to invent a kinder society” (as cited in McGovern, 1997). Learning how to treat each other with care and respect should be one of the most important components of a child’s education. Unfortunately, for many of the kids we serve, the afterschool program may be the first place where they have been invited to participate in fostering a kinder society. When I chat with parents as they pick up their children at the end of the day, they often thank us for being the first place outside the home where their child was given room to talk about the racism he or she has encountered. As they marvel at their child’s advances in painting, they also mention, in the same breath, that the child is getting in fewer fights at school since coming to the after-school program.

A Unique Role for Afterschool Programs

Most days, I go home all too aware of the fact that what we have had the opportunity to build at the FUN Program looks like a luxury. I recognize that, if I were a classroom teacher with 40 kids in my room and no budget for books or pencils, I might well crack under the pressure too. In the FUN Program afterschool program, we have the opportunity to work with kids in a more holistic way, without the onus of having to raise test scores. Freed of that burden, we are left with time to make art, to tell stories, to play games, and to listen to each other. Afterschool education researchers Noam, Biancarosa, and Dechausay (2003) explain the multifaceted nature of afterschool programs and describe how they function as “intermediary spaces.” They write, “Afterschool connects to academic work without serving as a school, takes on aspects of family life (such as comfort, security and recreation) without becoming a family and instills community consciousness without becoming a civic group” (p. 5).

In the space between home and school and community where the FUN Program resides, we have the gifts of time and freedom. The program I direct is well enough supported that I can make in-depth staff development and planning a priority throughout the year. As a staff, our priority is to make space for children—space both to explore their imaginative worlds using a variety of arts materials and to find their voices in the context of our community. As a result, we have a program where children and adults feel supported and have the energy and commitment to participate in community building. Our arts-based focus gives children who might not be considered achievers in the classroom a chance to feel accomplished and valued. As a community of adults and children learning side-by-side, we participate in rousing board games, drumming workshops, and book-making projects. And each night we hold community meetings where we strive to hear each other better.

I am the first to admit that what we're trying to do in the afterschool program often feels slow to take root. Kids still tease each other every day. Our community meetings are often filled with disruptions when kids who feel uncomfortable with what we're talking about attempt to distract the rest of the group. At the end of the year, I'm always left with a sense of frustration that we didn't do all we set out to do. I remind myself that community building takes time, that inventing a kind society requires a lifetime of commitment. When kids who feel uncomfortable with what we're talking about attempt to distract the rest of the group. At the end of the year, I'm always left with a sense of frustration that we didn't do all we set out to do. I remind myself that community building takes time, that inventing a kind society requires a lifetime of commitment. Such a society needs space to grow. Perhaps as intermediary spaces, as spaces that bridge home and school and community, as spaces that make room for dialogue and uncertainty, afterschool programs are in a unique position to nurture the kind of community we're committed to building at the FUN Program. I can think of many instances in which the kids treated each other with disrespect. Yet they've treated each other with care and joy more times than I can count.

One night, as our community meeting broke up and we prepared to move on to other activities, Franklin and Miguel asked if they could perform a rap they had prepared for Antoine in celebration of his ninth birthday that day. Seven months before, when Antoine began the program, he had sought the attention—perhaps too avidly—of these two older boys, who initially ignored him before slowly warming to him. On this night, Franklin beat-boxed while Miguel launched into three verses of the performers' appreciation of the younger boy and their recognition of his birthday. As we sat in the circle together, Antoine leapt up and began to shake his hips and clap along in time to the rhythm. When the rap ended, we all applauded and let out loud whoops. Franklin and Miguel smiled shyly and were uncharacteristically quiet during the applause. Antoine beamed. Moments later we dispersed, to homework and painting and chess, and I chatted briefly with Miguel and Franklin. "That was amazing, you guys. When did you come up with that?"

They shrugged their shoulders, obviously pleased with the praise but not wanting to reveal how much: "You know, we've been working on that for a little while." As I moved on to the next activity, I felt a deep sense of appreciation that we'd all had "a little

while”— a little while for Miguel and Franklin to create and practice and perform; a little while for Antoine to be celebrated on his birthday; and a little while for all of us to make time for an unexpected, unscheduled event that made us smile as we went on into the night together.

References

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About the Author

Kirsten Cole is the Director of the FUN (Family University) Afterschool Program at Long Island University's Brooklyn Campus. A member of the Robert Bowne Foundation Fellowship for 2002–2003, she is conducting research in the field of afterschool education. In 1999, she received an M.F.A. in textiles from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. As an artist, she considers working with children to be one of the most creative acts she can participate in.