

# Supporting the Literacy Development of Low-Income Children in Afterschool Programs

## Challenges and Exemplary Practices

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### Executive Summary

While much of the current concern over the literacy development of low- and moderate-income children focuses on schools (and, to a lesser degree, on parents), many observers are arguing for a role for other institutions. In particular, funders are turning to afterschool programs to address this critical developmental task. This paper explores the roles afterschool programs can and do play in the literacy development of low-income children, drawing on surveys and observations of afterschool programs in Chicago, New York, and Seattle.

Virtually all the afterschool programs surveyed and observed address the diverse literacy needs of children from varied cultures—a sizeable number of whom are “lost” at school—while being constrained by limited resources. Some exemplary programs, however, surmount at least some of their difficulties to provide a rich environment for literacy development that differs—intentionally—from the school environment. An examination of the characteristics of these exemplary programs leads to suggestions for strengthening literacy activity in afterschool programs. An appendix discusses the role of specific activities, such as book discussions and storytelling, in children’s literacy development.

**A**cquisition of literacy is a central developmental task of middle childhood. However, this task is problematic for many low- and moderate-income children.

Although urban school systems are working to strengthen literacy instruction, many experts now recognize that improving instruction in school is not the only key to meeting these children’s literacy needs. Some have argued for a renewed emphasis on parents’ role—and responsibility—in supporting children’s literacy development. Yet many low- and moderate-income parents lack the time or ability to help significantly with this task. Funders and policymakers have begun to turn to other institutions, and particularly to afterschool programs, to address children’s literacy support needs. While a handful of afterschool programs have been able to build on a long history of involvement with literacy activity, for many it is new territory.

In this paper, I reflect on afterschool programs as settings for promoting low-income children’s literacy development.<sup>1</sup> Three sources of information inform these reflections:

- The findings of a two-year study examining literacy goals and practices in afterschool programs in three cities (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002)
- Other literature discussing literacy activity in afterschool programs
- The literature on the broader issue of children’s literacy development

Although my main concern is to clarify both the potential and the limits of afterschool programs as settings for literacy development, I also consider

afterschool programs in relation to schools. I argue that afterschool programs' philosophy, purpose, and approach to nurturing literacy has to be different—in some ways fundamentally different—from that found in most urban schools.

## Why Focus on Literacy in Afterschool Programs?

The sense that children's literacy development poses a major problem is not new. Literacy "crises" have recurred every ten or twenty years for the past century, sometimes focused on children, sometimes on adults. Such crises are not typically linked to objective data (McQuillan, 1998). Over the past three decades, reading achievement scores have remained more or less stable. American children continue to be proficient at the basics, less proficient at higher-level comprehension and understanding. In the past, literacy crises have been linked to heightened concerns about public education and American society's need to "compete": a perception that effective labor force participation, decent earnings, and effective citizenship demanded high levels of literacy and, less consistently, the acculturation of large numbers of immigrants. The current perception of crisis is not only driven by historical concerns, but also stems from the new standards and

some guided oral reading. At the local level, urban school systems are hiring more reading specialists, requiring "failing" schools to adopt skills-based, teacher-proof curricula, and requiring classroom teachers to devote significant time daily to basic skills instruction.

Parents are also being urged by school authorities—and politicians—to make a greater contribution to their children's literacy development by reading to them regularly, helping with homework, and taking children to the library. Yet the percentage of low-income parents with limited English language literacy—and sometimes with low levels of literacy in their native language—appears to be growing. In addition, many low-income parents are working long hours due to low pay, welfare reform, or both, making them less available to their children. Chin and Newman (2002) recently studied the conflict between welfare reform—which has sent large numbers of poor mothers, many of them single parents, back to work, often for long hours—and demands by urban school authorities that parents play a more active role in supporting their children's school progress. Chin and Newman cite a New York City Board of Education brochure in which parents are "admonished to read to their children nightly, to listen to their children read back, to visit libraries and museums. . . ." (p. 16). Yet of one newly working

mother they note: "Debra simply does not have the energy to check homework or to read to [her children] like she used to. She knows how important monitoring is; she believes it is her responsibility; but she can

only do so much" (p. 36). Another child in this study had been doing his homework only two days a week—the days he went to an afterschool program (Chin & Newman, 2002).

Many are therefore beginning to recognize a role for other settings and institutions in literacy development, what some call *informal* or *non-formal learning environments*. Afterschool programs are becoming a notably important informal learning environment for low- and moderate-income children. About 25 percent of such children now regularly participate in afterschool programs, and that percentage is growing (Halpern, 2002). Because their mandates, purposes, and approaches are flexible, afterschool programs can address a variety of tasks and be responsive to prevailing social concerns. In

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testing movement in public education, which has found sizable numbers of urban children not meeting state or national standards.

Most efforts to address the current worries about literacy are centered on schools. At the urging of the Bush administration, the U.S. Department of Education has made reading a top priority. The National Institute of Child Health and Development also has a significant reading initiative underway (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2002). The ostensible focus of federal efforts has been identifying and disseminating research-based, empirically proven reading instruction strategies. In reality, such criteria are proving to be euphemisms for approaches focused on phonemic awareness, phonics, word-attack skills, and

my work with afterschool programs around the country, I have observed that funders increasingly are asking afterschool providers to address the task of nurturing literacy or at least to help with children's school-related difficulties.

Yet a number of attributes of afterschool programs complicate a focus on literacy. One is the importance of attending to other developmental needs, including opportunity to explore the visual and performing arts; opportunity for physical activity; and some time to decompress, play and have some simple fun. Another is the reality that afterschool programs are fundamentally modest institutions, with limited resources and staffing. The majority of programs operate barely above a survival level. A significant number of programs rely on borrowed or shared space. The majority of afterschool staff, who typically earn seven or eight dollars an hour, have less than a college education, and many have mixed experiences with literacy themselves. In addition, afterschool programs and their staff—for reasons I will discuss later—have had almost no access to the extensive knowledge of and experience with children's literacy development that has been built over the past thirty years.

It is also unclear—or perhaps there is no agreement on—what the goals, expectations, and activities of afterschool programs' literacy efforts should be. In a number of cities—Boston and Seattle being prime examples—funders and elected officials have urged afterschool programs to align their literacy activity with school district curricula and learning standards. The 21st Century Community Learning Center program, a major federal funder of school-based afterschool programs, requires grantees to demonstrate how they are contributing to children's academic achievement and test-readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Yet, as one staff member at Interfaith Neighbors, a youth-serving agency in New York City, told me, this agency approached literacy differently from the schools, "because we can."

## A Perspective on Children's Literacy Development

Defining an appropriate role for afterschool programs in supporting literacy development requires consideration of the process of literacy development, as well as where, how, and why afterschool programs might fit in. Literacy development is, first, a multifaceted process. It involves developing:

- The skills necessary for reading and writing
- The habit of reading and writing
- A disposition toward reading and writing
- A view of what, how, where, and why one reads and writes
- A particular identity as a reader and writer

Except in the case of children who have innate difficulties processing print, motivation may be the driving force in literacy development. The importance of skill-building and practice should not be minimized, but, as Hawkins (1990) notes, "children can learn to read and write with commitment just in proportion as they are engaged with matters of importance to them" (p. 6). He argues that children need not only to achieve competence in literacy but also to "themselves recognize and enjoy its expression" (p. 10). At a minimum, skill, habit, and motivation are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Children who read and write well will read and write more, improving their vocabulary, comprehension, and skill at self-expression. Improved skills will lead to more positive feedback from adults. All these factors will motivate children to read and write still more.

Literacy development is a contextually shaped and socially-driven process. Each of the settings in which children grow up—home, community institutions, school, the streets, the mass media—provides some of the background knowledge and experience children bring to reading and writing, giving them a context for making sense of words and ideas, as well as providing a basis for their own narratives. Each setting exposes children to specific ideas, materials, and practices: reasons for engaging in literacy activity; kinds and amounts of literacy materials; kinds and patterns of language use; adult roles in encouraging, guiding, instructing and discussing reading and writing; adults' own literacy practices and talk about reading and writing. Each setting provides opportunity to develop a distinctive role. The same child who is an apprentice at school might be the audience for a grandparent, the expert for a younger sibling, and the partner for a friend. Each role shapes motivation and identity. If adults who are important to children enjoy reading and writing, children will internalize the habit and pleasure of these activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). If children do not see adults reading, they are less likely to develop the habit. If children are praised for their literacy efforts, they will be more likely to incorporate literacy into their emerging selves; if

they are criticized, they will be less likely to do so. If children learn that they will not be attacked or belittled for expressing their ideas and imagination in their writing, they will do so; if they fear personal attacks, they will learn not to express themselves.

As important as the availability of multiple settings is the opportunity to engage in a wide range of literacy practices. Some activities are likely to be found in all kinds of settings, for example, reading to children and oral reading by children, independent reading, and talk *about* reading and writing. Some are more likely to be found in formal or semi-formal learning settings, such as book discussions; story dramatization; vocabulary-building activities; open-ended and creative writing; journal writing, especially dialogue journals; collaborative writing; reading and writing to conduct research; and, less directly, participation in visual and expressive arts. Each activity has a distinctive role in children's literacy development and therefore deserves a distinctive place in children's lives. (Appendix 1 briefly elaborates on the role of specific activities. The reader should bear in mind that there is a sizable literature on each.)

As a group, low-income children appear to have less opportunity than more advantaged children to engage in the range of practices, in their many settings, that are

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critical to literacy development (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). Low-income children are more likely than their eco-

nomically advantaged peers to experience discrepancies in literacy practice between settings. They are more likely to come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken. They also appear to have less of the "cultural capital" that helps children make sense of texts (Heath, 2001; Delpit, 1988). There are, of course, significant individual differences within groups. Reading, and to an extent writing, are inherently more difficult or less pleasurable for some children than for others. Still, class differences trump individual differences in American society. The result is a literacy development experience that leads to cumulative advantage for some groups of children and cumulative disadvantage for others (Mosenthal, 1999).

## Urban Schools as Literacy Development Contexts for Low-Income Children

As children grow older, school becomes increasingly influential in their literacy development. Yet for low-income urban children, school is frequently a problematic literacy setting. One reason is current instructional trends: Finding balanced approaches to literacy instruction in urban schools is increasingly difficult. In most cases, the imbalance means a skills-based curriculum—especially in schools with low aggregate test scores, which in many cities are now required to adopt such curricula. Another reason is that schools promulgate different kinds of literacy for different kinds of children: more "powerful" literacy for economically advantaged children, more "functional" literacy for low- and moderate-income children (Finn, 1999).

Yet another reason is the inherent characteristics of schools as learning contexts. Generally, schools are not positive developmental settings for many low-income children. If schools' formal work is teaching and learning, their de facto work is apportioning success and failure (Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). School generally becomes a less welcoming place for children as they advance in grade (Stipek, 1992). Teaching styles become less nurturing; for instance, teachers give less positive reinforcement to children, spend less time conversing with them, and have less time (and patience) to listen to what children are expressing. Calkins (2001) notes that "In many classrooms, kids talk as if no one is listening" (p. 21). By middle school, children confront:

- A growing emphasis on competition and comparison
- Less willingness to accept and deal with individual differences in learning speed, style, capacity, and motivation, as well as with language difficulties
- Less attention to how an individual child is faring
- Less room for the knowledge and experience children bring from their home communities

In some urban schools and school systems, these inherent attributes are complemented by military-style discipline; lack of recess, arts, and physical education (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Linver, & Hofferth, 2002); and anxiety associated with the threat of being held back or of being singled out for summer school or afterschool remediation.

The difficulties posed for children by the general attributes of schooling are compounded by schools' predominant approach to literacy. Of course, scores of individual teachers, schools, and local school districts have created, and struggled to sustain, positive and creative literacy programs. Stein and D'Amico (2002), for instance, describe a balanced literacy program implemented in District 2 in New York City under the leadership of Anthony Alvaredo. The program is built around the simple but powerful concept of reading by, with, and to children, that is, independent, shared, and guided reading. The program starts with the idea that "teachers must know individual children deeply as readers" (p. 1318), and use that knowledge to provide carefully tailored assistance. To the extent practicable, word study and related forms of skill-building are embedded in meaningful activity, and the primary focus is on meaning rather than on correctness per se. The deeper goal is to create a classroom community "in which reading is modeled and valued every day" (p. 1339). This and similar examples do not, however, characterize literacy instruction for the great majority of low-income children.

For one thing, the prevailing view in most urban schools is that children have to master basic skills before they can use reading and writing for personal and social purposes. The emphasis on building skills minimizes children's opportunity to explore literacy as a vehicle for self-exploration and expression, understanding the world, or exercising imagination (Silberman, 1989; Carney, 1990). It also pushes the task of nurturing motivation to the background. Furthermore, because reading and writing in school are tied to tests, grades, and promotion, the motivation that does develop is primarily extrinsic. Children focus their energy either on trying to understand and respond to the teacher's agenda or on hiding from that agenda. Silberman (1989) notes that children "produce assignments, not in order to be heard, but in order to give teachers something to judge on the basis of their agenda" (p. 550). This pattern has intensified with the growth of high-stakes testing. Strickland and colleagues (2001) quote an experienced sixth-grade teacher, whose writing curriculum has been narrowed to focus on the types of writing children must produce on a statewide assessment: "I think my students may be doing more writing than in the past, [but] . . . as their papers begin to conform to the rubric, the writing

begins to become more uniform and much less interesting. I'm concerned about this, but I haven't figured out how to deal with it and still keep them focused on the rubric" (pp. 385–386).

Critics of literacy instruction in school have focused also on the poor quality of basal readers and other commercial textbooks, the principal sources of

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reading material (see, for example, Antonacci & Colasco, 1994). Stories and nonfiction passages in such texts are constructed using readability formulas and controlled vocabulary lists; children sometimes can write only from those lists. Commercial textbooks have been criticized as "commodities" whose purpose is profit for publishers; they are therefore designed to contain knowledge "acceptable to the widest possible audience" (Shannon, 1990, p. 151). The texts typically avoid difficult issues and conflict; they are often unconnected, even alien, to children's lives, experiences, and interests. Because lesson planning tied to commercial texts is standardized, teachers have little opportunity to incorporate knowledge of what their particular group of children brings to the learning experience. In contrast to literature, commercial textbooks offer less to question, debate, and wonder about. Even when teachers are not using basal readers, their language arts lessons tend to reflect the structure of basal lessons (Shannon, 1990). Children are often silenced by questions about a text because they have learned through experience with basal readers that the teacher only has one answer in mind—not their answer (Calkins, 2001).

Through the instructional practices that they are socialized into—and are required to use—teachers come to emphasize the deficits rather than the strengths that children bring to literacy activities. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) notes that, while children need feedback to stay on track, that feedback should be "informational" (p. 136), not controlling. Yet when teachers provide feedback on children's reading or writing, they are more likely to focus on errors in mechanics than on fluency or creativity or commitment, in part because they tend to feel that they themselves will be evaluated on their students' mistakes, rather than on their students' excitement or

motivation or creativity (Bettelheim & Zelan, 1982; Silberman, 1989).

The consequence of the school literacy practices experienced by most low-income children is the opposite of their intent. Low-income children tend to fall steadily behind in reading between first and fourth grade, regardless of their initial reading skills. Many who acquire and maintain reading skills still do not learn how to “read to learn” (Gee, 1999, p. 365). They pay “too much attention to the surface structure of a text” (Shannon, 1990, p. 135) and cannot “tell us what words on the page add up to, what sense they make” (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001, p. 85). Children who like reading and writing in elementary school often come to dislike these activities by middle school. In one study, low-income children reported that they stopped reading in middle school and that they “faked” reading during silent reading periods (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). As Silberman (1989) describes it, children’s eagerness to write “diminishes when they find their ideas and language being pushed aside” (p. xiii). As children lose faith in their own thoughts, they may come to prefer an assigned topic, “no matter how dreary it may be” (p. 3).

Over the long term, the majority of low-income children develop literacy identities that are limited in specific ways. A few children, either against the grain or with the support of a teacher, parent, librarian, or some other adult figure, acquire the “powerful” literacy that Finn (1999) describes. Many children develop a kind of pseudo-literacy: They can

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engage in the mechanics of reading and writing but do not enjoy these activities or use them for reflection, exploration, or becoming competent in the disciplines. For those who have failed to acquire the basics, shame becomes a prominent element of the literacy experience. This shame, in turn, causes children to read and write less. As older children lose touch with literacy and learning, observers note that their sense of possible later identities is foreclosed, an outcome MacLeod (1987) has described as “leveled aspirations.”

## **A Role for Afterschool Programs?**

Given the constraints on schools as literacy development contexts for low-income children, defining a role for afterschool programs might seem straightforward—they should provide the literacy-nurturing experiences that schools cannot (or will not) provide. Yet elaborating an appropriate role for afterschool programs in children’s literacy development requires consideration of the history and qualities of afterschool programs as settings for literacy development and of how much consistency is desirable between settings. Each afterschool program also needs a coherent set of assumptions about what literacy is for.

### ***Afterschool Programs as Historical Contexts for Nurturing Literacy***

Attention to literacy is not new to afterschool programs. Almost as soon as such programs began appearing in settlement houses and boys’ clubs late in the nineteenth century, they included libraries, reading and study rooms, book discussions, poetry clubs in which children wrote as well as read poetry, and newsletters produced by children (Halpern, 2003). For instance, as early as 1907, New York City’s Henry Street Settlement provided study rooms where children could do homework and receive assistance from residents and volunteers (Wald, 1915). On Fridays, time was set aside for book selection and reading. In 1909, Chicago Commons started a “study hour” where children “of the 6th, 7th and 8th grades can bring their homework and study

in a quiet place” (Chicago Commons, 1910, p. 3). In those formative decades, drama clubs enacted stories, staged fairy tales, wrote and staged their own plays, and did dramatic readings of contemporary and classic plays.

Some of the varied non-literacy activities in afterschool programs—including debate, parliamentary law, cooking, stenography, and poster-making—also required reading and writing.

The historic level and pattern of literacy activity—present, but low-key and informal, focusing on enrichment—continued until the 1960s. With the War on Poverty, afterschool programs were asked for the first time to contribute to the new compensatory education agenda in urban school systems. For instance, the 1967 afterschool program guide to

the Hudson Guild, located in Manhattan's Chelsea district, included homework help and tutoring as well as such traditional activities as arts and crafts, activity clubs, gym, music, and dance lessons. The Hudson Guild developed a program called "Operation Brainstorm," which provided both tutoring and educational and cultural activities for seventh to ninth graders, as well as a "Study Den," which provided homework help and tutoring for elementary and junior high children. Program reports from this era noted such literacy-related activities as spelling bees, Scrabble tournaments, and book clubs (Halpern, 2003).

### **Consistency among Literacy Development Settings**

Although pressures on afterschool programs to contribute to low-income children's academic success continued through the next two decades, they remained limited until the early 1990s. By mid-decade, the afterschool field was being pulled into a tighter embrace by schools and school systems. Afterschool programs were mentioned in rhetoric calling for longer school days and increased efforts to ensure that low-income children met new learning standards. The desire to link afterschool programs to school agendas animated private afterschool initiatives, including Extended Service Schools and New York City's The Afterschool Corporation (TASC); mayoral initiatives in numerous cities, including Boston, Columbus, Denver, and Seattle; and the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center program.

At a practical level, homework time began to eat into time for other activities and projects, as well as into time to relax, play, or sit and have conversations. A growing number of afterschool programs, including those run by community-based agencies, were located in schools and so experienced pressure from principals and funders to help foster academic achievement.

### **Visions of Literacy Development**

At the same time that academic pressures on afterschool programs were growing, a handful of studies were—purposely or incidentally—raising questions about the range and quality of prevailing literacy activity in afterschool programs. (Halpern, 1990; Ellowitch, et al., 1991; Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 1999). These studies found literacy activity to be constrained to varying degrees by limitations in staff members' own experience with literacy, understand-

ing of children's literacy development, and skill in implementing literacy activity; staff members were rarely connected to the knowledge and experience of the literacy field. Studies also observed general program resource constraints and quality problems. For instance, staff usually had little or no time to plan. Activities were routine and fragmented. Many historic literacy activities, such as poetry and drama-writing, had all but disappeared. The bulk of time not devoted to homework was occupied by routine activities such as board games, arts and crafts, group games such as bingo, and open gym recreation. Activities and projects were usually short-term, often seemed designed with relatively little thought, and tended not to create opportunities for children to express their own intentions and creativity or to work gradually toward mastery.

The modest group of afterschool providers who had given children's literacy development some thought were sure that they did not want to serve as extensions of school. As one afterschool leader in Seattle told me and my colleagues, "It's very important for us [the afterschool community] not to change our global view of reaching and caring for the whole child. . . . You know what their [school officials'] idea would be for an ideal afterschool program: drill-and-practice, to fill the gap in what didn't happen between 9 AM and 3 PM" (Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 1999). At the same time, with a handful of exceptions, afterschool providers were unsure of what exactly they ought to be doing around literacy and why.

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## **A Study of Literacy Practices in Afterschool Programs**

**I**n this context of apparent potential, heightened expectations, and questions about program quality and about roles and responsibilities, my colleague Julie Spielberger and I embarked in early 2000 on a two-year study of literacy goals, resources, and practices in urban afterschool programs. We began by asking ourselves what purposes and types of literacy activity made sense for afterschool programs. Taking historical roles into account, we asked how the defining qualities of afterschool programs as devel-

opmental settings—at least in ideal terms—could be linked to the literature on literacy development to suggest an appropriate set of literacy-related purposes and practices.

### ***An Ideal Vision of Afterschool Literacy Practices and Purposes***

We knew that, at their best, afterschool programs cope well with individual differences, attend to children's point of view and encourage their sense of "voice," try to respond to children's interests, and put children in active roles as learners. Because they can

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incorporate children's home and community culture, afterschool programs are good settings in which to explore links between "a society's cultural heritage and [children's] personal experience" (Damon, 1990, p. 48). Because learning and experience are not divided up by time period or subject matter, afterschool programs can easily design activities that work across different disciplines. Because their agenda is not so full, afterschool programs theoretically have time to pursue activities in depth. Afterschool programs can support the social dimensions of children's learning, allowing children to share, collaborate, help each other, and work and play together. Adults play supportive, nonjudgmental roles; children usually feel safe psychologically as well as physically, with a relatively low risk of failure. Moreover, afterschool program staff have the luxury of attending to children's developmental struggles without defining children by those struggles.

Such qualities suggested a variety of literacy-related purposes and practices—some supportive of, others clearly distinct from, the purposes and practices found in urban schools. For instance, afterschool programs can afford to expose children to a wide range of forms and uses of literacy and to different kinds of reading and writing experiences, allowing children to use literacy for their own ends. They afford opportunity to work on projects in which children use reading and writing for aesthetic, informational, cultural, and deeply personal purposes. Afterschool programs can provide opportunities for children to learn the literacies of their own heritage—the forms, the stories, the particular

uses of language—and can make connections between the literacies of home or community and school literacy. They can encourage children to use their own histories and experiences as a springboard for writing (Hill, Townsend, Lawrence, Shevin, & Ingalls, 1995). They have, at least in theory, the time and resources to contribute to low-income children's store of cultural capital, the knowledge children bring to their reading and writing.

Afterschool programs are well suited to fostering literacy through the visual and expressive arts and through activities that work simultaneously across different symbol systems: words, pictures, music, movement. Since each art form has its own vocabulary and grammar, children also can make connections between creative expression and language, learn correspondences between movement and sentences or between jazz notation and writing, and better understand narrative structure. The arts help children understand the crucial link between creativity and discipline. Cushman (1998) notes that the arts "disrupt convention, control, predictability; they require discipline and mentorship" (p. 1).

In theory at least, afterschool programs can afford to take the time needed to help children acquire and practice literacy skills. Children need not feel pressure to read or write quickly. Except for homework, afterschool programs emphasize the process of a task as much as the timely completion of it. Afterschool programs can give children time and opportunity to explore literature, time which has become scarcer in school.<sup>2</sup> They can allow children to read independently and to discuss books with no external agenda. Indeed, afterschool programs can afford children the "freedom" to have their own reactions to a text: "what they see, feel, think and remember as they read" (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 21). They can offer a variety of ways to respond to, and make sense of, texts—through talk, drawing, or spontaneous dramatization (Sipe, 2000).

Because afterschool programs are as much peer oriented as adult oriented, they can make reading and writing social. They can link children in cross-age pairs for reading aloud or give children a chance to read with others, jointly write poems or stories, or write for a broader audience than is usually possible in school. Afterschool programs can create, in modest form, a new literacy community in which children read and write together. The basic qualities of afterschool programs also suggest a different role for

adults than that found in most urban schools—one that is essentially more supportive than directive.

### *Searching for These Ideals in Practice*

Using this conceptual framework as a kind of ideal case, my colleague and I set out to examine actual practice in the field. Fieldwork included a survey of programs in Chicago and Seattle; case studies, involving observations and interviews, of sixteen afterschool programs in Chicago, New York City, and Seattle; and key informant interviews with trainers, literacy specialists, and foundation staff (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002). We also drew on program observations and interviews conducted in ten afterschool programs as part of an earlier study (Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

In the survey, we were primarily interested in building a basic picture of literacy arrangements and practices. We asked about:

- Goals
- Schedules
- Specific types of activities
- The material literacy environment
- Staff roles and skills
- Issues and challenges faced

We also gathered information on general program characteristics that might help explain variations we found among programs (an issue not discussed in this article). We surveyed 212 programs, 47 percent

of the identified universe of some 450 afterschool programs in Chicago and Seattle. The sample included programs sponsored by child-care centers, social service agencies (settlement houses, community centers, child and family service agencies), youth-serving organizations, and parks and recreation departments. Some programs were based in schools, but none were run by them.

In the case studies, we were interested not only in confirming and deepening the picture created in the survey, but also in exploring exemplary literacy approaches, activities, and principles that seemed a good “fit” for afterschool programs. We constructed a convenience sample, half of which was selected to reflect diverse sponsors, neighborhoods, and populations of low-income children, as well as, to a lesser extent, philosophy and emphases. The other half of the sample was identified—by us, by staff in resource organizations or foundations, or through previous reports—as doing interesting or exemplary literacy work.<sup>4</sup>

### *Literacy Practices Typical of Afterschool Programs*

#### *Material and Space for Literacy*

The material literacy environment of afterschool programs provides an important foundation for literacy activity. This environment is especially important in low-income communities because families often lack the resources to provide materials and



*Lower Eastside Girls Club, New York City*

space for reading and writing. The programs we surveyed and observed varied widely in both space and material for literacy activity, but the majority provided at least a moderate foundation. Most surveyed programs reported having at least a modest selection of fiction and nonfiction books, although our observations showed that collections were typically limited and somewhat haphazard. To build book collections, programs relied on small book budgets; the public library; and donated books from

***Homework was by far the dominant literacy activity in afterschool programs in our study, followed, in moderate degree, by independent reading.***

individuals, businesses, and nonprofit book distributors. Most programs provided writing tools and materials; they had dictionaries, rulers, and calculators available. Programs also typically had props for dramatic play, as well as pen-and-paper word games such as crossword puzzles. About half the programs surveyed had a set of encyclopedias and computers for word processing. About a third had books on audiotape and books in languages other than English.

The nature—dedicated, shared, or borrowed—and amount of space available to afterschool programs affect the amount of literacy materials a program can make available, the opportunity to display literacy products, and the ability to create protected space for reading and writing. Most programs with dedicated space reported providing display areas for children’s artwork; the majority also displayed children’s writing. Displays we observed included poems, sets of rules or instructions composed by children, homemade books, book reports and writing assignments on particular topics, and occasional school work. A few programs designed word-rich bulletin boards, with words to unjumble, riddles to solve, or brain teasers; a few used chalkboards for writing or word games.

For space-related and other reasons, programs varied widely in whether and how they organized book collections. About half of the programs surveyed and observed were deliberate in displaying books; for example, they highlighted a few titles and, less commonly, rotated highlighted titles, labeled books for degree of difficulty, or used book cards for quick reviews. A handful of programs, rather than placing all books in a central location, provided

small collections of books in several different areas of the room and rotated books periodically.

***Nature and Frequency of Literacy Activities***

While we found hints of the range of purposes and activities outlined in our conceptual framework, they remained just that—hints. Homework was by far the dominant literacy activity in afterschool programs in our study, followed, in moderate degree, by independent reading. Although policies and philosophies varied, for all practical purposes homework was a universal daily activity except on Fridays. Younger children reportedly spent a half hour or less on homework, children nine years or older up to an hour. At least a third of the surveyed programs assigned homework if a child had none. In our observations, children were assigned work sheets, asked to work in textbooks, or required to read quietly if they had no homework or finished it quickly. Staff interviews suggested that, among some programs, homework was viewed as a central activity, almost the main reason-for-being of the program; among others, it seemed to be treated as a necessary, but not defining, activity.

In program observations, the climate during homework time was typically purposeful, more or less orderly, and relaxed. Yet a strict, school-like climate was not uncommon; we occasionally saw a noisy and chaotic one. In the majority of programs, staff and volunteers were engaged with children, sitting with them, explaining, asking questions, prodding, hinting, and otherwise helping children to stay on task. In a few, staff did not interact with children except to ask them to be quiet, using this time to do paperwork, talk with each other, or plan for later activities. More often than not, staff or volunteers checked children’s work—usually to see that it had been done, not whether it had been done correctly. Children themselves approached homework in different ways. Some preferred to get it over with, others appeared restless, and a handful were obviously frustrated. In a few programs we observed staff use homework time to talk with children about school in general—about particular experiences in school, about what it takes to do well, or about how and when to seek help.

Apart from homework time, most afterschool programs reported scheduling a modest amount of time for specific literacy activities, typically once or twice weekly—not too different from the time allotted to other “special” activities. Two-thirds of

programs reported scheduling time at least once a week for children to read on their own, and half reported scheduling time for children to write. Comments in survey responses and interviews suggested a belief that children who had been in school all day needed a chance to engage in other activities, that the need for reading and writing was met during homework time, and that it was up to children to find time for reading and writing. (About half of all surveyed programs allowed children to borrow books to bring home.) Program observations suggested that a third or more of scheduled literacy activities (as with other activities) either did not take place or did not get the time scheduled.

Three-fourths of the survey respondents reported that children read independently. Observations suggest that independent reading varied by child and was more unplanned than planned. Children typically chose to read during unstructured moments, when they finished homework early or between or during other activities. Adults reportedly read to children in about two-thirds of programs, and children read to others in half of all programs. Observations suggest that these percentages seem accurate, with the actual practice of reading to children being more irregular than regular. About half of all programs also reported that adults told children stories, although we were able to observe few such instances. Book discussions and literature circles were reported and observed to be an element in a small number of programs.

Writing—as a distinct activity other than for homework—was not common in afterschool programs in our study. About a third of programs reported that children wrote “stories, plays, or poetry” at least occasionally; about 20 percent that children “write about their experiences”; and about 20 percent that children wrote in their own journals on a regular basis. Staff or volunteers read children’s writing (primarily homework) in 58 percent of programs and wrote responses to children’s writing in 20 percent of programs. In our observations, we often spotted children’s journals, sometimes saw children writing in journals, and less commonly saw children writing poetry, stories, or plays or saw performances of these writings.

We found three clearly positive aspects of literacy practice in our study:

- Some reading and writing occurred incidentally in the course of activities not defined specifically as literacy. For instance, we observed children incorporate reading and

writing into dramatic play, label a drawing, read the words of a song they were learning for a performance, check schedules, read instructions in a board game, read a recipe for making pizza, and read instructions for using photography equipment, among many other activities.

- Literacy activities in afterschool programs were often strongly social. Children sat together to read or read to each other; they sought help from each other with a difficult word in a book. Children helped each other write, commented on each other’s work, took turns reading, or simply talked while working on a piece of writing.
- In programs serving children from immigrant and refugee families, children’s home languages and literacy traditions were recognized and supported. We observed staff telling children stories and using dramatic forms from their homelands, teaching the characters of a different alphabet, and so forth. The majority of programs serving English language learners tended to be bilingual in their practices, with staff and children switching naturally back and forth between English and the children’s home language.

In general, then, we found that, though the goal of contributing to children’s literacy development is now on the “radar screen” of afterschool programs in the study—something that would not have been true even a decade ago—most are not yet deliberate and active in this area of programming. Homework remains the dominant literacy activity. Beyond some independent reading—itsself a good thing—other activities are catch as catch can. Few programs have thought through a philosophy or approach to their literacy activities or are implementing literacy-based projects on anything like a regular basis. The survey and program observations revealed varied obstacles to fuller implementation of literacy activity, which I will discuss in detail later in this paper.

### ***Exemplary Approaches to Literacy Activity***

A central goal of our study was to identify afterschool programs that were doing interesting work in fostering literacy and to describe their approaches and activities in order to derive some tentative principles of potential use to the larger field. The programs selected were diverse in many ways. They were sponsored by settlements, churches, YMCAs,

Boys and Girls Clubs, independent youth-work agencies, and public housing developments. They served children from a variety of ethnic and racial groups and family situations. They had distinctive philosophies and emphases.

Yet they also shared certain general characteristics, for instance:

- They were thoughtful about their work. Directors, and sometimes front-line staff, were able to articulate goals for literacy and other activity, and in some cases a guiding philosophy.
- Most made an effort to socialize new staff into a shared understanding of the work.
- Staff created settings in which children felt safe and valued. They took children seriously.
- Staff conveyed excitement about program activities and made an effort to connect activities to children's lives.
- Directors and experienced staff were concerned about the details of implementation and paid attention to the importance of regularity and consistency.
- Almost all the programs structured time for staff to plan and discuss the daily work with children. These meetings served as occasions for program directors to reiterate core principles and practices.

In general, fostering literacy was not the organizing purpose of these programs. However, it was an identifiable focus, one to which thought had been given and to which regular time, strong support, and a program-wide commitment were devoted. We observed plenty of reading and writing, sometimes infused into other types of activity. Staff regularly encouraged children's efforts to read and write. Deliberate attention to words, language, and vocabulary was common. Staff discussed literacy during staff meetings, including, on occasion, their own formative experiences as readers and writers, as well as their ideas and beliefs about literacy development.

Like the larger community of afterschool programs, this group did not use commercial curricula or packaged reading development programs. A few had developed their own curricula. For example, Interfaith Neighbors in New York City had developed its own writing curriculum called "PATH." The Chicago Commons afterschool programs had adapted a well-known early childhood curriculum, "Reggio Emilia," which shaped literacy activity, as

well as the larger program. Staff in a number of programs maintained their own notebooks of ideas for literacy activities that they had read about, learned in a workshop, or tried with children. Some programs also used arts and literacy resources from the broader community. For instance, a YMCA-sponsored program at Bailey Gatzert School in Seattle worked for several months with Hugo House, a local literacy organization, to implement a drama project that involved a variety of literacy-related activities—talking, writing, reading, drawing, and performing. At El Centro de la Raza in Seattle, a local poet came every Wednesday evening to work with school-age children and adults on poetry writing.

### *Creating a Rich Material Literacy Environment*

The exemplary programs generally were thoughtful about the material literacy environment. They used a variety of means to highlight books and to help children choose books: rotating book selections periodically; organizing and labeling books by topic or degree of difficulty; providing multiple copies of popular books or of books used in group reading activities; using book cards for quick reviews; writing about books in a program newsletter; exhibiting book jackets on bulletin boards, sometimes with a staff- or child-written book review; locating small collections of books in different areas of the room or on book carts. They encouraged children to sign out books to take home. Some programs had created book corners or reading lofts. In selected programs, we saw literacy artifacts in dramatic play areas, various signs including some in languages other than English, printed instructions for projects and activities, and maps of all kinds: of the United States and the world, of imaginary places depicted in books, of the neighborhood. We observed concept webs and bulletin boards based on a particular theme or displaying riddles and word puzzles.

### *Goals of Literacy Activity*

Collectively, the exemplary programs seemed to focus on strengthening motivation to read and write, exposing children to different purposes for engaging in literacy activity, and encouraging a sense of playfulness about reading and writing. They wanted children to learn that reading and writing are not only things one does at school, but that they can be used for self-discovery and self-definition, to find a voice, to explore where one fits. The programs wanted children to come to believe that their own histories and experiences were worth

communicating and pondering. They wanted children to use reading and writing to reflect on family, social class, and culture, as well as to explore links between their personal experiences and heritage and those of other people.

Literacy activity was often used as a vehicle to explore issues both close to home and out in the world. For instance, Latino children at Chicago Commons' Guadalupe Center developed pen-pal relationships with children of the same age in a town in Nicaragua. The drama teacher at the Arts and Literacy Program of the Coalition for Hispanic Family Services in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn worked with children to bring a Mexican folktale, "The Cornmaidens," to life. One of the writing teachers in this program conducted activities in both English and Spanish, noting that he wanted children to "value Spanish more." Programs used reading and writing to examine issues of identity and group membership. At Forest Hills Community House in Queens, New York, a discussion of the book *Summer Wheels* by Eve Bunting explored the concept of "toughness," especially in relation to bullying. At Riverdale Neighborhood House in New York, we observed a group of sixth and seventh graders reading and discussing *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, on one occasion discussing the difference between "socks" and "greasers," as well as the meaning of "rat race."

Interfaith Neighbors in New York City was exceptionally thoughtful in developing a variety of reading and writing curricula intended to help middle-school children maintain a sense of self in the face of external pressures. At GirlSpace, a weekly writing group focused on middle-school girls' loss of confidence and sense of self as they enter adolescence. Writing included autobiography, individual and group poems, and pop songs. As girls became comfortable in their group, they were encouraged to share their writing and give each other feedback. They also read literature selected to generate discussion about their lives and experiences. Interfaith had developed similar writing and discussion groups for early adolescent boys in order to provide a safe space and non-aggressive means for boys to express their ideas and process their experiences—too many of which had involved witnessing, being subjected to, or participating in violent acts. In all these examples, implicit goals included giving children a con-

crete sense that there are reasons to read and write and overcoming anxieties about writing.

### *Incorporating Literacy into Program Life*

A number of the exemplary programs were notable for the ways in which they incorporated literacy activity into the full life of the program. For instance, many programs consciously linked reading to other kinds of activities. At the Riverdale Neighborhood House in New York, children made apple crisp after reading a book about Johnny Appleseed and then baked Irish soda bread in conjunction with a book

***The exemplary programs seemed to focus on strengthening motivation to read and write, exposing children to different purposes for engaging in literacy activity, and encouraging a sense of playfulness about reading and writing.***

called *Albert's Bad Word*. During our visit to the CYCLE Wiz Factory in Chicago, children were reading *Charlotte's Web* throughout the hallways of the center in anticipation of a weekend field trip to see a performance of the story. When children arrived, the director greeted them and asked, "Do you have a copy of *Charlotte's Web* yet?" If they did not, she handed them one.

Deliberate attention to language and vocabulary was common across a range of activities. Plans for art activities typically included a vocabulary list that reminded staff to go over particular key words or concepts with children. Children in the program at Interfaith Neighbors in New York developed and posted lists of "cool words" from books they had read. At the Hartley House in New York, we saw a wall display explaining what *genre* means: "The genre of a story tells us what kind of story it is." A variety of genres—tall tale, nonfiction, fable, fairytale, realistic fiction, article, and folktale—were presented with their definitions. Book discussion activities sometimes involved developing thematically organized word lists or lists of words to define. We sometimes observed staff pointing out and talking about particular words with children or comparing words in different languages. The poetry instructor at the CYCLE Wiz Factory told us, "We play with words as a child would play with sand in the sandbox."

Children in these programs did more writing than is typical in afterschool programs; they had greater opportunity to explore different purposes for

and forms of writing. In addition to use of dialogue journals, we observed projects in which children explored the structure and rhythms of poetry (for example, writing Chinese calligraphy poems), created comic strips using storyboards, and wrote and performed skits. One writing teacher had children create “noise poems”: He had children go out into the streets, identify neighborhood sounds, and “convert” them to poetry, which could use made-up words. One program’s year-end street festival featured kites with tails made up of index cards on which children had written wishes.

### *Fostering Literacy through Other Art Forms*

A few programs deliberately used the visual and performing arts—dance and movement, photography, video, instrumental music, musical notation and composition, drawing, mural making, cartooning, comic book illustration—as a foundation for literacy. The Arts and Literacy Program Coalition for Hispanic Family Services in Brooklyn illustrates the ways in which literacy and the arts can be connected. The staff in this program were mostly young artists in various fields. Activities were based on month-long projects designed by individual staff, sometimes with input from children. There was a general plan that included the basic concepts to be conveyed, learning and skill development goals, the

steps in carrying out the project, and the vocabulary involved. For example, one photography project included such concepts as composition and “color as mood”; vocabulary included *focus*, *documentary*, and *perspective*, as well as *aperture* and *shutter*.

Such arts projects attended to literacy both directly and indirectly. Most included writing in one or another form. The drama teacher read stories to children and had them share in the reading, passing the book around a circle. She had them write monologues, using specific objects for inspiration, and then perform their pieces. In one music project, the children worked in groups to write lyrics. In the process, they learned about *verse* and *chorus* and about constructing a story around a theme. The cartooning instructor had children write about who the characters were before drawing them. After every project, children completed written reviews and critiques of their work; these formed part of their individual portfolios.

A lot of activities and projects involved work across symbol systems: drawing to complement writing, writing to explain pictures or photographs, translating words into movement, writing lyrics to accompany a melody. We observed a writing instructor lead an exercise in which children wrote short stories and then drew pictures representing scenes in the story, which were put on a “picture



*Lower Eastside Girls Club, New York City*

wheel” that rotated as the story progressed. The dance teacher used words, poetry, and stories to shape movement. For example, she asked children to think of movement and action words that begin with *s*—*swinging, stretching, standing*—and then demonstrate those words. She sometimes read a poem and then asked children to develop movement corresponding to the images of the poem.

Sometimes this work was designed to help children see correspondences among the concepts, vocabulary, and creative process in different art forms, for example, between the elements of narrative in a dance and those in a story. On one occasion, the dance teacher worked with children to create a dance out of the pictures and story in a book about a Puerto Rican myth. In some instances, staff were trying to help children see how each art form has its own distinct structure and vocabulary. The photography teacher told us that he wanted to help children develop what he called “a visual language,” by which he meant the ability to use a variety of concepts—foreground-background, perspective, shape, silhouette, isolating, and framing—to create a visual composition. The dance teacher spoke of “movement vocabulary,” with individual movements the equivalent of words that are combined to create “movement sentences,” a group of movements which, when combined, convey a complete thought.

### *Celebrating and Validating Children’s Literacy Work*

A number of programs created opportunities for children to exhibit, publicize, and perform the products of their literacy work. For instance, staff arranged for children from East Harlem Tutorial’s writing group to read their poetry at a local Barnes & Noble. Both Interfaith Neighbors and Arts and Literacy sponsored public festivals where children read and performed their writing. In the Arts and Literacy Program, children performed the songs they had written for family and friends. The program published an annual anthology of children’s work, which was mostly poetry but also included a play and some mini-biography. Creating opportunities for children to read and perform their writing helped parents and the broader community see that their children were capable, creative writers who had something valuable to say. It allowed children to see connections between reading and writing activity and oral performance. It affirmed for children the value of their work.

### *Limitations and Challenges to Literacy Work in Afterschool Programs*

We were gratified to find a variety of creative and engaging literacy practices in a handful of afterschool programs, but this finding also highlighted the enormous challenges to effective literacy practice facing the larger afterschool field. For the great majority of programs in our study, these included:

- Time, space, and material resource constraints
- Lack of staff skill and experience in fostering literacy, as well as limitations in staff members’ own literacy skills
- The wide range of literacy support needs, interests, and identities among participating children
- Lack of support for programs—in particular for program directors—in thinking through and trying to implement a coherent approach to literacy activity

In addition to these challenges, many afterschool programs in our study were struggling to find an appropriate stance in relation to schools and to respond to pressure—from funders, parents, and other stakeholders—to become more school-like and help address school-related agendas.

### *Time, Space, and Material Constraints*

The afterschool programs we observed had less functional time for sustained literacy activity than might seem available. Many tended not to use available time optimally because they divided the day into short fragments that prevented deep engagement in an activity. By the time children arrived, settled in, did homework, had snacks, and had some free time, there was often not enough time left for any meaningful literacy activity. The effect of time constraints was exacerbated when children struggled with homework, a problem that was surprisingly common in the programs we observed and was also reported by a number of program directors in the survey. Additionally, in some programs, children arrived individually or in small clusters from different schools over the course of an hour or more. The end of the afternoon was often rushed and sometimes disorganized, with parents or siblings arriving at different times to take children home. When children knew they were leaving in a few minutes, they were less likely to settle down to an activity.

Time constraints on literacy activity are directly related to children’s needs after a day at school.

Schools in low-income neighborhoods are increasingly programmed, and staff are strict. Children experience tight control of all movement—silence is required in the halls, and in general extraordinary self-control is demanded. On top of these restrictions, more and more children are coming from

***Our observations and discussions with staff suggest that many were uncomfortable with their own identity and strengths as readers and writers.***

school having had no recess or gym. Under increased pressure and with fewer outlets for decompressing during the school day, children need time to unwind and “regroup” psychologically after

school. Many children also desperately need some physical activity. (This need is on the verge of becoming another theme in the afterschool field.) They may not be interested in taking on even the most engaging literacy activity. Ironically, one issue that we observed in some afterschool programs was lack of flexibility for children who did want to sit and read. A child might settle down to read, perhaps after finishing homework, and then within a few minutes be asked to stop in order to move to another activity.

In a quarter to a third of the programs, lack of dedicated space affected literacy-related physical arrangements (as well as other activities). Having to share space or to set up and put away furniture and materials daily hampered the creation of a language-rich physical environment or quiet and comfortable areas for reading. Combined with fragmented use of time, this physical constraint limited opportunities to carry out long-term projects or to create areas for dramatic play.

Less commonly, lack of literacy materials or of budgets to purchase materials created moderate constraints on literacy activity. For instance, some programs could not afford multiple copies of books needed for book discussions. Programs were sometimes unable to update libraries or to purchase particular kinds of books.

***Staff Limitations***

Staff limitations create a major obstacle to afterschool programs’ capacity to provide enriching literacy experiences. Adults play important roles in scaffolding or structuring children’s literacy experiences and nurturing their literacy-related identities:

They help children choose appropriate books, demonstrate different ways of engaging texts, model excitement about reading and writing, frame and guide book discussions, help connect texts to children’s experiences, serve as an audience and respondent to children’s writing, introduce children to new authors, and so forth. These and other critical mediating tasks are difficult enough even for skilled literacy mentors. Through no fault of their own, the great majority of frontline staff and even the majority of supervisory staff in afterschool programs are not skilled in this domain. For example, we rarely observed staff engaging in pre-reading activities: They seldom previewed a story or book chapter before reading it aloud to children or prepared children in book discussion groups for a particular book by giving background, reviewing vocabulary, and so forth.

Our observations and discussions with staff suggest that many were uncomfortable with their own identity and strengths as readers and writers. Staff who do not see themselves as readers and writers usually will not provide literacy models for children. For instance, children in afterschool programs we observed rarely saw staff reading, writing, or discussing reading and writing. Lack of staff conviction around literacy was sometimes apparent in lack of follow-through; they would start to read a story and not finish it, for example, or begin a writing project and then not respond to the writing or do anything with the products.

When afterschool staff were insecure about literacy-related activity or did not receive training, information, and support, they tended to imitate the worst literacy practices of schools instead of the best ones: giving children worksheets to fill out, having them trace letters, or subjecting them to drills. This school-like drilling was even more inappropriate because it was not part of a surrounding conceptual framework: Assignments were not part of a sequenced program, were completed haphazardly, and received little or no feedback. Afterschool staff often had difficulty in building children’s confidence as readers and writers. They sometimes had trouble responding primarily as an interested audience for children’s writing, focusing instead on correcting mistakes.

As afterschool programs have come to use more volunteers for homework help, tutoring, reading to children, and so forth, the literacy skills of these auxiliary staff have become an issue. In our study, high-school youth proved particularly variable in

these roles. We observed instances in which they were patient, persistent, and good at explaining concepts, and other instances in which they showed little skill. The staff member in charge of homework help at East Harlem Tutorial told us that some high school tutors had trouble reading deeply for comprehension themselves and so could not really help younger children learn to read more deeply. Increasingly, college students also have variable literacy skills. One New York City settlement house that relies on college students as staff feels compelled to test these students on basic skills before hiring them in order to be sure they have adequate literacy and numeracy skills to help children with homework.

### *Children's Diverse Literacy Support Needs*

Children served by afterschool programs have diverse literacy support needs, interests, and identities. This diversity created all kinds of challenges for the afterschool programs in our study. A group of 15 or 20 children might have almost as many different homework assignments. A group pulled together for a book discussion might include children who have read a particular book with ease and children who barely understood it. A program might serve children from three, four, or more linguistic communities. As noted above, after a day at school, a few children like curling up with a book, while others have no interest in or endurance for more reading and writing.

Staff in the case study programs reported a variety of distinctive—but not unexpected—literacy support needs among the children they served. Beyond inability to do their homework, some children had limited experience in reading and writing outside the school context. Many children reportedly did not enjoy reading for pleasure and did not know how either to choose books or to use writing for self-expression. A growing number of immigrant and refugee children were struggling with weak literacy foundations in their native languages. Staff reported that older children, especially, were reluctant to write, and that it was difficult to convince children that they had something to say. Some children found it hard to write about themselves, perhaps having never been asked to think of themselves as worth writing about. Staff noted children's complaints that reading or writing were "boring"; such complaints appeared to serve as a defense for reading or writing difficulties. Such difficulties were often a subtle mixture of fear, shame,

and skill deficits. Speaking of the child she worked with, a tutor at one program told us that "sometimes she wouldn't show up at all, or she would be hiding" in a different part of the building.

Specific literacy problems were often intertwined with general difficulties with school. A sizable minority of children served by the afterschool programs we observed were, in one way or another, lost at school. The fact that as many as a quarter of the children in many programs seemed to have serious problems doing their homework was a symptom of this difficulty. In some cases, older children did not even bother to pretend to do homework anymore. Staff in programs serving immigrant and refugee communities noted a surprising number and variety of school problems among children served, contradicting the received wisdom that such children are strongly committed to schooling. When afterschool staff reached out to teachers, they often had received little response.

### *Struggling with Literacy Activity in Isolation*

An important finding of our study was that most afterschool programs struggle in isolation in their efforts—whether modest or significant—to foster literacy. Although many program directors expressed interest in reconfiguring their programs to include more literacy activity, they typically did not know how to begin to act on that interest. They were either unaware of or lacked the time and energy to pursue external literacy resources.

The literacy field is full of wonderful and practical books about children's reading and writing development. Although most of these books are implicitly or explicitly directed at teachers, they could be useful to afterschool providers. The literacy field also includes a sizable group of resource people and centers that conduct training and technical assistance around literacy. Of these, a handful at most are paying attention to afterschool programs. Local arts organizations, museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions are all potentially available to support and enrich afterschool programs' literacy efforts. Many cities offer individuals and institutions that could be linked to afterschool programs for story-reading, writing workshops, and the like. A number of inter-

***A sizable minority of children served by the afterschool programs we observed were, in one way or another, lost at school.***

### ***Strengths of Most Afterschool Programs Observed***

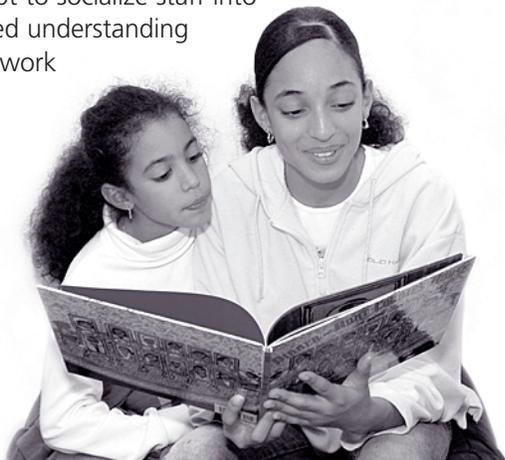
- Provide a “safe” environment for children’s literacy activities
- Respect children’s home languages and cultures
- Understand the social dimensions of literacy activity

### ***Challenges for Most Afterschool Programs Observed***

- Must deal with constraints of time, space (often shared or borrowed), and money that limit their ability to provide a rich material literacy environment
- Must often hire staff with little or no literacy experience or training, sometimes with limited literacy skills themselves
- Struggle with the diverse needs of children from a variety of cultural backgrounds and with a wide range of literacy abilities and habits
- Are relatively isolated from the rich array of resources available in the field of children’s literacy development

### ***Strengths of Most Exemplary Programs Observed***

- Are intentional about planning to integrate literacy activities into program life
- Create a rich material literacy environment with book displays, dedicated areas for reading and writing, displays of literacy artifacts
- Purposefully integrate literacy into other program activities such as arts activities
- Strengthen children’s motivation for reading and writing; explore varied reasons for literacy
- Can hire staff with specific training and experience in literacy or literacy-related activities
- Attempt to socialize staff into a shared understanding of the work



mediary organizations have developed resources and training experiences for afterschool literacy activity, such as the Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, School’s Out Consortium in Seattle, Partnership for After School Education in New York City, and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time.

However, many programs work in such isolation that directors are not aware of these supports or don’t have time to seek them out. In addition, limited budgets often don’t allow funds for outside consultation.

### ***Conclusions***

The findings of our research, when placed in the larger context of literature on children’s literacy development, suggest that afterschool programs can be “truly alternative settings for literacy practice” (Resnick, 1990), freed from the constraints faced by schools. Afterschool programs’ psychological climate, motivational structure, temporal structure, and adult roles clearly distinguish them from schools as literacy nurturing environments. At the same time, the great majority of afterschool programs currently operate at such a basic level that a good deal of capacity-building work will be needed to help them fulfill their potential as literacy development settings (as well as in other program areas).

The principal strength of afterschool programs today is the fact that children typically see them as a safe context. For literacy activity this perception is no small thing. Feeling and being safe—not just physically but psychologically safe—are pre-requisites for learning. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) notes that “Because everyone’s priority is to keep the self safe, whenever danger or ridicule threatens it, we lose concentration and focus attention on defending ourselves rather than on getting involved with the task” (p. 137). If low-income children do not read and write because they perceive reading and writing as risky or even threatening activities, afterschool programs can help counter those feelings. Several staff in our exemplary programs noted that children have to feel not only safe, but also accepted for who they are, before they can take risks.

We learned in our study that literacy activities naturally fit differently into different programs, tending to work best when they reflected the program’s character and were integrated into its daily life. We observed also that some literacy

activity in afterschool programs was embedded in activity that had other purposes; the exemplary programs tended to be more aware of this congruence and built on it in designing a range of activities and projects. These findings reflect and confirm the oft-cited principle that “children often learn best by being absorbed in tasks that require the incidental use of skills and ideas” (Robinson, 2001).

Although the exemplary programs differed from each other, they shared some important characteristics. These included helping children explore varied reasons to read and write, strengthening children’s belief that what they had to say is important, and enhancing children’s sense of ownership of reading and writing—their sense of themselves as readers and writers. We observed and learned about children using reading (including discussion of texts) and writing to explore identity, reflect on their lives, exercise their imaginations, and analyze their experiences. In programs with strong arts components, children had an opportunity to explore the structure of and correspondences between different symbolic systems. A number of the exemplary programs had activities designed to help children explore the particular literacy traditions of their families and communities.

Our findings confirmed that when the context permits or encourages it, children’s literacy activity is often strongly social. We observed children kibbitzing, sharing ideas, seeking and giving help, reading passages out loud, commenting to each other about a book, asking each other to listen, responding to and critiquing each other. We were struck also by how playful children often were with words and language. These patterns, made possible by afterschool programs’ modest adult agenda and lack of competitive culture, were positive in many respects: They fit the context, and they fit how children learn. To an extent, children were engaging each other around literacy because adults were hanging back.

## Strengthening Literacy Activity in Afterschool Programs

Children’s ownership of literacy is enhanced when they can act on their own initiative and use materials and other resources to their own ends. This goal is in turn enhanced when staff respect children’s choice of reading material, the connec-

tions children make in their reading, and the ways children express ideas. Yet reading, and to some extent writing, are complex activities, sometimes requiring skilled adult support to enrich the process and help children achieve mastery. As in the arts, there is some apprenticeship involved: “the invisible

***Experience indicates that effectively linking outside resources to afterschool programs takes a good deal of work, but this linkage is in some respects one of the most critical challenges facing the afterschool field and its proponents.***

mental processes involved in the task [of reading and interpreting text] must be made visible and available to apprentices” (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001, p. 88). Referring to writing development, Silberman (1989, p. 87), argues that it “is neither spinach nor ice cream, neither rote memorization of conventions and nothing else, nor undisciplined self-expression without careful thought and correct form.”

With exceptions, the afterschool field currently lacks the staff who can apprentice children to literacy. Filling this gap will require recruiting outside help. Fuller and more consistent support for arts and literacy resource organizations would be a start, as would recruitment of professional writers who are interested in working with children. A growing number of arts-oriented organizations include literacy activities among their offerings. The Community Word Project in New York City, for instance, provides both resident artists and staff training in collaborative creative writing, drama, performance, and visual arts. It also emphasizes creative ways of using words and language to build vocabulary. Experience indicates that effectively linking outside resources to afterschool programs takes a good deal of work, but this linkage is in some respects one of the most critical challenges facing the afterschool field and its proponents.

What role, if any, afterschool programs have in helping to address the needs of children who have identified problems with reading and writing is unclear. At a modest level, afterschool programs can be settings in which children re-approach literacy with less at stake. Afterschool programs can help children recover some of their motivation to read and write, as well as their sense of pleasure in these activities. They can perhaps help correct basic

misapprehensions about reading that discourage some children. Yet, as children grow older, the work of reading and writing recovery requires specialized skill that few afterschool programs can be expected to acquire (see, e.g., Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001).

Encouraging and supporting afterschool programs to be more thoughtful in how they use time and label activities should free some space for literacy activity. This process might start by re-thinking responsibility—and setting limits on parental pressures—for homework time and help. For example, programs might set aside two afternoons a week when parents knew children were not going to be doing homework, freeing up more time for in-depth projects and activities. Such projects in turn create more opportunity to incorporate reading and writing into program life.

In their relationship with schools, afterschool programs will have to walk a fine line. School agendas intrude in the world of afterschool programs. Much new funding is tied to school-related worries and goals. Children bring homework to afterschool programs every day. Some—but by no means all—afterschool staff see it as their role to monitor school progress by, for instance, checking report cards and asking about school experiences; they often learn

about and feel compelled to help with school problems. At the same time, afterschool programs would not want the attributes that lead children to feel discouraged in school—fragmented and disembedded learning, a preoccupation with compliance and obedience, the constant experience of being judged and ranked, the all-too-often accompanying experience of failure, the lack of time for processing and for simple respite—to filter into their own literacy development activities.

There is a clear danger that if afterschool programs are pulled into the orbit of schools, they will lose the opportunity to forge their own distinctive goals for children's literacy development. Moreover, children appear to want and need boundaries between different types of experiences (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Heath, 2001). Our observations suggest that children instinctively understand and value the differences in reading and writing in school and outside it. Afterschool programs surely need help gaining access to the specialized knowledge and experience about literacy development in the educational literature. But they themselves will still be responsible for forging a literacy-related identity that makes sense given their distinctive qualities. With their generally modest capacity, they will have to build this identity a step at a time.

## The Role of Specific Activities in Children's Literacy Development

### Reading to Children

The literature is virtually unanimous on the benefits of reading to children. These include developing a love of books; learning to distinguish types of language; developing an understanding of story structure and narrative; learning to think or imagine “ahead”; improving vocabulary, listening comprehension, and more general “attending” abilities; strengthening bonds with the reader/caregiver; and creating a reading “community” (Sipe, 2000, p. 252; Calkins, 2001). For some children, hearing a story read aloud fluently lets them experience the story as a whole, which helps them see the deeper meanings in words or the story that they might not understand when they read themselves because they are working too hard (Allen, 2000). Because children’s oral understanding and listening comprehension is at a higher level than their print understanding, reading aloud to children can introduce them to higher-level books than they could read on their own, exposing them to more interesting and challenging material. Reading aloud introduces children to books that they may later choose to read themselves. Children who are read to gradually “appropriate” the reading act for themselves (Resnick, 1990, p. 181).

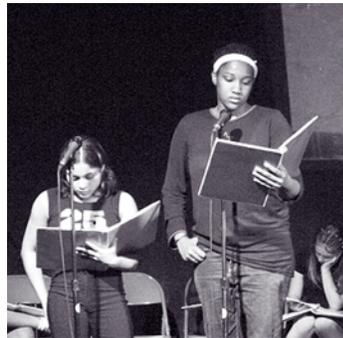
### Sustained Silent Reading

Although there is obviously no substitute for reading itself in learning to read and in making reading part of one’s life, what is sometimes called “sustained silent reading” is often neglected in the settings in which children spend their days. Sustained silent reading provides a good opportunity to read for pleasure, which Resnick (1990) defines as the freedom to pick up or put down a book at will, with “no need to prove to others that one has read” (p. 182). As Calkins (2001) puts it, “children benefit from daily opportunities to read books they choose for themselves for their own purposes and pleasures” (p. 8).

### Book Discussions

Text can be a stimulus for discussion and creative expression. Talking about what they have read or heard read aloud allows children to connect one text to other texts and to personal experiences. It allows

them to develop—or simply to recognize that they have—a distinct perspective (Wilhelm, 1997). Calkins (2001) writes, “We teach children to think with and between and against texts by helping them say aloud, in conversation with us and others, the thoughts they will eventually be able to develop without the interaction of conversation” (p. 226). There is some debate about how much to structure book discussions with children. Some argue that children do well with free or open discussion, usually finding their way to key elements of the narrative, especially if they have knowledge of key concepts; the group leader directs merely by asking key questions (Sipe, 2000). Others emphasize the value of some adult framing, such as asking children to discuss what they liked or disliked about a text, what puzzled them, or how a book compares to others they have read (Carney, 1990).



### Story and Literature Dramatization

Dramatizing stories, plays, and other literature provides an active means of exploring text, one that is therefore more engaging for some

children than passive reading or listening. Acting out a story deepens children’s sense of character, plot, and narrative, thereby providing an opportunity for deeper understanding. Speaking and acting out stories gives children a different pathway into the distinctive language of literature. Dramatization makes abstract attributes of a piece of literature concrete. When children temporarily take on other identities, they think about what they have in common with and how they differ from others. Thematic fantasy play, akin to story dramatization in some respects, sometimes incorporates stories that children have heard or read. Children “re-tell” those stories in their own ways, perhaps changing characters or other elements, but usually retaining the basic narrative structure (see Pellegrini & Galda, 2002).

## Writing Activities

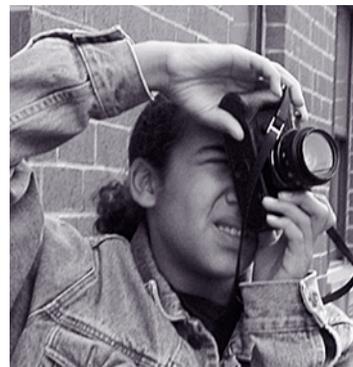
Some have noted that children are more naturally writers than readers. Most children want to share their experiences and internal worlds with others, and most love to experiment with writing in the same way they love to experiment with drawing—as forms of self-expression, as ways of representing experience, their culture, their feelings, even their questions. When children begin to write, they build on what they know. They draw also upon their experiences with other symbolic media—not only talk but also drawing and dramatic play (Dyson, 1993).

A variety of writing experiences for different purposes, both guided by adults and unguided, encourages attention to language and helps children develop understanding of word sounds, sound-spelling relationships, and meanings (Calkins, 1994, 1997; Graves & Stuart, 1986). Open-ended and creative writing activities foster interest in literacy as well as specific skills such as narrative structure or character development. Journal writing encourages children to express their ideas, concerns, and experiences in their own way, without fear of censure by an adult. Dialogue journals (with a strong assurance of privacy and confidentiality) provide an opportunity for children to record responses to their experiences or reading and to share those responses with a teacher or other adult who responds in writing. Collaborative writing groups allow children to stimulate, help, and constructively critique each other; they learn to revise and to connect their own ideas to those of others. Children sometimes enjoy reading what they have produced, a process that can be invested with a bit of ritual. One idea is to have an “author’s chair” used especially for children to read their writing.

## Using Reading and Writing for Research

Putting reading and writing in the service of some other end—say, learning about elephants or planning a group construction project—is also a helpful literacy development activity, because children are not self-consciously focused on learning how to read or write, but are using these tools to think about and learn something new of interest to them. Connecting books to field trips, art, and other activities, such as making applesauce after reading a book about Johnny Appleseed or making origami birds after reading *A Thousand Cranes*, is another common way to extend learning and foster interest in reading.

Reading to acquire information is often neglected. Children have to learn to read for information differently than they read stories, sometimes scanning and reading selectively. They also have to learn how to read different kinds of documents, including diagrams, maps, graphs, tables, photographs, and other “visual” texts (Moline, 1995). Children’s understanding of literacy expands when they read a schedule in order to see what activities are happening, instructions in order to play a game, or recipes in order to prepare food. Children enjoy informational writing that combines words with pictures or diagrams, as in flow charts, webs, maps, or timelines.



## Participation in Visual and Expressive Arts

The arts—drama, movement, photography, video, music, song writing, drawing, mural making, cartooning, comic book illustration—provide other

pathways into literacy. The arts reveal unrecognized abilities in children, allowing children to lead from strength and to gain confidence for taking risks. Some children express themselves better through other symbol systems than through writing and thereby learn they have something to say. Some children’s verbal imagination is sparked by their visual imagination; they express something first in pictures and then move into using words. Some children have difficulty ordering and expressing the ideas in their heads in words and can more easily practice that process using other art forms. For children who are struggling with literacy, re-approaching it through and incorporating it into another art form removes some of the psychological baggage that may have begun to accumulate.

Crossing back and forth between different media—for example, acting out a poem through movement—can lead to understanding and insight. Sometimes activity in one art form stimulates activity in another—a book or story stimulates a child to paint or draw something or to act something out. The arts help children distinguish the subjective from the objective, the concrete from the abstract; they also foster what Shirley Brice Heath (2001) has called conditional reasoning: What if we tried this . . . ? ■

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## Notes

1. When I speak of *afterschool programs*, I use the term in its traditional sense, referring to programs that provide care and supervision, enrichment—through arts, sports, cultural activities, and so on—homework help, and opportunity for play and fun, albeit with varying emphases on each. I do not include efforts to extend the school day for the purpose of academic remediation. By *literacy*, I mean reading and writing, as well as activities immediately tied to reading and writing, for example, talk about texts and about reading and writing in general, story dramatization, drawings meant to represent texts, vocabulary-building activities, and so forth. This definition may seem narrow in that it does not include, for example, use of computers, but a narrow definition provides conceptual clarity and meets a practical need for boundaries.

2. Trelease (1985) points out that among the qualities of literature absent from textbook fiction is conflict, which “allows us to vent our emotions with tears, laughter, love and hate.” Literature also “releases us from life’s pressures by allowing us to escape into other people’s lives” (p. 10). Vargas Llosa (2001) writes that, through literature, human beings recognize themselves, converse with each other, transcend time and place, learn what all humans share (or not). Literature is a source of beauty, an expression of human creativity, and a nurturer of language.

3. This was an evaluation of a three-city afterschool “system-building” initiative, called MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time), sponsored by the Wallace-Readers Digest Fund in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. The MOST case study programs do not overlap with those undertaken for the literacy study. We observed literacy activities as well as a variety of other foci.

4. The sponsoring agencies in Chicago were Chicago Commons Guadalupano Center, Chicago Commons NIA Center, Chinese American Service League, Erie Neighborhood House, LaSalle Street Cycle, and Street Level Youth Media; in New York, Coalition for Hispanic Family Services (Arts & Literacy Program), East Harlem Tutorial, Forest Hills Community House, Hartley House, Interfaith Neighbors, and Riverdale Neighborhood House; in Seattle, Chinese Information Service Center, El Centro de la Raza, Refugee Women’s Alliance, and the YMCA Enrichment Program at Bailey Gatzert.

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The Lower Eastside Girls Club provides a place where girls age 8 to 18 can grow, learn, have fun, and develop confidence in themselves and their ability to make a difference in the world. Through strong and innovative programs in the arts, sciences, literacy, entrepreneurial training, health, and wellness, the Girls Club encourages girls to develop and celebrate their own unique gifts and talents. To learn more about their programs visit: [www.girlsclub.org](http://www.girlsclub.org).