

The
**Robert
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Afterschool Matters

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

The Art of Democracy/ Democracy as Art:

Creative Learning in
Afterschool
Comic Book Clubs

MICHAEL BITZ

Civic Connections:

Urban Debate and
Democracy in Action
during Out-of-School Time

GEORGIA HALL

#7 FALL 2006



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The Robert Bowne Foundation publishes Afterschool Matters Occasional Papers twice a year. This series provides a venue for publishing research that explores key issues in the theory and practice of afterschool programming, youth development, and learning during the non-school hours.

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AFTERSCHOOL MATTERS INITIATIVE

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

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

AFTERSCHOOL MATTERS/OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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

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

Copies of both *Afterschool Matters* and the Occasional Papers are available on the RBF website, www.robertbownefoundation.org.

RESEARCH GRANTS/RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

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

Now in its fourth year, the RBF Research Fellowship is dedicated to building the capacity of youth program staff to design and conduct research in the areas of youth development and education during the out-of-school hours. The goals of the Research Fellowship include generating and disseminating research in the area of education in community-based organizations serving youth during the out-of-school hours, building a network of scholars, contributing to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice, and informing policy in the area of community-based youth programs.

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

Michael Bitz

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

Engaging children in creating comic books reinforces many of the academic skills that school teachers so desperately struggle to instill.

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 chil-

dren 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,

For children in inner-city areas, where needs are diverse but resources are limited, authentic arts experiences can be lifelines to a better future.

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.

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

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(*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*



Figure 1

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.

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.

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.

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 fantasized 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.



Figure 2

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

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

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.

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

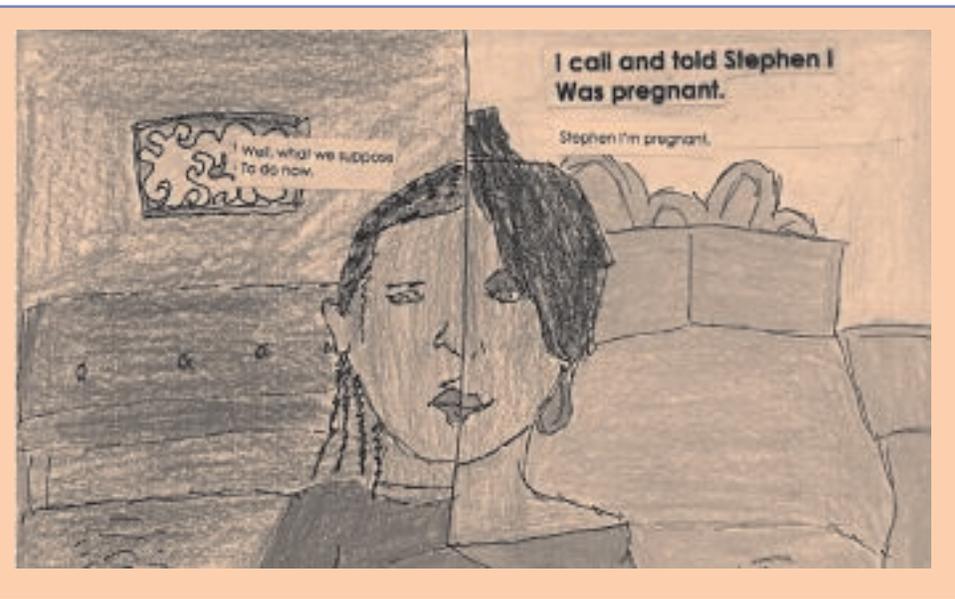
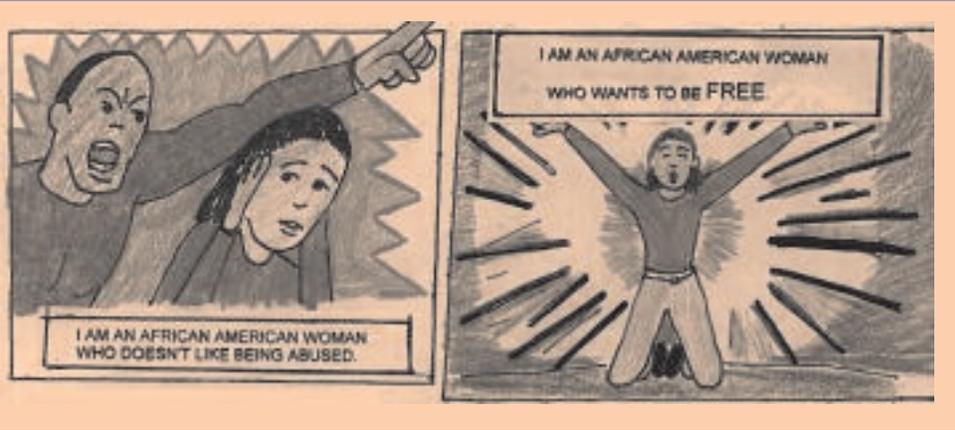
the club to take on this new shape, the teachers ensured that the voice of every student would be heard. No one got lost in the shuffle, and every opinion had merit.

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

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,



Figure 7

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

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.

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



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.



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.

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 $\frac{1}{3}$ on the board and then compared it to $\frac{2}{3}$ and $\frac{3}{3}$. 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

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



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.

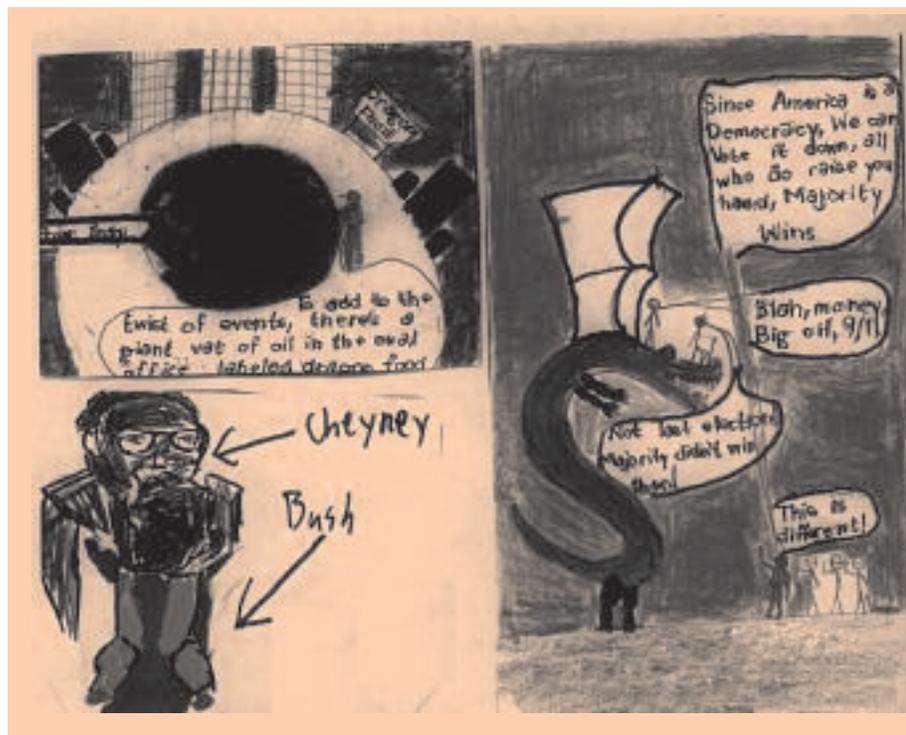
PROCESS TO PRODUCT: DEMOCRACY AS ART

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

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 there’s 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



Figures 13 and 14

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

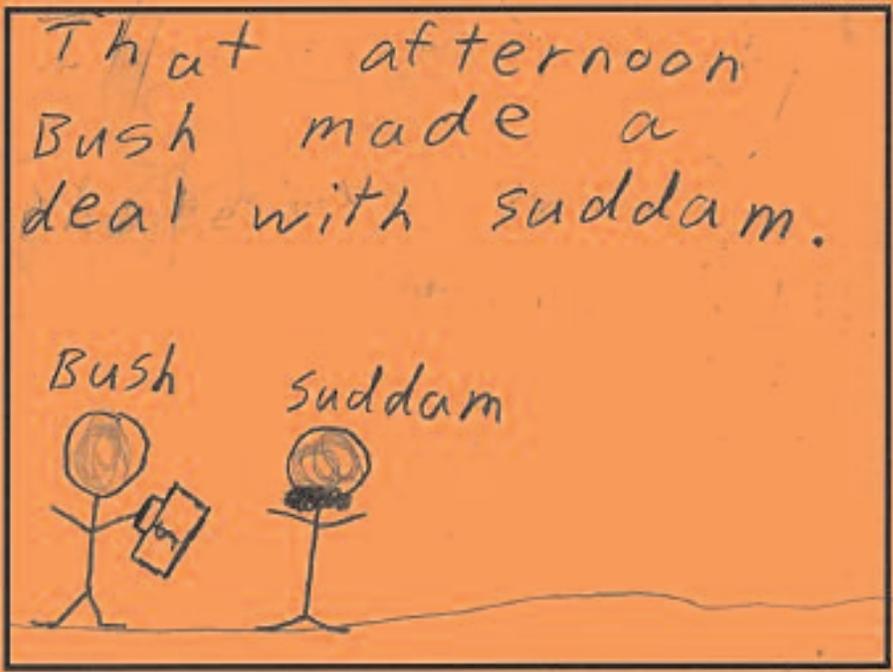


Figure 15

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 making a

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

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).

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 after-school 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 after-school 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.

Civic Connections:

Urban Debate and Democracy in Action during Out-of-School Time

Georgia Hall

Executive Summary

This paper examines the approach of urban debate leagues, and specifically the New York Urban Debate League, to democracy skill building and civic engagement. In the face of concerns about lack of civic engagement and knowledge among young people, such out-of-school-time programs can often reach youth bypassed by traditional sources of civic and democracy development, providing a vision of what “democracy in action” for underserved youth might look like. Such democracy skill-building experiences can empower youth to become engaged learners and participating citizens.

On a crisp Saturday morning in March in the Bronx, about 200 youth are packing into the Wings Academy school cafeteria for one of many New York Urban Debate tournaments. It's eight in the morning. The teens are in their usual attire, sporting baggy jeans, baseball caps, and knapsacks. They talk on cell phones and keep the soda machine active—but they also are working: holding portfolios, tapping on laptops, and shuffling manila envelopes labeled “Negative” and “Affirmative.” One middle-school-aged girl is practicing debate dialogue while her peer listens and then offers some advice: “You should add more emotion to your last paragraph.” The girl tries again, this time sounding more convincing. Her peer approves.

These two middle school students are engaging in democracy skill building. The forum in which they are doing it, an urban debate league, may offer a model for using out-of-school time to foster democratic skills. Why is democracy skill building important? Active participation is crucial for the longevity and fidelity of our democracy, while lack of civic engagement contributes to existing educational, economic, and employment inequities. Full participation in democracy skill building is vital for all youth.

Research has shown that young people who do not have regular discussions about politics are more likely than those who do to be African American and Hispanic, while they are less likely to be college

bound, Internet users, well-educated, or registered to vote (Soule, 2001). The political advantages of socioeconomic status, stockpiled over a lifetime (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), may result, in part, from more opportunity to engage in clubs, youth organizations, and public service. Research on communities and youth civic engagement has suggested that youth-serving organizations—Little League, YMCA, 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, and the like—are less represented in poorer neighborhoods. Socioeconomic advantage apparently affords youth opportunities for civic connection and civic practice (Connell & Halpern-Felsher, 1997; Flanagan & Faison, 2001).

By reaching out across communities to youth bypassed by traditional sources of civic and democracy development, democracy skill-building experiences such as urban debate can empower youth to become engaged learners, critical thinkers, and active citizens. This paper investigates the following questions:

- In what ways can out-of-school-time and youth development programs be part of the vision of a more informed and active citizenry?
- What might “democracy in action” look like in out-of-school-time and youth development programs?

The photographs in this article are from the New York Urban Debate League Tournament, Spring 2005.

While periods such as the 1960s were rich in youth political involvement, civic participation of youth has declined over the past 40 years. While participation has decreased, cynicism about our institutions and leaders has increased.

- What program and policy infrastructures are needed to support a civic engagement and democracy skill-building role for out-of-school-time and youth development programs?

In the first section of the paper, I discuss the current thinking and literature on the status of youth democracy skill building and civic engagement, including information on research-based predictors.¹ Then I examine a variety of approaches for civic development, highlighting the unique role for out-of-school-time programs and a positive youth development strategy. In the next section, I explore evidence of democracy skill building and civic engagement gathered through research on youth development and civic engagement programs, particularly urban debate. The paper concludes with recommendations for youth program providers, policymakers, and other individuals and organizations seeking to foster youth democracy development and participation during out-of-school time.

DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Historically, educators and government leaders have agreed that preserving a democracy requires developing democratic skills in its citizens. Our society relies on its people to make deliberate choices about the direction of their collective life (Battistoni, 1985). Yet how we think about the formation of democratic citizens depends on the specific conception of democracy we hold, whether it is a set of skills, level of participation, civic discourse, mobilization, or the exercise of certain rights and responsibilities (Galston, 2001).

Political thinkers, educators, and policymakers have described democratic development or civic engagement in a variety of ways. John Dewey (1916) is one of the influential thinkers who articulated that democracy is more than a form of government: “It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 101). Speaking of the impor-

ance of developing democratic principles, Ravitch and Viteritti (2001) noted, “Unless they [the public] understand deeply the sources of our democracy, they will take it for granted and fail to exercise their rights and responsibilities” (p. 28). Remy (1980) suggested that civic education “involves learning and instruction related to the development of citizen competence” (p. 1). Denver and Hands (1990) defined political literacy as “the knowledge and understanding of the political process and political issues which enable people to perform their roles as citizens effectively” (p. 263).

While an earlier notion of citizenship was “mastering a body of facts” (Battistoni, 1985, p. 90), a more recent premise is that citizenship should mean active participation with rigorous interpersonal discussion. The earlier notion was easily reflected in the school curriculum through activities such as memorizing the names of presidents, learning the functions of government, or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution. The more recent notion recognizes the interdependence of society (Battistoni, 1985). Gibson (2001), writing for the Carnegie Foundation, explained that “the heart of a healthy democracy is a citizenry actively engaged in civic life—taking responsibility for building communities, solving community problems, and participating in the electoral and political processes” (p. 1).

A report by the National Center for Education Statistics (Niemi & Chapman, 1999) on the civic development of ninth- to twelfth-grade students in the U.S. offered five elements to describe the civic values to be encouraged among American youth:

- Knowledge of government and how it operates
- Awareness of and attention to politics and government
- Skills to participate in political processes
- Confidence in their ability to influence government through political processes
- Tolerance of diverse opinions

DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Levels of youth political involvement and activity have fluctuated over time. While periods such as the 1960s were rich in youth political involvement, civic participation of youth has declined over the past 40 years. While participation has decreased, cynicism about our institutions and leaders has increased. Some political theorists and researchers believe we are faced with a citizenry that is “less informed,” “less interested,” and “less inclined” to participate (Berman, 1997, p. 5).

Evidence of Decline

The 2003 report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) titled *The Civic Mission of Schools* noted that young people are not only less likely to vote, but also less interested in political discussion and public issues than both their older counterparts and young people of past decades. The same report also outlined several “disturbing trends related to youth civic engagement including a decrease in young people’s interest in political discussion and public issues; their tendency to be more cynical and alienated from formal politics, more materialistic, and less trusting; and a decline in their voter participation rates” (p. 5). Voter turnout reports show that less than one-third of young people aged 18–24 voted in the 2000 presidential election, compared to 42 percent in 1972 (Gibson, 2001).

The New Millennium Survey shows that youth tend to focus on American rights and freedoms rather than on responsibilities when asked about the meaning of citizenship. Most young people do not seek out information on government or politics or hold conversations on such subjects with parents or peers (National Association of Secretaries of State, 2000). Young people have scored low on traditional markers of political involvement such as interest in the news, knowledge of current events, voting participation, and tests of political knowledge (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002). A national assessment of student knowledge of civics and government conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 1999 showed that most American youth have a weak grasp of the principles that underlie the U.S. Constitution and lack basic understanding of how government works (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). Surveys and behavioral studies conducted over the past few years have shown “high levels of apathy, low rates of voter turnout, a loss of confidence in government institutions, and poor showing on history and civics tests” (Hartry & Porter, 2004, p. 1).

Political researchers suggest several explanations for decline in youth civic participation:

- Schools are dedicating fewer resources toward educating young people about politics, government, and civic process.



- There is a decline of trust in public institutions and public leaders.
- Youth have become disengaged from institutions such as public meetings, churches, and community-based organizations. (Gibson, 2001)

Mattson (2003) suggested that several major shifts in the social and economic landscape have changed the political outlook of the youth population:

- Student political activism has shifted attention toward diversity and multiculturalism.
- College majors have shifted away from the liberal arts and humanities toward other fields.
- The margin in pay between nonprofit and business careers has attracted young people away from establishing careers in nonprofit organizations.
- Political organizations are much more focused on check contributions than on volunteer contributions.
- Associations connected to churches and community clubs have decreased in membership over the last ten years.
- These organizations have changed to target particular causes rather than more global awareness or efforts for the common good.

Ravitch and Viteritti (2001) add that many voluntary organizations have become more porous, with participants essentially just “passing through.”

Alternative perspectives on youth civic engagement and low voter turnout also exist. While Putnam (2000) argued in *Bowling Alone* that indicators such as participation in community organizations, voting, and reading newspapers have declined, others, including McLeod (2000) and Youniss and Yates (1997) have argued that different indicators have increased, showing that types of participation have simply changed over time. Fields (2003) concludes that, while voter turnout and political activism may be low, young people are volunteering at higher rates than ever. Rationale for volunteering may vary from personal interest to fulfilling mandatory school requirements, but the fact that young people are getting the hours done suggests that they do want to be involved (Fields, 2003).



Predictors of Civic Development in Older Youth

Disagreement over the indicators of civic development has made it particularly challenging to identify possible predictors of civic engagement and democracy activity. Data and analysis from the National Household Education Survey (NHES), a large national study of adults and youths, helps us understand factors that relate to civic development for young

- Grade in school
- Attention to print media and/or television and radio
- Participation in student government
- Parents with high level of political knowledge
- Some level of participation in community service (Niemi & Chapman, 1999)

Researchers from Child Trends examined the research literature to identify predictors of positive citizenship among youth. The indicators of positive citizenship used in the report were community service, voting, and environmentalism. The findings indicate that knowledge of civics and desire to be civilly active do not seem to be the prime predictors of actual engagement (Zaff & Michelsen, 2001). Other factors that showed mixed results as predictors of positive citizenship included stability, gender, race or ethnicity, culture and nationality, empathy, motivation, parenting, society, and engagement in civic-related activities. Because of the lack of experimental and longitudinal data, and the fact that the limited data collection focused on adolescents, definitive conclusions about these factors as antecedents to positive citizenship couldn't be drawn. However, the researchers did suggest that the data pointed to pathways that could promote youth civic engagement: Programs should adopt

There appears to be little connection between a cognitive understanding of citizenship and an affective or emotional commitment.

people (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). In this report, civic development consisted of the five dimensions outlined above: political knowledge, attention to politics, political participation skills, political efficacy, and tolerance of diversity (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). The researchers found that the following factors have positive association with high civic development:

multiple strategies, create activities in which adolescents feel engaged, and continue to operate over the long term (Zaff & Michelsen, 2001).

While further research and discussion needs to clarify a broadly agreed-upon set of citizenship indicators, the Child Trends research contributes a valuable framework for a youth development approach to democracy skill building and a foundation for establishing supportive public policy.

APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY SKILL BUILDING

An early notion of citizenship training coincided with increased immigration during the early 20th century. The public school emerged as an agent of citizenship education in order to promote development of common goals and values (Battistoni, 1985). Horace Mann's ideas—that intellectual education was the foundation of democracy and that the purposes of democracy were best served by offering a common academic education to all children—were firmly established (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001). Historically, educators and politicians have struggled over the role of schools in preserving democracy. Some have seen school education as a way of preparing young people to shape the future of the state, while others have seen it as a way of teaching young people to protect themselves from intrusion by the state (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001).

The teaching of civics or democracy in schools has incorporated a range of activities and curricula, including discussions of current events, community service, Model UN, cooperative learning, participatory school governance, and student leadership (Berman, 1997). An overwhelming number of studies have shown that *quantity* of education correlates with participation, voting, political skills, and political knowledge (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001). However, how the *content* of education is related to these behaviors is unclear. High school government courses and civics curricula have minimal impact on political socialization. There appears to be little connection between a cognitive understanding of citizenship and an affective or emotional commitment (Battistoni, 1985).

A variety of agents influence youth civic engagement, including civic content in schools, parental education, family communication practices, and feelings of social trust (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Opinions vary when it comes to determining the best strategies for increasing engagement and what outcomes consti-

tute success (Fields, 2003). Many experts believe that an integrated approach to increasing youth civic engagement—combining experiences such as civic education, service learning, political advocacy, and youth development—would work best (Fields, 2003).

This thinking suggests that schools are not the only avenue through which children and adolescents learn about civic and democratic processes. Because of their unique characteristics as youth-serving organizations, out-of-school-time and youth development programs can fill a significant role in promoting civic engagement and democracy skill building.

Civic activism is not only an intended outcome of youth development programs but is itself a valuable strategy to achieve positive youth development outcomes.

Out-of-school-time and youth development programs can function in ways very different from traditional classrooms, featuring, for example, mixed-age groups, small-group learning, flexible scheduling, and real-world connections. Research has also suggested that out-of-school-time programs can promote skills that lay the foundation for academic achievement and healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development (Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, & Wilson, 2003). Miller (2003) explained that out-of-school time programs can offer intangible benefits, such as:

the opportunity to engage in activities that help young people realize they have something to contribute to the group; the opportunity to work with diverse peers and adults to create projects, performances and presentations that receive accolades from their families and the larger community; and the opportunity to develop a vision of life's possibilities that, with commitment and persistence, are attainable. (p. 9)

Researchers from the Forum for Youth Investment (2004) suggest that “given their flexibility, connections to community, voluntary nature, and ability to engage and motivate” (p. 2), youth development organizations and out-of-school-time programs are logical places to facilitate democracy skill building. Participation is by choice, which challenges program providers to create

and sustain programs that engage the interest and participation of older youth, while at the same time promoting positive developmental outcomes and skills for the 21st century.

In fact, out-of-school-time and youth development programs seem to be a good fit for the pathways described by Zaff and Michelsen (2001), since variety of activity is a hallmark of such programs. Afterschool participants often report that they feel more engaged in their afterschool programs than in their schools. Many community-based programs, such as YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and 4H, offer long-term enrollment from kindergarten to middle school and beyond. Extending involvement over a span of years increases opportunities for engagement, leadership development, and realization of civic project goals.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

While the overlap between youth development programs and civic engagement may seem natural, in reality, partnership has not been so clear. Researchers commissioned by the Ford Foundation, in partnership with the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, suggested that many community-based youth-serving organizations fail to see the need for “youth participation, voice, and input,” so they lose out on opportunities to engage youth in the organizations’ decision-making processes (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001, p. 11). The research team concluded that civic activism is not only an intended outcome of youth development programs but is itself a valuable strategy to achieve positive youth development outcomes. Participation in civic activism can promote features of positive youth development such as understanding equality and social justice, having a sense of purpose, and peaceful conflict resolution (Search Institute, 2006). The Innovation Center report outlined specific recommendations for promoting civic activism in youth development programs, including supporting youth workers with promising practices networks, leadership training, and global activist connections (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001).

While there is consensus that civic participation is a needed and natural component of youth development, there is little agreement on the most effective programming strategies. Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, and Lacoé (2004) compared the effectiveness of youth-organizing and identity-support programs to

traditional youth development programs in promoting community engagement and supporting youths’ holistic development. The youth-organizing approaches included political education, community mapping, public protest, letter-writing campaigns, and public awareness movements. Identity-support approaches included political education; interactive and experiential learning support groups; and community outreach, education, and advocacy. On measures of civic activism, “higher proportions of youth in both identity-support and youth-organizing programs report optimal levels” on civic action, efficacy, and community problem solving compared with youth in “traditional youth development agencies” (Gambone et al., 2004, p. 8). Members of the youth-organizing programs “consistently experienced opportunities to give back to their community and reported greater knowledge of their communities” than youth in traditional youth development agencies (Gambone et al., 2004, p. 12). These findings suggest that engaging youth in meaningful opportunities deeply embedded in a rich civic or political context can influence youth development outcomes and promote community involvement and engagement.

Researchers from Child Trends provided a synthesis of evaluations of in-school and out-of-school-time civic programs for youth, focusing on the role civic programs can play in contributing to the development of active citizens. The synthesis focused on two questions, among others:

- What do civic engagement programs look like?
- What characteristics of the programs seem to constitute effective civic engagement? (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002)

The Child Trends researchers gathered information from experimental, quasi-experimental, and non-experimental program evaluations. The programs’ approaches to civic engagement varied, but almost all had some methods in common. Most emphasized the social nature of civic engagement activities and combined life skills or civics curricula with opportunities to become engaged (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002).

In this study, evaluations of Kids Voting USA and the Community-Based Planning Project suggested that exposure to a rigorous civics curriculum, with exercises mimicking real-world experience, can increase students’ interest in the news and their likelihood of participating in the community in the future. Students in several of the programs evaluated were more likely



Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, which includes a list of 28 personal and social assets grouped into four domains: physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social development. The subcomponents of the domains closely associate with the outcomes found by Child Trends researchers such as community engagement, working in groups, critical thinking, and reasoning skills. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* concluded that:

- Each person has various assets in various combinations.
- Having more assets is better than having few.
- Individuals acquire new assets and grow existing ones through exposure to positive experiences, people, and settings. (NRC & IOM, 2002)

than youth in the control group to engage in community service. Students in the Public Works Mapping Project, which emphasized bringing students together with teachers and community leaders, “reported learning about working as a group and about citizenship in the context of school, as well as learning how to apply theoretical work to practical matters” (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002, pp. 23–24). Of all the programs evaluated, those that appeared to have the greatest success in reaching youth outcomes were those that included both behavioral and learning components (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002).

This research helps to verify the connections between civic engagement activities and positive youth development. Over the last decade, youth development and research organizations, including the Search Institute (2006) have offered many lists of positive youth development assets. Much attention has been given to the task of distinguishing a “set of personal and social assets that increase the healthy development and well-being of adolescents and facilitate a successful transition from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood” (National Research Council [NRC] and Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2002, p. 6). In 2002, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine jointly produced

A recent study on the Community Youth Research (CYR) afterschool program in Redwood City, California, contributes further to our understanding of program approaches for developing youths’ civic involvement during out-of-school time (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, n.d.). CYR used problem-driven participatory action research to train youth to identify and study issues in their communities and to act on their findings. Activities in the program included data gathering, teamwork, public speaking, problem solving, critical thinking, and policy examination. The study focused on how young people involved in this afterschool program reasoned about their social and political environment. The researchers found that young people were thinking critically about their surroundings and at the same time developing solutions to the problems they identified. The researchers explained that “critical awareness, if left alone, can just as easily lead to apathy as it can to empowerment” (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, n.d., p. 16). Critical thinking and critical awareness skills can develop more strongly when participants simultaneously have opportunities to take action on their conclusions. In CYR, youth had an opportunity to participate in a meaningful way in promoting change



Youth debate programs are thriving in New York City, Baltimore, Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other urban centers. They encompass more than 260 urban public high schools and middle schools, with over 12,000 young people participating since 1997.

and affecting their environment. The study suggests that participatory action research has potential as strategy for promoting citizenship skills, because it asks youth to “work together to study about and act on concerns that affect their own communities” (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, n.d., p. 16).

BUILDING DEMOCRACY IN URBAN DEBATE LEAGUES

Another national youth development and civic engagement approach is urban debate, which engages youth primarily after school and on weekends. Youth turnout for urban debate leagues has steadily grown since the \$9.3 million seed funding initiative by the Soros Foundation in 1997. Youth debate programs are thriving in New York City, Baltimore, Seattle, Los

Angeles, Chicago, and other urban centers. They encompass more than 260 urban public high schools and middle schools, with over 12,000 young people participating since 1997 (National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, n.d.). Both high-achieving students and those who struggle academically are enticed to participate. While honing valuable academic skills such as organizing, critical thinking, and researching, urban debate also encourages another dimension: practicing democracy.

During 2005, a team of research assistants and I conducted a qualitative investigation of the experiences of youth in the New York Urban Debate League in order to examine the debate league approach to democracy skill building and civic engagement. The following sections provide an overview of the context and methods of our investigation.

Context

The IMPACT Coalition, a nonprofit mentoring and educational development organization located in Manhattan, manages the New York Urban Debate League (NYUDL). The NYUDL was established in 1997 in partnership with the Barkley Forum and the Open Society Institute. The NYUDL was begun with the goal of making debate, and specifically policy debate, accessible to all city students regardless of their race or

socioeconomic status. With teams in over 70 schools and more than 450 youth participants, the NYUDL is the largest urban debate league in the country.

The National Forensic League (NFL) sponsors and organizes youth debate at the national level, setting the rules and regulations for competition. School debate teams compete in tournaments organized by their local leagues and travel to invitational tournaments held around the country. With a focus on policy debate, the NYUDL gives New York City students access to a national activity in which students from around the country debate the same national resolution. For instance, the 2004–2005 resolution was “The United States government should establish a foreign policy substantially increasing its support of United Nations peacekeeping operations.” In a debate contest, one pair of students argues the affirmative side while another argues the negative. Both pairs must prepare both sides, as they may be assigned the opposite position in their next debate.

The IMPACT Coalition provides teachers and students from selected high schools with intensive summer training in policy debate, weekend tournament competitions, ongoing mentoring, debate materials and curricular resources, scholarships to national summer debate camps, and special end-of-year culminating events. Debate coaches include college students, AmeriCorp volunteers, teachers, and other professionals.

Methods

The research for this paper was conducted using a qualitative approach. The primary methods for data collection were observation, a youth focus group, and personal interviews with youth participants and program leaders. Two observations were conducted: one of an NYUDL tournament at Wings Academy in the Bronx on March 5, 2005, and the other of a debate club meeting and practice session at the Bronx Preparatory Charter School on May 5, 2005. The Wings Academy tournament included both middle school and high school youth, while middle school students were the participants in the Bronx Prep debate club meeting. After the practice debate and discussion session at Bronx Prep, students participated in a focus group. In addition, phone interviews were conducted with high school debate team participants and program leaders from across the city. Interviews were also conducted with citywide league administrators of the New York, Boston, and Baltimore Urban Debate Leagues.

Though this investigation included a limited sample, it is valuable because it provides insight into a youth-focused program model that fosters development of democracy skills. The following section summarizes the findings from this research and points to the substantial contribution that out-of-school-time programs such as urban debate can offer toward building an effective and informed youth citizenry.

Urban Debate Leagues as Democracy in Action

We used a report developed during the “Creating Citizenship” conference under the auspices of the Stanford Center on Adolescence (Torney-Purta, 2000) as a framework for examining the personal testimony we collected from urban debate youth participants, program leaders, and citywide administrators. The report provides a list of youth capacities believed to be essential in achieving a society in which democratic governance and civil disobedience thrive. Those qualities and capacities, as written in the “Creating Citizenship” conference executive summary, are:

1. A civic identity that includes commitment to a larger sense of social purpose and a positive sense of affiliation with the society
2. An awareness that decisions made in the public political process directly and indirectly affect their private lives and futures
3. The knowledge and capacity to acquire information necessary to navigate the social and political world, including an understanding of democracy and the functioning of its institutions, current issues of importance and modes of participation that are likely to be effective
4. A balance between trust and skepticism and a constructive tension between support for legitimate authority and willingness to dissent in relation to the political system and civil society
5. The capacity for making autonomous choices and decisions
6. The capacity and willingness to engage in shared discourse which is tolerant of other opinions and dissent
7. Respect for other individuals and the groups to which they belong
8. Skills of cooperation and negotiation, including the ability to work in a team and present an effective argument for one’s views without denigrating the views of others
9. The willingness and ability to assume leadership roles when appropriate



10. Belief in their ability to make a difference by acting alone or with others, including a belief that institutions should be responsive to such actions (Torney-Purta et al., 2000, p. 3–4)

These capacities are embedded in the youth development assets outlined by the National Research Council (Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, 2002). For example, the National Research Council’s “intellectual development” asset includes critical thinking and reasoning skills, knowledge of more than one culture, and good decision-making skills. The psychological and emotional development assets include a sense of larger purpose in life, pro-social and culturally sensitive values, and a sense of personal autonomy and responsibility for self. Assets such as connectedness, sense of social place, ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts, and commitment to civic engagement, from the NRC’s social development category, coincide closely with the “Creating Citizenship” civic engagement capacities. This crossover between youth development assets and civic engagement capacities confirms the value of considering the potentially powerful connections between participation in democracy skill building and positive youth development.

Based on our belief that urban debate serves as an example of democracy skill building for youth, we hypothesized that we would hear themes in the personal testimony of youth participants and adult leaders related to these capacities. Using this list as a framework, we examined the stories and testimony of the youth participants and their club leaders to understand how participation in debate embraced active democracy.

SENSE OF SOCIAL PURPOSE AND AFFILIATION WITH SOCIETY

While current-event discussions are likely to come up in typical school classrooms, “owning” an issue, as students do in debate, prompts a different type of intellectual and emotional understanding. In order to argue both the affirmative and negative positions, debaters have to take in the issue and know it as their own. Twice during meetings and interviews with youth, we were struck by how participation in debate had become personal for the young person with whom we were talking. We asked one of the middle school debaters what role debate had played in his understanding of democracy. He said, “It’s our democracy and not George Bush’s democracy or Bill Clinton’s

democracy, or even George Washington's democracy or Abe Lincoln's democracy; it's our democracy and that's what counts." Participating in debate had helped him understand that he had active ownership in the democracy he knew.

In a later conversation, a high school junior recalled how debate had given her a greater sense of purpose. The peacekeeping debates had struck a chord. The student was moved to bring her opinions to a bigger stage. She and debate friends prepared a formal presentation of their ideas and arguments for a trip to the United Nations. They believed strongly enough in the solutions and suggestions they had dutifully researched and debated to want to share them in a real and substantial forum. While they were welcomed at the UN, they were realistic about the impact of their conversation with an official there. Their actions clearly demonstrate the personal impact debate had on their lives and the connections they had made between the larger public democracy and their own civic identities and responsibilities.

CONNECTION BETWEEN PUBLIC POLITICAL PROCESS AND PRIVATE LIVES

Debate topics, which are national or global in scope, immediately challenge participants to think beyond the confines of their own family, school, and community, leading them to consider the local implications of global issues. For example, youth participants quickly recognized, according to program leaders, that the spring 2005 resolution to increase U.S. support for UN peacekeeping operations would have an obvious effect on local communities as more soldiers were assigned to cover obligations overseas.

Debate program leaders noted that youth debaters increased their ability to think about both domestic and global political issues. While becoming experts on large issues, they were also making connections from the debates to their own lives and taking their new knowledge "to the streets." Program leaders insisted that youth debaters wanted to use their political skills, vote, and get into the political life of the community. One coach said that debate participation "allows for the making of substantial connections between school classes, the news, debate topics, personal values/ethics, and broad social concepts." Some participants later started their own community-service projects related to debate issues.

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UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Overwhelmingly, the literature on youth civic engagement suggests that most middle and high school youth struggle to define democracy and government. In order to participate in debate, young people must become knowledgeable about forms of government and be able to incorporate relevant information into their debate content. Through debate, youth practice a key component of civic participation: gaining knowledge. Laura Sjoberg, citywide leader for the Boston Debate League, refers to the learning students get from participating in debate as "real-time learning." Students learn about political issues in the here-and-now; they investigate and prepare information about topics that are important to the world they live in today.

Preparing to debate requires collecting information from various sources, analyzing and organizing the information, and articulating a point of view. Debate coaches take an active role in building knowledge about democracy. One high school coach reflected, "On a daily basis, I scaffold learning so we can build upon the basics and begin thinking critically about the subject matter." The very nature of debate affirms the value of diverse opinions and dialogue, which are central to understanding democracy.

SUPPORT FOR AUTHORITY AND WILLINGNESS TO DISSENT

It comes as no surprise to hear middle or high school youth disagreeing with rules and policies. Current literature notes the high level of cynicism young people express about the federal government and public policies (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Soule, 2001). Finding the balance between supporting authoritative structures and constructively articulating opposing opin-

One of the enriching aspects of participation in youth debate is that students learn the language of political criticism.

ions is a challenge. One of the enriching aspects of participation in youth debate is that students learn the language of political criticism. Not only do debaters have to be able to defend both sides of an opinion, but they also have to construct persuasive arguments. They learn to use language to resolve conflict in a positive way. Debaters find a voice for dissent and an ability to craft that voice in ways that are respectful and that others can value.

CAPACITY FOR AUTONOMOUS CHOICES

Few of the comments from youth provided direct evidence that they associated participation in debate with capacity for autonomous choices; it was hard, older students suggested, to separate the effect of debate participation from their general maturation in their ability to make choices and manage their lives. However, the association between the skills that debate hones and students' capacity for autonomous choices is not hard to discern. We frequently heard from coaches that the teams were student-centered and self-sufficient. Several coaches suggested that the students really managed the program. Additionally, once a debate begins, debaters must make decisions on their own. Their ability to listen, organize, and make informed strategy decisions is critical to team success.

SHARED DISCOURSE TOLERANT OF OTHER OPINIONS

Shared discourse is the foundation of policy debate. In a standard debate tournament structure, a given team goes back and forth between arguing the negative and the affirmative opinion. A high school debater shared that after she and a teammate "argued both opinions so many times" they "became very open to accepting both opinions." The process of investigating, preparing, and arguing opposing opinions provides a unique experience that goes beyond the traditional experience of preparing a one-opinion persuasive essay.

We found that middle school debaters had a great zest for shared discourse. While accepting other opinions, they were lured by the thrill of persuading others

to their convictions. One middle school debater remarked:

If somebody goes against what I am saying, I just pull out more facts and more facts to let them know that I am right. And speak out clearly. So they'll know "he's aggressive and he's got his facts straight so I can say nothing about it and I got to agree." What you have to do in a debate is make sure you are very clear, that you understand what you are arguing and why you are arguing it. Sometimes you have to make a compromise.

RESPECT FOR OTHERS AND THEIR GROUPS

Many youth talked in interviews and the focus group about the attractive social aspects of debate participation. Debate tournaments are held throughout the city, which necessitates visiting areas outside students' home neighborhoods and meeting youth from other parts of the city. As teams improve, their tournament schedule may take them to regional and national tournaments. Teams of debaters from different schools can meet frequently over the course of a season.

During our visit to a middle school debate practice, the arguments became heated. One debater later explained, "Sometimes with the arguments... sometimes we get really loud and sometime people get really emotional over this stuff." While competitive feelings exist, teams also develop a respect for each other, as one high school debater explained: "On a personal level, not actually debating, I learned so much from everyone. I am able to see classism and racism in new ways, through exposure to so many different people, situations, and experiences."

SKILL BUILDING

During a debate, students practice all of these skills: organizing, problem solving, public speaking, working in teams and negotiating, persuasive speaking, critical thinking, summarizing, and strategizing. Cooperation with a debate partner is essential to a strong presentation. Coaches noted that the youth often dedicated their free time to debate practice because they had a passion for honing their speaking and arguing skills.

The skill coaches most hoped to develop was critical thinking. Being able to think through problems and try out possible solutions opens the door to students' learning how to advocate for themselves and their communities. The youth themselves described many skill-based benefits from their participation in debate. A high school debater remarked:

I have become a lot more comfortable with presentations in class. At school we have to present a portfolio. We have to write really persuasive arguments in a short amount of time. We spend a lot of time building our arguments. Debate helped me writing essays using the same techniques: going through evidence, using that to prove something.

LEADERSHIP

Youniss and colleagues (2002) noted that putting in hours toward a political cause or a service activity has limited meaning unless change happens within the individual and the individual understands the change. Consistent examples of longitudinal commitment to debate and political activity show that participation in debate can stimulate personal change related to active democracy and leadership.

For example, during our tournament observation, the judges' orientation room was full of former high school debaters, now college students, who were volunteering as judges. High school practice sessions are frequented by alumni debaters who assist advanced debaters on writing arguments while novice debaters focus on oral practice. Many coaches we interviewed had experience as high school or college debaters. A former debater, now a law student, recently founded the Boston Debate League with the help of friends.

Participation that transcends graduation and college or career shifts speaks to the strength of the association many young people feel with urban debate leagues. Debate alumni consistently credit debate experiences with fostering success in higher education and influencing their career choices and achievements. The model for urban debate participation is a seamless transition from novice debater to college debater to volunteer coach and active citizen.

BELIEF IN THE ABILITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Pearson and Voke (2003) concluded that “educating for democracy requires more than the transmission of discrete knowledge and skills” (p. 33). Students must also learn that they are valued and contributing members of a community. Urban debate leaders view themselves as



Debate alumni consistently credit debate experiences with fostering success in higher education and influencing their career choices and achievements.

agents of change working to develop more informed and actively engaged young citizens. Program leaders in the Baltimore Urban Debate League (UDL) made sure to talk about influencing change, deliberately promoting to youth the conscious link between developing skills and transferring those skills toward improving their own lives and communities. The Baltimore UDL leader noted that the league extended experiences beyond the debate tournament by sponsoring debate exhibitions at venues such as popular open markets and city hall—a reminder to participants that debate is about real people and real life.

Youth and coaches spoke about their belief in their ability to influence change. A high school debater said: I think that I am more likely to speak about controversial things in class—more likely to help other people, to think that I can help people with other things. I am not necessarily smarter or better because of debate, but may be in a better position to help.

A high school debate coach reinforced the notion that students were learning to effect change:

Through debate youth are shown how their voice can make a difference, and how to argue their point of view productively. The most important lesson they learn is not to give up, to set goals, and put forth effort. They will continue debating and learn to articulate their voice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING AND PRACTICE

In the ways outlined above, urban debate programs reflect a positive youth development philosophy. As defined by the National Collaboration for Youth Members (1998), the youth development approach “is a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent.” By developing these competencies, youth are able to lead healthier, more productive lives as well as to positively influence others and their surroundings.

Because civic participation and the exercise of democratic skills are so important, we must look to a variety of settings in which youth can experience and build civic skills—not only schools. As is evident in the findings of this research, out-of-school-time programs, such as urban debate leagues, can play an important role in providing opportunities for young people to nurture and practice these skills. During out-of-school time, youth development organizations can help young people understand how politics works, see themselves as political agents, become involved in the community, make choices, practice conflict resolution, form a civic identity, and experience social diversity (Gibson, 2001).

American Youth Policy Forum (Pearson & Voke, 2003) conducted a series of forums and field trips focused on issues related to the development of effective citizenry and youth civic engagement. A few of the resulting recommendations were to:

- Increase the quality and quantity of activities in schools that support engagement skills including oral reports, persuasive debate, discussion, and group services activities
- Expand the number of schools and community programs that support youth civic engagement and service and civics instruction

- Promote a more supportive cultural environment for teaching democracy (Pearson & Voke, 2003, pp. 31–33)

Such a “supportive cultural environment” might be one in which all members feel valued and diversity is celebrated.

Several similar promising approaches program providers can use to encourage youth civic engagement are outlined in *The Civic Mission of Schools*:

- Promote discussion of current local, national, and international events, including a variety of viewpoints
- Encourage students’ participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures such as voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy (CIRCLE, 2003).

In addition to reflecting the elements of a positive youth development philosophy, approaches to democracy skill building such as urban debate also connect to learning standards. Such activities stretch across the syllabus, including learning covered in, for example, these New York State English Language Arts and Social Studies standards:

New York State English Language Arts Standard 3

Students will listen, speak, read, and write for critical analysis and evaluation. As listeners and readers, students will analyze experiences, ideas, information, and issues presented by others using a variety of established criteria. As speakers and writers, they will use oral and written language that follows the accepted conventions of the English language to present, from a variety of perspectives, their opinions and judgments on experiences, ideas, information and issues.

New York State Social Studies Standard 5

Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental system of the United States and other nations; the United States Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation. (New York State Academy for Teaching and Learning, n.d.)

The connection between urban debate and these standards is clear. Youth development programs such as urban debate can serve as vehicles for bringing

these different strands of learning together in meaningful ways that communicate both the content and responsibilities of democracy.

Providing engaging civic and democracy development experiences during out-of-school time is challenging. Many infrastructure components are necessary to support such active civic engagement programs as community service learning, community mapping, youth organizing, and urban debate. Delivery of program activities and opportunities to youth during out-of-school time would be enhanced by a systemic community-wide approach with such infrastructure elements as:

- Buy-in from school principals and teachers
- Technology to support connections to news sources and relevant databases
- Linkages between high schools, communities, and local government organizations
- Financial support for expert facilitators and leaders
- Planning and cooperation among stakeholders
- An agreed-upon set of objectives
- Capacity-building intermediaries to provide citywide coordination and linkages between participating programs around common challenges such as resources, staffing, and sustainability

Supportive public education policy is a critical component of the development of engaged youth. Policies should expand opportunities for youth leadership and civic education, create stronger connections between schools and communities, and support the development of model democracy skill-building programs. Supporting democracy skill building for youth requires public policies that create experiences such as civic leadership internships and job shadows, promote school credit for participation in community organizing and community service, and enable development of genuine venues for youth voice such as youth councils and youth-run civic advisory boards.

Research on the current status of youth civic engagement has suggested the importance of an agenda that prepares young people to fully participate in our democracy as informed, competent, and responsible active citizens. The work of providing enriching democracy-in-action experiences for young people will take enormous collective effort by schools, government agencies, youth-serving organizations, policymakers, religious organizations, and others. Programs such as urban debate leagues serve as dynamic and inspired models that have demonstrated their value to urban youth and the broader community.

The work of providing enriching democracy-in-action experiences for young people will take enormous collective effort by schools, government agencies, youth-serving organizations, policymakers, religious organizations, and others.

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NOTE

¹ While political science literature may distinguish among the terms *democracy*, *citizenship*, *civic education*, and *civic engagement*, for the purposes of this paper, I use these terms interchangeably.

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