



Critical Issues in After-School Programming

Robert Halpern



MONOGRAPHS OF THE HERR RESEARCH CENTER
FOR CHILDREN AND SOCIAL POLICY, ERIKSON INSTITUTE
FRANCES STOTT, EDITOR

Critical Issues
in After-School
Programming

Robert Halpern

MONOGRAPHS OF THE HERR RESEARCH
CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND SOCIAL POLICY,
ERIKSON INSTITUTE

SERIAL NO. 1, VOLUME 1, NO. 1 2006

Contents

Abstract **v**

Introduction **ix**

The Role of After-School Programs
in Supporting Low-Income Children's
Literacy Development **1**

Physical (In)Activity Among Low-Income
Children and Youth **41**

The Challenges of System-Building
in the After-School Field: Lessons
from Experience **77**

Confronting "The Big Lie":
The Need to Reframe Expectations
of After-School Programs **111**

Contributor **138**

Critical Issues in After-School Programming explores the expectations, goals, potential, and challenges of after-school care in the United States at the start of the 21st century. The monograph, which brings together four recently published studies, looks at four issues central to the future of after-school programs: their role in supporting literacy development and in fostering children’s physical well-being, the challenge of system building, and the question of appropriate expectations.

How well can after-school programs support literacy development among low-income children? Do the most recent set of expectations we have placed on after-school programs conform to what those programs do best? And if not, which should change, our expectations or their goals? What role do after-school programs play in addressing the complicated problem of physical inactivity? How can we transform a patchwork of independent programs of varying quality into an efficient and effective system, and do we want to?

The Role of After-School Programs in Supporting Low-Income Children’s Literacy Development

The acquisition of literacy is problematic for many low- and moderate-income children. As urban school systems work to strengthen literacy instruction and parents, in some cases themselves struggling with literacy, are encouraged to help with the task, funders and policymakers have also begun to turn to after-school programs.

How well can after-school programs—programs that provide care and supervision, enrichment through arts and sports and cultural activities, homework help, and opportunities for play and fun—promote literacy development among low-income children? Drawing on the findings of a two-year study examining literacy goals and practices in after-school programs in three cities, Halpern clarifies the potential and the limits of after-school programs as literacy devel-

opment settings. He considers them in relation to schools, and argues that after-school programs' philosophy, purpose, and approach to nurturing literacy has to be different—in some ways fundamentally different—than that found in most urban schools.

Physical (In)activity Among Low-Income Children and Youth:

Problem, Prospect, Challenge

When today's adults reach back in their minds to childhood, their strongest memories often include physical ones—running, skipping, bicycling, playing ball, jumping rope, chasing and being chased. Being physically active was a defining dimension of urban or suburban childhood for at least the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Over the past twenty or so years, that has become less and less the case. Unfriendly and unhealthy physical environments, economic pressures on (and necessary priorities of) low-income families, the growing institutionalization of childhood, unbridled advertising and damaging messages from popular culture, rampant consumerism, the often unhealthy way in which American society “does” sports, and not least, dysfunctional public policies in a wide range of spheres (e.g., support for working families, urban planning, environmental policy, organization of the school day, regulation of business, etc.) all contribute to the decline.

Halpern examines the reasons for what some are calling an epidemic of inactivity among low- and moderate-income children and youth and discusses what it might take to address this problem. He examines the potential roles of after-school and youth programs and of organized youth sports, as well as such broader responses as renewing outdoor play and recreation spaces and reinstating recess in school.

The Challenge of System-Building in the After-School Field:

Lessons from Experience

The heterogeneous, decentralized, and fragmented nature of the after-school field has long been a mixed blessing. It has allowed a variety of community institutions to find a role as providers, and other institutions, such as cultural and arts organizations, to feel welcome in contributing to children's experiences. It has kept bureaucracy to a minimum, allowing after-school programs to remain community oriented and rooted and to serve all interested children without having to label or categorize.

These same defining qualities have complicated efforts to develop the after-school field in a coherent way, especially to formulate and implement strategies for addressing common challenges facing the field. Increasing supply and strengthening program quality, for example, are often complicated by cities' inability to collect and analyze information, to plan, and to set priorities. Providers cannot find, and sometimes are unaware of, resources that would be helpful to their work. Potential funders may not be sure where or how to focus their investments.

Drawing on his studies of system-building in four cities—Boston, Chicago, Seattle, and Baltimore—Halpern analyzes the tasks, questions, and challenges associated with system-building in the after-school field, focusing on city-level efforts.

Confronting “The Big Lie”: The Need to Reframe Expectations of After-School Programs

In each era, the mission of after-school programs has been defined in part by providers' own idiosyncratic visions and in part by broad societal worries about particular groups of children. Over the past decade, one such worry—inadequate academic achievement levels among low- and moderate-income children—has come to influence key dimensions of the after-school field. It has shaped the expectations of funders and policymakers, altered (to some degree) the daily work of thousands of such programs, and, finally, strongly influenced where and how evaluators look for after-school program effects.

Halpern analyzes our expectation that after-school programs help boost academic achievement and argues the urgent need to undertake basic, grounded research to uncover the range and size of program effects for children of different dispositions, ages, and life situations, and for different types and qualities of programs. Such research, he argues, might yield a more realistic set of expectations. By identifying and developing more appropriate measures of program effects, Halpern argues, we might determine not whether after-school programs deserve public funding but what they should be supported in trying to accomplish. And by shedding light on the breadth of developmental tasks that children of different ages face, we will not only point to the developmental domains that after-school programs should be attending to but will help organize and focus the daily work of programs and their staff.

INTRODUCTION

Frances Stott, Editor

Robert Halpern has been studying and writing about after-school programs for many years. His 2003 book, *Making Play Work: The Promise of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children* (Teachers College Press) provided a broad social and historical understanding of after-school programs and a keen analysis of contemporary policy and programmatic issues. In the interim, he has finished a major evaluation of After School Matters, an after-school apprenticeship program for Chicago high school students, as well as presented at national conferences, and consulted to numerous national and local youth serving programs, foundations, and city governments.

In all Halpern's work he returns to one central idea: low- and moderate-income children have the same developmental needs as other children, and despite the sometimes distinct circumstances of their lives, they need the same normative supports that all children do. Halpern's focus on normative supports—as opposed to preventive or compensatory or remedial interventions—for low- and moderate-income children is key. He notes that after-school programs have become a Rorschach image onto which funders, adult providers, and parents project their anxieties about children and broad social trends. The current national worry centers on inadequate academic achievement levels among low-and moderate-income children. That worry affects after-school programs when adults' agendas and anxieties are put ahead of what children want and need in their after-school lives.

This monograph brings together four previously published papers dealing with critical issues in children's out-of-school time. Two focus on substantive or curricular issues: how to support literacy development in after-school programs and the potential for after-school programs to address the epidemic of inactivity among low- and moderate-income children. The other two papers focus on systemic and policy issues related to after-school care. Taken together, these papers form an incisive analysis of what has become a fact of life for an increas-

ing number of children and families, a number that the most conservative estimates place at something more than 56.5 million.

The Role of After-School Programs in Supporting Low-Income Children's Literacy Development, first published as part of the Robert Bowne Foundation's Afterschool Matters monograph series, takes on the recent mandate of funders and policymakers to turn to after-school programs to address "the crisis" in children's literacy development. Halpern presents his research in the larger context on children's literacy development and suggests that after-school programs can be "truly alternative settings for literacy practice." This means that on the one hand they should not adopt the "skill and drill" approach of many schools serving low-income children, and on the other that after-school program staff are not (and should not be) in the position to teach or remediate children's literacy. Rather, they should provide safe contexts for children and forge their own distinctive goals for children's literacy development.

In *Physical (In) Activity Among Low-Income Children and Youth*, prepared for the After School Project of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Halpern once again takes the long view. He presents the multiple causes for physical inactivity and argues for the need to see this problem as part and parcel of our societal arrangements for low- and moderate-income children. He rejects the simple solution, to tack physical activity onto an intervention program or add it to a health education curriculum, for the complex: rethinking the very social arrangements that caused the problem. Halpern argues that we must create social and physical arrangements that allow children to experience some of the simple joy of unrestricted play and physical activity; create forums for debate about how we organize, promote and view sports; and make a national issue of problems affecting vulnerable children.

Halpern also takes on the shifting role of a variety of institutions in low-income children's lives and argues for viewing after-school programs as a distinct developmental institution. In *The Challenges of System-Building in the After-School Field: Lessons from Experience*, published by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, he offers evidence that system-building is well underway in the after-school field. He argues, however, that the "heterogeneous, patchwork and cottage industry-like qualities of the after-school field are as much (or more) strengths as limitations." More strategic building efforts for after school are all-too likely to mimic the crusade for closing the achievement gap, and thus miss the real contribution they can make to low-income commu-

nities. Instead, after-school programs need to be coherent structures with their own purposes and taken seriously as a context for child development.

Finally, in his seminal article, *Confronting “The Big Lie”: The Need to Reframe Expectations of After-School Programs*, prepared for the Partnership for After-School Education, Halpern argues that our expectations that after-school programs help boost academic achievement are not only unrealistic, but misguided. These programs are neither schools nor extensions of schools. This simple fact has implications for both research and practice. Halpern argues passionately that research should consider the breadth of developmental tasks of children of different ages and stop focusing on academic achievement as an outcome measure. Likewise, after-school programs should focus on providing developmental experiences that school and other institutions can no longer provide (e.g., visual and performing arts, humanities, civics, physical activity, and sports).

Halpern astutely notes that his arguments are rooted in a particular ideological position. They are as much a way of thinking about children as they are about evaluating and understanding programs and systems. Contemporary childhood is characterized by a host of complexities and contradictions. Among them, Halpern notes that unstructured, unsupervised free play has dramatically declined for children and that there has been a systematic over-organization of young people’s lives—particularly in the schools. With the elimination of nonacademic and extracurricular activities and anxiety about competing in a global society, children are experiencing more stress and pressure. Halpern’s point of view is clear: he emphasizes the need for providing more of a “protected” than “prepared” childhood in which adult agendas supercede those of children—especially in after-school programs. Deeply identified with the child, he argues for a place and time when children can have a measure of freedom and control—enough time for self-initiated activities, daydreaming, and self-discovery through the arts or physical activity—and can experience a bit of risk and unpredictability. Children’s needs for social interaction would be met through informal and spontaneous conversations among a group of children working together on a task, talking with a staff member about family or school, and through mutually determined motivation and goals. By focusing on these developmental agendas, Halpern provides both meaning and a north star for after-school programs. He outlines what, in his view, children need developmentally during their middle childhood—and suggests that good programs provide opportunities for children to thrive and grow in ways that schools cannot.

THE ROLE OF AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS
IN SUPPORTING LOW-INCOME
CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Acquisition of literacy is a central developmental task of middle childhood. This task is also problematic for many children in low- and moderate-income families. Although urban school systems are working to strengthen literacy instruction, there is a growing recognition that improving instruction in school is not the only key to tackling this important problem. Some have argued for a renewed emphasis on parents' role—and responsibility—in supporting children's literacy development. Yet low- and moderate-income parents' ability to help with this task is constrained by long work hours, language issues, and (in some cases) personal difficulties with literacy. Funders and policy makers have also begun to turn to other institutions to address children's literacy support needs, and, in particular, to after-school programs. A handful of these 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 after-school programs as settings for promoting low-income children's literacy development.¹ I draw on the findings of a two-year study examining literacy goals and practices in after-school programs in

¹ When I speak of after-school programs, I use the term in its traditional sense—as referring to programs that provide care and supervision, enrichment (through arts, sports, cultural activities, etc.), homework help, and opportunity for play and fun, albeit with varying emphases on each. I do not mean efforts to extend the school day for the purpose of academic remediation. By literacy I mean reading, writing, and activities immediately tied to them, 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 to some (for example, excluding use of computers) but was chosen for reasons of conceptual clarity and a practical need for boundaries.

Support for the preparation of this paper was provided by the Robert Bowne Foundation and the William T. Grant Foundation. Views expressed are those of the author.

three cities (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002), on other literature discussing literacy activity in after-school programs, and on the broader literature on children's literacy development. Although my main concern is to clarify the potential and the limits of after-school programs as literacy development settings, I also consider them in relation to schools. I argue that after-school programs' philosophy, purpose, and approach to nurturing literacy has to be different—in some ways, fundamentally different—than those of most urban schools.

Why Focus on Literacy in After-School Programs?

The sense that a major problem exists with respect to children's literacy development is not new. Literacy "crises" have recurred every 10 or 20 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 meaning making. In the past, literacy crises have been linked to heightened concerns about public education and/or American society's need to "compete"; a perception that effective labor force participation, decent earnings, and effective citizenship demanded higher levels of literacy; and, less consistently, a perceived need to acculturate large numbers of immigrants. The current perception of crisis is driven by historical concerns and also stems from the new standards and testing movement within 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 in and on schools. At the urging of the George W. 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 under way.) The ostensible focus of federal efforts has been identification and dissemination of 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 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 them 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. And 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) studied the conflict between welfare reform, which has sent large numbers of poor mothers—many of them single parents—back to work for often long hours, and demands by urban school authorities that parents play a more active role in supporting their children’s school progress. They 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). And 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 that he went to an after-school program (p. 39).

There is, in that respect, nascent recognition of and attention to a role for other settings and institutions in literacy development—what some call informal or nonformal learning environments. Among these, after-school programs are becoming a notably important setting for low- and moderate-income children. About 25 percent of such children now participate in after-school programs on a regular basis, and that percentage is growing (Halpern, 2002). After-school programs’ flexibility of mandate, purpose, and approach allows them to address a range of tasks and be responsive to prevailing social concerns. Providers see children’s literacy support needs every day, especially during homework time. In his work with after-school programs around the country, the author has observed that funders increasingly are asking after-school 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 after-school programs complicate a focus on literacy. One is the importance of attending to other developmental needs, including exploring the visual and performing arts, engaging in physical activity, and having some time to decompress, play, and have some simple fun. Another is the reality that after-school programs are fundamentally modest

institutions, with modest 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 after-school staff, who typically earn \$7 to \$8 an hour, have less than a college education, and many have mixed experiences with literacy themselves. For reasons to be discussed later, after-school programs and their staff have had almost no access to the extensive knowledge of and experience with children's literacy development that has been built over the past 30 years.

It is also unclear—or perhaps there is not agreement on—what goals, expectations, and activities should be attached to after-school programs' literacy-related efforts. In a number of cities—Boston and Seattle being prime examples—fundors and elected officials have urged after-school programs to “align” their literacy activity with school district curricula and learning standards. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, a major federal funder of school-based after-school programs, requires grantees to demonstrate how they are contributing to children's academic achievement and test readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Yet, as one staff member at Interfaith Neighbors, a youth-serving agency in New York City, told the author, they approach literacy differently than the schools do, “because we can.”

A Perspective on Children's Literacy Development

Defining an appropriate role for after-school programs in supporting literacy development requires consideration of what the process of literacy development is about and then of where, how, and why after-school programs might fit in. Literacy development is, first, a multifaceted process. It is about acquiring the skills necessary for reading and writing; developing the habit of reading and writing; developing a disposition toward reading and writing—a view of what, how, where, and why one reads and writes; and, ultimately, developing a particular identity as a reader and writer.

One can argue that motivation is the driving force in literacy development (except in the case of children who have innate difficulties processing print). This is not to minimize the importance of skill building and practice. But as Hawkins (1990, p. 6) notes, “Children can learn to read and write with commitment just in proportion as they are engaged with matters of importance to them.” He argues that children need not only to achieve competence in literacy but to “themselves recognize and enjoy its expression” (p. 10). At a minimum,

it is safe to say that 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 and leading to more positive feedback from adults, all of which will motivate them 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 brought to reading and writing: to make sense of words and ideas, to link texts to, and to provide a basis for children’s 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 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 multiple settings is opportunity to engage in a wide range of literacy practices and activities. Some of these, such as reading to children (and oral reading by children), opportunity for independent reading, and opportunity for talk *about* reading and writing, are likely to be found in all kinds of settings. Some are more likely to be found in formal (or semiformal) learning settings, for example, book discussions, story dramatization, vocabulary-building activities, open-ended and creative writing, journal writing (especially dialog journals), collaborative writing (e.g., writing a play), reading and writing to conduct “research” (on specific questions of interest, to plan a project, or to prepare for a field trip), and, less directly, participation in visual and expressive arts. Each activity has a somewhat distinctive role in and value to children’s

literacy development and therefore deserves a distinctive place in children's lives. (The Appendix 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 (including time) to engage in the range of practices critical to literacy development, in all the settings in which one might wish to find these practices (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). Low-income children are more likely than their economically 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 bring 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 processes for some children than for others and inherently less pleasurable for some 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 experience becomes increasingly influential in their literacy development. Yet for low-income, urban children, school is frequently a problematic literacy setting. This is due in part to current instructional trends: It is increasingly difficult to find balanced approaches to literacy instruction in urban schools, and 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). It is due in part to the fact 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). And it is due in part to inherent characteristics of schools as learning contexts.

In a general sense, schools are not positive developmental settings for many low-income children. If the formal work of schools is about teaching and learning, their de facto work is about 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). Teacher 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 whatever children are expressing. (Calkins, 2001, p. 21, notes, “In many classrooms, kids talk as if no one is listening.”) There is a growing emphasis on competition and comparison; less willingness to accept and deal with individual differences in learning speed, style, capacity, and motivation, or with language difficulties; and, generally, less attention to how an individual child is faring. There is 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 singled out for summer school or after-school remediation.

The difficulties posed for children by the general attributes of schooling are compounded by schools’ predominant approach to literacy. There are, of course, scores of individual teachers, schools, and local school districts that 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 Alvarado. The program is built around the simple but powerful concept of reading by, with, and to children (i.e., independent, shared, and guided reading). It starts with the idea that “teachers must know individual children deeply as readers” and must use that knowledge to provide carefully tailored assistance (p. 1318). 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 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 cannot, however, serve to characterize literacy instruction for the great majority of low-income children.

For one thing, the prevailing view in most urban school literacy programs 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; Cairney, 1991). It also pushes the task of nurturing motivation to the background. And 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 (p. 550) 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." This pattern has only intensified with the growth of high-stakes testing. Strickland et al. (2001, pp. 385–386) quote an experienced sixth-grade teacher whose "writing curriculum" has been narrowed to focus on the types of writing children will be asked to 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."

Critics of literacy instruction in school have focused also on the poor quality of basal readers and other commercial textbooks, the principal sources of reading material (see, e.g., Antonacci & Colasco, 1994). Stories and nonfiction passages in such texts are constructed based on readability formulas using controlled vocabulary lists, and children sometimes are allowed only to write from those lists. Commercial textbooks have been criticized as "commodities," whose purpose is profit for publishers and which are therefore designed to contain knowledge "acceptable to the widest possible audience" (Shannon, 1990, p. 151). The content of texts typically avoids difficult issues and conflict and is often unconnected, and even alien, to children's lives, past experiences, and interests. Because lesson planning tied to commercial texts is standardized, teachers have little opportunity to incorporate knowledge of the particular group of children and what they bring to the learning experience. Commercial textbooks—in contrast to literature—offer less to talk about, question, debate, and wonder about.² Even when teachers are not using basals, their language arts lessons tend to reflect the structure of basal lessons (Shannon, p. 152). Children are often silenced by questions about a text, because they have learned through

² Trelease (1985, p. 10) 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, p. 32) writes that through literature, human beings recognize themselves, converse with each other, transcend time and place, learn what all humans share (or do not share). Literature is a source of beauty, an expression of human creativity, and a nurturer of language.

experience with basal readers that the teacher has only one answer in mind—not necessarily 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, p. 136) notes that while children need feedback to stay on track, that feedback should be “informational,” 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. This is, in part, because they tend to feel that they themselves will be evaluated on their students’ mistakes rather than on the students’ excitement or motivation or creativity (Bettelheim & Zelan, 1982; Silberman, 1989).

The consequence of the school-based literacy practices experienced by most low-income children is the opposite of their intent. Low-income children tend to fall steadily more behind in reading between the first and fourth grades, regardless of 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” and cannot “tell us what words on the page add up to, what sense they make” (Shannon, 1990, p. 135; Greenleaf et al., 2001, p. 85). It is not uncommon for children who like reading and writing in elementary school to 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 et al., p. 80). As Silberman describes it, children’s eagerness to write “diminishes when they find their ideas and language being pushed aside.” As children lose faith in their own thoughts, they may come to prefer an assigned topic, “no matter how dreary it may be” (1989, pp. xiii, 3).

Over the long term, the majority of low-income children develop literacy identities that are limited in some specific way. A few children, either against the grain or with the support of a teacher, parent, librarian, or other adult figure, acquire the “powerful” literacy that Finn (1999) describes. Many children develop a kind of pseudoliteracy, in which they can engage in the mechanics of reading and writing but do not enjoy these activities or use them for reflecting, exploring, deepening knowledge, and becoming competent in the disciplines. For those who have failed to acquire the basics, shame becomes a more prominent element of the literacy experience. This shame, in turn, contributes to a decline in persistence at literacy efforts. As older children lose touch with

literacy and learning, observers note a foreclosure in their sense of possible later identities—what MacLeod (1987) has described as “leveled aspirations.”

A Role for After-School Programs?

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

Experience With After-School Programs As Contexts for Nurturing Literacy

Attention to literacy is not new to after-school programs. Almost as soon they began appearing in settlement houses and boys’ clubs (late in the 19th century), they included libraries, reading and study rooms, book discussions, poetry clubs (in which children wrote as well as read poetry), writing (as well as performing) plays, 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, p. 103). 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 Newsletter*, 1910, p. 3; boys and girls were segregated in separate rooms). In those formative decades, drama clubs reenacted stories, staged fairy tales, wrote and staged their own plays, and did dramatic readings of contemporary and classic plays. Some of the varied nonliteracy activities in after-school programs—debate, parliamentary law, cooking, stenography, and poster making, for instance—also required reading and/or writing.

The historic level and pattern of literacy activity—present, but low-key and informal, and focused on enrichment—continued until the 1960s. With the War on Poverty, after-school programs were asked for the first time to contribute to the new compensatory education agenda in urban school systems. For instance, the 1967 after-school 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, miscellaneous activity clubs, gym, music, and dance lessons. The Hudson Guild developed and ran a program called Operation Brainstorm, which provided tutoring and enriched educational and cultural activities for seventh to ninth graders, as well as a "study den," providing 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).

Although pressures on after-school programs to contribute to low-income children's academic success would continue through the next two decades, they remained limited until the early 1990s. By the mid-'90s, though, the after-school field was being pulled into a tighter embrace by schools and school systems. After-school programs were mentioned in rhetoric calling for longer school days, more learning time, and increased efforts to assure that low-income children met new learning standards. The idea of after-school programs as an extension of schooling gained credence among some stakeholders. The desire to link after-school programs to school agendas animated private after-school initiatives, including Extended Service Schools; the After-School Corporation (TASC) in New York City; mayoral initiatives in numerous cities, including Boston, Columbus, Denver, and Seattle; and the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

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

At the same time that academic pressures on after-school programs were growing, a handful of studies were—purposefully or incidentally—raising questions about the range and quality of prevailing literacy activity in after-school programs (Halpern, 1990; Ellowitch et al., 1991; Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 1999). Such activity was found to be constrained to varying degrees by limitations in staff members' own experience with literacy, understanding of children's literacy development, and skill in implementing literacy activity, and, relatedly, by lack of connection to knowledge and experience in the literacy field and by general program resource constraints and quality problems. For instance, staff usually had little or no time to plan. Activities were routinized and fragmented.

Many historic literacy activities, such as poetry and play writing and performing, 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 (e.g., 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 after-school providers who had given children’s literacy development some thought were sure that they did not want to serve as extensions of school. One after-school leader in Seattle said, “It’s very important for [the after-school community] not to change our global view of reaching and caring for the whole child ... you know what [school officials’] idea would be for an ideal after-school program is drill-and-practice, to fill the gap in what didn’t happen between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.” (Halpern et al., 1999). At the same time, with a handful of exceptions, they were unsure of what exactly they ought to be doing around literacy and why.

A Study of Literacy Practices in After-School Programs

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

We knew that after-school programs, at their best, cope well with individual differences, attend to children’s points of view and encourage their sense of “voice,” try to respond to children’s interests, and put children in active roles as learners. After-school programs incorporate children’s home and community culture and thus 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, after-school programs can easily design activities that combine or work across different disciplines. Because their agenda is not so full as school’s, after-school programs theoretically afford time to pursue activities in depth. After-

school programs are supportive of the social dimensions of children's learning. Their activities involve children sharing, collaborating, helping each other, working and playing together. Adults play supportive, nonjudgmental roles; children usually feel safe psychologically as well as physically; and there is a relatively low risk of failure. Moreover, after-school program staff have the luxury of attending to children's developmental struggles without labeling or defining them by those struggles.

Such qualities suggested a variety of literacy-related purposes and practices, some extending or supportive of, others clearly distinct from, the purposes and practices found in urban schools. For instance, after-school programs can afford to give children exposure to a wide range of forms and uses of literacy and to different kinds of reading and writing experiences, as well as opportunities to use literacy for their own ends. They afford opportunity to work on projects and tasks in which children are using reading and writing for aesthetic, informational, cultural, and deeply personal purposes. After-school programs can provide opportunities for children to come to know the literacies of their own heritage—the forms, the stories, the particular uses of language—and can play a bridging role between the literacies of home or community and that of school. They can encourage children to use their own histories and experiences as a “springboard” for writing (Hill, Townsend, Lawrence, Shevin, & Ingalls, 1995). At the same time, they have, at least in theory, time and resources to contribute to low-income children's store of cultural capital, the knowledge brought to the reading and writing experience.

After-school programs are well-suited to fostering literacy through the visual and expressive arts and to activities that work simultaneously across different symbol systems—words, pictures, music, movement. Because each art form has its own vocabulary and grammar, children also can be challenged to 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 link, crucial to writing, between creativity and discipline. Cushman (1998, p. 1) notes that the arts “disrupt convention, control, predictability; they require discipline and mentorship.”

In theory, at least, after-school programs can afford to work within a relatively relaxed temporal framework with respect to children's literacy acquisition and practice. Children need not feel pressure to read or write quickly. With the exception of homework, there is as much emphasis on the process of a task as

on the timely completion of it. After-school programs can afford children time and opportunity to explore literature, time that has become scarcer in school. They can afford time for independent reading and book discussion with no external agenda. Indeed, after-school 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 afford a variety of ways to respond to and make sense of texts—through talk, drawing, spontaneous dramatizing (Sipe, 2000).

Because after-school programs are peer-oriented as much as adult-oriented settings, they provide opportunity to make reading and writing social—for instance, reading quietly with others, jointly writing poems or stories, writing for a broader audience than is usually possible in school, reading aloud in cross-age pairs, and so forth. They can create, in modest form, a new literacy community in which children read and write together. The basic qualities of after-school 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 Purposes and Activities in Practice

Using this conceptual framework as a kind of ideal case, we 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 16 after-school 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 10 after-school programs as part of an earlier study (Halpern et al., 1999).³

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, and 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 these pages). We surveyed 212 programs, 47 percent of

³ This was an evaluation of a three-city after-school “system-building” initiative, called MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time), sponsored by the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. The MOST case study programs do not overlap with those undertaken for the literacy study. Observations included literacy activity among a variety of other foci.

the identified universe of some 450 after-school programs in the two cities. The sample included programs sponsored by child care centers, social service agencies (e.g., 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 both in confirming (and deepening) the picture created in the survey and in exploring exemplary literacy approaches, activities, and general principles that seemed a good “fit” for after-school programs. Given these two purposes, we constructed a convenience sample, half of which was selected to reflect diverse sponsors, neighborhoods, populations of low-income children, and, to a lesser extent, philosophy and emphases, and half of which was identified (by us, by staff in resource organizations or foundations, or through previous reports) as doing interesting or exemplary work around literacy.⁴ This latter group also proved to be diverse on most program characteristics.

Findings: Literacy Practice Typical of After-School Programs

MATERIAL AND SPACE FOR LITERACY. The material literacy environment of after-school programs provides an important foundation for literacy activity. It is especially important in low-income communities because many families lack the resources to provide some of the material underpinnings of literacy activity. Programs surveyed and observed by the investigators varied widely in both space and material for literacy activity. The majority nonetheless provided at least a moderate foundation. Most surveyed programs reported having at least a modest selection of fiction and nonfiction books, although in our observations we noted collections to be typically limited and somewhat haphazard. To build book collections, programs relied on often very small book budgets, the public library, and donated books from individuals, businesses, and non-profit book distribution organizations. Most programs provided access to writ-

⁴ The sponsoring agencies were, in Chicago, the 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, the Coalition for Hispanic Family Services (Arts and Literacy program), East Harlem Tutorial, Forest Hills Community House, Hartley House, Interfaith Neighbors, and Riverdale Neighborhood House; and in Seattle, Chinese Information Service Center, El Centro de la Raza, Refugee Women’s Alliance, and the YMCA Enrichment Program at Bailey Gatzert Elementary School.

ing tools and materials and had dictionaries, rulers, and calculators available. Programs also typically had props for dramatic play and pen-and-paper word games such as crossword puzzles and Mad Libs. About half of the programs responding to the survey had a set of encyclopedias and had computers available 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 after-school 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, and the majority also displayed children's writing. Displays that we observed included poems, sets of rules or instructions composed by children, homemade books, book reports and writing assignments on particular topics, and, occasionally, schoolwork. A few programs designed word-rich bulletin boards, with words to unscramble, riddles to solve, brain teasers, etc.; a few had and used chalkboards for writing and/or word games.

For space-related as well as 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, by highlighting a few titles, or, less commonly, by rotating highlighted titles, labeling books by degree of difficulty, or using book cards for quick reviews of books. 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. Homework was by far the dominant literacy activity in after-school 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 (Friday excepted). Younger children reportedly spent a half-hour or less on homework; children age 9 and older spent up to an hour. At least a third of the surveyed programs assigned homework if a child had none. In our observations, children were either assigned worksheets, asked to work in textbooks, or required to read quietly if they had no homework or finished it quickly. Staff interviews suggested

that in some programs, homework was viewed as a central activity, almost the main reason-for-being of the program itself; in 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, nor, occasionally, was 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 them 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; this was 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 using homework time to talk with children about school in general—particular experiences, or what it takes to do well, how and when to seek help, etc.

Apart from homework time, most after-school programs reported scheduling a modest amount of time for specific literacy activities, typically once or twice weekly. (This was 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 left 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 (like other activities) either did not take place or did not get the time allotted to them.

Three fourths of the survey respondents reported that children read independently. Observations suggested that independent reading varied by child and was more unplanned than planned; children typically chose to read during unstructured moments, when finishing 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 suggested that these percentages were 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 after-school programs in our study. About a third of programs reported that children wrote “stories, plays, or poetry” at least occasionally; about 20 percent said that children “write about their experiences”; and about 20 percent reported 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 (or saw the products of) poetry, stories, or plays.

It is important to note three clearly positive aspects of literacy practice found in our study. Some reading and/or writing occurred incidentally in the course of activities not defined specifically as literacy. For instance, we observed children incorporating reading and writing into dramatic play, labeling a drawing, reading the words of a song they were learning for a performance, checking schedules, reading instructions for a board game, reading a pizza recipe, and reading instructions for using photography equipment, among many other activities. Our observations also suggested that literacy activities in after-school programs were often strongly social. Children sat together and read, they read to each other, older children read to younger ones, children 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. Finally, our observations suggested that in programs serving children from immigrant (and refugee) families, children’s home language 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 what are sometimes called “English-language learners” tended to be bilingual in their practices, with staff and children switching naturally back and forth between English and children’s home language.

In general, then, we found that although the goal of contributing to children’s literacy development is now on the “radar screen” of after-school pro-

grams 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 and challenges to fuller implementation of literacy activity. These, to be discussed in detail later in the paper, include time constraints, staff constraints, children’s perceived “state” after a day at school, isolation from information and ideas about literacy practice, and, as implied, lack of a guiding set of ideas about why and how to provide literacy activity.

Exemplary Approaches to Literacy Activity

A central goal of our study was to identify after-school programs thought to be doing interesting work in fostering literacy, describe their approaches and activities, and 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’ clubs 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 of these programs 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 conveyed excitement about program activities and made an effort to connect activities to children’s lives. They took children seriously. Directors and experienced staff in these programs were concerned about the details of implementation and attentive to the importance of regularity and consistency. Almost all of the programs structured time for staff to meet, plan, and discuss their daily work with each other. 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. At the same time, it was an identifiable focus, one that had been given

thought and for which there was regular time, strong support, and a program-wide commitment. We observed plenty of reading and/or writing, sometimes infused into other types of activity, and regular staff encouragement of 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 and their ideas and beliefs about literacy development).

Like the larger community of after-school programs, this group did not use commercial curricula, packaged reading development programs, and the like. 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 after-school programs had adapted a well-known early childhood curriculum, Reggio Emilia, which shaped literacy activity in addition to framing the larger programs. Staff in a number of programs maintained their own notebooks of ideas for literacy activities that they had read about, learned in a workshop, and/or tried with children. There was also moderate use of 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 from 6 to 8 p.m. to work with school-age children and adults on poetry writing.

CREATING A RICH MATERIAL LITERACY ENVIRONMENT. This group of programs generally were thoughtful about the material literacy environment. They used a variety of means to highlight books and help children choose them: rotating book selections periodically; organizing and/or labeling books by topic or degree of difficulty; providing multiple copies of popular books or 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 along with a staff- or child-written book review; and locating small collections of books in different areas of the room or on book carts. They encouraged children to sign books out and take them home. Some programs had created book corners or reading lofts. In selected programs, we saw literacy artifacts in dramatic play areas, signs of all kinds, signs 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, thematic bulletin boards, and bulletin boards with riddles and word puzzles.

GOALS OF LITERACY ACTIVITY. Collectively, the programs seemed to focus most 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 come to believe that reading and writing were not just school activities but could be used for self-discovery and self-definition, to find a voice, or to explore where one fit. 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 and 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 the Chicago Commons Guadalupano Center had developed pen pal relationships with children of the same age in a town in Nicaragua, exchanging information about their lives. The drama teacher at the Arts and Literacy program in Brooklyn worked with children to bring the Mexican folktale “The Corn Maidens” to life. One of the writing teachers in this program conducted his activities in both English and Spanish, noting that he wanted children to “value Spanish more.” Programs used reading and writing to examine what it meant to be tough, a nerd, on the edge of the group, or poor (as opposed to rich). At Forest Hills Community House in Queens, a discussion of the book *Summer Wheels* explored the concept of “toughness,” especially in relation to bullying. At Riverdale Neighborhood House in New York, for instance, 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 had been 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 nonaggressive means to express their ideas and process experiences they had, too many of which had involved witnessing, being subjected to, or participating in violent acts. In all of these examples, an implicit goal was to give children a concrete sense that “there are reasons to read and write” and to help overcome 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, they 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 baked Irish soda bread in conjunction with a book called *Elbert's Bad Word*. Children at the CYCLE Wiz Factory of Learning in Chicago, in anticipation of a weekend field trip to see a performance of *Charlotte's Web*, were reading the book throughout the hallways of the center. When children arrived, the director would greet them and ask, “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 activity. 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, fairy tale, 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. On different occasions we 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 sand box.”

Children in these programs did more writing than is typical in after-school programs and had greater opportunity to explore different purposes for and

forms of writing. In addition to the use of dialog journals, we observed projects in which children explored the structure and rhythms of poetry (e.g., writing Chinese calligraphy poems), created comic strips (using storyboards), or wrote and performed skits. One writing teacher had children create “noise poems” corresponding to sounds with which they were familiar. (He had children go out into the streets, identify neighborhood sounds, and “convert” them to poetry, which could use made-up words.). Among the props for one program’s year-end street festival were kites with tails made up of strings attached to 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, and comic book illustration—as a pathway to and foundation for literacy. The Arts and Literacy program in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn illustrates the ways in which literacy and the arts can be connected. The staff in this program were mostly young artists in varied 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/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*.

Projects attended to literacy both directly and indirectly. Most included writing in some 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 monologs using specific objects as inspiration and then perform the monologs. In one music project, the children worked in groups to write lyrics, learning about verse and chorus and about constructing a story around a theme (people, place, emotion). The cartooning instructor had children write about the characters (i.e., who they were) before drawing them. After every project, children completed written reviews and critiques of their own work that became part of 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 leading an exercise in which children wrote short stories and

then drew pictures representing scenes in the story, which were put on a “picture 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/action words that began with *s*—swinging, stretching, standing—and to demonstrate those words. She would read a poem and then ask children to develop movement that corresponded to the images of the poem.

Sometimes this work was designed to help children see correspondences between concepts, vocabulary, and the creative process in different art forms, for example, between the elements of a 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 picture book about a particular 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 “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 talked of “movement vocabulary,” with individual movements the equivalent of words that are combined to create movement sentences—a group of movements that, when combined, convey a complete thought—and then compositions.

CELEBRATING AND VALIDATING CHILDREN’S LITERACY WORK. A number of programs created opportunities for children to exhibit, publicize, and/or 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 bookstore. Both Interfaith Neighbors and the Arts and Literacy program sponsored public “festivals” for oral reading and performance of children’s writing. In the latter program, children performed for family and friends the songs they had written. The program published an annual anthology of children’s work, mostly poetry, but also including a play and some mini-biography. Watching children read and perform their own 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—the fact that they had something to say that was of value to others.

Limitations and Challenges to Literacy Work in After-School Programs

It was gratifying to find a variety of creative and engaging literacy practices in a handful of after-school programs. But this finding also highlighted the enormous challenges to effective literacy practice facing the larger after-school 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 (and limitations in staffs' own literacy skills); the wide range of literacy support needs, interests, and "identities" among participating children; and lack of support for programs—in particular, for program directors—to think through and try to implement a coherent approach to literacy activity. In addition to these challenges, many after-school 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. After-school programs have less functional time than might seem available for sustained literacy activity. They tend also not to use available time optimally, dividing the day into short fragments that prevent deep engagement in an activity. By the time children have arrived, settled in, done homework, eaten snacks, and had some free time, there are often not enough after-school hours left. The effect of time constraints is exacerbated when children struggle with homework, a problem that was surprisingly common in the programs we observed and was reported by a number of program directors in the survey. Additionally, in some programs, children arrive individually or in small clusters from different schools over the course of an hour or more. The end of the afternoon is often rushed and sometimes disorganized, with parents or siblings arriving at different times to take children home. When children know they are leaving in a few minutes, they are 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 school without having had 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 after-school field.) And children may not be interested in or motivated to take on even the most seemingly engaging literacy activity. (Ironically, one issue that we observed in some after-school programs was a lack of flexibility around time for children who did want to sit and read. For example, a child would sometimes settle down to read, perhaps after finishing homework, and then within a few minutes be asked to stop in order to transition to another activity or part of the afternoon.)

Lack of dedicated space in a quarter to a third of programs affected literacy-related arrangements, just as it did other aspects of program activity. Having to share space or on a daily basis set up and put away furniture and materials hampered the creation of a language-rich physical environment, attractive arrangements of books and enrichment materials, quiet and comfortable areas for reading, or the display of children's writing. Combined with fragmented use of time, it could limit opportunity to carry out long-term projects or create areas for dramatic play. More selectively across programs, lack of literacy materials and/or budgets to purchase materials created moderate constraints to literacy activity. For instance, programs might not be able to afford multiple copies of books needed for book discussions. Programs were sometimes unable to update libraries or purchase particular kinds of books.

STAFF LIMITATIONS. Limitations related to staffing create a major obstacle to after-school programs' capacity to provide enriching literacy experiences. As noted throughout this paper, 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, and introduce children to new authors. These and other critical mediating tasks are difficult enough even for skilled literacy mentors. Through no fault of their own, the great majority of front-line staff and the majority of supervisory staff in after-school programs are not skilled in this domain. For example, from what we could observe and learn, it was rare for staff to preview a story (or chapter in a book) before reading it aloud to children, or in book discussions to prepare children to read a particular book by giving some background, reviewing vocabulary, and so forth.

Our observations of and discussions with staff suggest that many were uncomfortable about their own identity and strengths as readers and writers. Staff who do not see themselves as readers and writers usually do not provide a model of such for children. For instance, children in after-school programs rarely observe staff reading or writing—or discussing reading and writing. After-school staff have not had the experience of using language in different ways. Lack of staff conviction around literacy was sometimes apparent in lack of follow-through—starting to read a story and then not finishing it, beginning a writing project and then not responding to the writing or doing anything with the products.

When after-school staff were insecure about literacy-related activity and/or did not receive training, information, or support, they tended to imitate the worst literacy practices of schools instead of the best ones, for example, worksheets, letter tracing, and drills. Such practices were made even more inappropriate by the fact that children were required to do school-like drilling without any surrounding conceptual framework; assignments were not part of a carefully sequenced program, there was little or no feedback, and they were completed haphazardly. It was also difficult for after-school staff to attend to the part of their role that called for building children's confidence as readers and writers. For example, it sometimes appeared hard for staff to respond primarily as an interested audience for a child's writing and refrain from correcting a mistake.

As after-school 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 come to be an issue. In our study, high school youth proved to be 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 that relies on college students for staff feels compelled to test them 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 after-school programs have diverse literacy support needs, interests, and identities, in turn creating all kinds of challenges for the after-school programs in our

study. A group of 15 or 20 children might, at times, have almost as many different homework assignments. A group pulled together for a book discussion might include children who 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, a few children like curling up with a book after a day at school, but 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 children served. Beyond an 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, did not know how to choose books, and did not know how 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 never having been asked to think of themselves as worth writing about. Staff noted children’s complaints that reading and writing were “boring,” complaints that appeared to serve as a defense for reading or writing difficulties. Such difficulties were often a subtle mixture of fears, 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 upstairs [in a different part of the building].”

Specific literacy problems were often intertwined with general difficulties in and with school. A sizable minority of children served by the after-school programs in our observational study 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 only symptomatic of this. Older children were, in some cases, not bothering 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 after-school staff had 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 after-school 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 or where to begin to act on that interest. They were either unaware of or lacked the time and energy to pursue external literacy resources that might be drawn on. 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 after-school providers. The literacy field also contains 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 after-school programs.

Local arts organizations, museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions are all potentially available to support and enrich after-school programs' efforts around literacy. As well, in some cities there are individuals and institutions that could be linked to after-school programs for story readings, writing workshops, and the like. There also are a number of intermediary organizations that have developed resources and training experiences for after-school literacy activity, including the Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, the School's Out Consortium in Seattle, the Partnership for After-School Education in New York City, and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time. However, given the isolation under which some programs operate, there is a lack of awareness of these supports and of time to seek them out—often in addition to limited funds to pay for outside consultation.

Conclusions

The findings of our research, when placed in the larger context of literature on children's literacy development, suggest that after-school programs can be “truly alternative settings for literacy practice” (Resnick, 1990), freed from the constraints faced by schools. After-school programs' psychological climate, motivational structure, temporal structure, and adult roles make them distinctive—and clearly distinguish them from schools—as literacy-nurturing environments. At the same time, the great majority of after-school 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 in this domain, as in others.

The principal strength of after-school programs at present is the fact that children typically see them as a safe context. For literacy activity this is no small

thing. Feeling and being safe—not just physically, but psychologically—are prerequisites for learning. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 137) 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.” To the extent that low-income children do not read and write because these are perceived as risky, even threatening, activities, after-school programs can help counter those feelings. Several staff in our exemplary programs noted that children not only have to feel safe but also need to feel accepted for who they are before they can take risks.

We learned in our study that literacy activities naturally fit differently into different programs and tend to work best when they reflect the character of and are integrated into the daily life of a program. We observed also that some literacy activity in after-school programs is incidental (embedded in activity that has other purposes) and that the exemplary programs tended to be more aware of this, building on it in by 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, p. xx).

Although exemplary programs were different from each other, they shared some important characteristics. These included helping children explore varied reasons to read and write, strengthening their belief that what they had to say was important, and strengthening 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 other experiences they had had in the after-school program. 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 kibitzing, sharing ideas, seeking and giving help, reading passages aloud, commenting to each other about a book, asking each other to listen, and 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 after-school programs’

modest adult agenda and noncompetitive culture, were positive in many respects; they fit the context and they fit how children learn. Yet, to an extent, children were engaging each other around literacy because adults were hanging back.

Strengthening Literacy Activity in After-School Programs

As noted throughout this paper, 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, when staff respect children's choice of reading material, the connections children make in their reading, and the ways children choose to express ideas. Yet reading and, to some extent, writing are also complex activities, sometimes requiring skilled adult support to master and to make enriching. As in the arts, there is some apprenticeship involved; "the invisible mental processes involved in the task [of reading and interpreting text] must be made visible and available to apprentices" (Greenleaf et al., 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 after-school field currently lacks the staff to apprentice children to literacy. Filling this gap will require fuller and more consistent support for the arts and literacy resource organizations that exist in many cities, as well as recruitment of professional writers who might be 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 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 it takes a good deal of work to link outside resources to after-school programs effectively, and that is, in some respects, one of the most critical challenges facing the after-school field and its proponents.

It is especially unclear what role, if any, after-school programs have in helping to address the needs of children with identified problems in reading and/or writing. At a modest level, after-school programs can be settings in which children reapproach literacy with less at stake. After-school programs can help children "recover" some of their motivation to read and write and a 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 after-school programs can be expected to acquire (see, e.g., Greenleaf et al., 2001).

After-school programs can be encouraged and supported also to be more thoughtful in how they use time and label activities, which should allow for more literacy activity. This process might start by rethinking responsibility (and setting limits on parental pressures) for homework time and help. For example, programs might set aside two afternoons a week when parents know children are not going to be doing homework at the after-school program, freeing up larger time segments for in-depth projects and activities. These in turn create more opportunity to incorporate reading and writing into program life.

With respect to their relationship with schools, after-school programs will have to walk a fine line. School agendas intrude in the world of after-school programs. Much new funding is tied to school-related worries and goals. Children bring homework to after-school programs every day. Some—but by no means all—after-school staff see it as their role to monitor school progress (among other things, checking report cards and asking about school experiences), and they often learn about and feel compelled to help with school problems. At the same time, we would not want the attributes that lead children to come to feel discouraged in school—fragmented and disembedded learning, a preoccupation with compliance and obedience, the constant experience of being judged and ranked and the all too often accompanying experience of failure, the lack of time for processing and for simple respite—to filter into the literacy development activities of after-school programs.

There is a clear danger that if after-school 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). Observations in the present study suggest that children instinctively understand—and value—the differences in reading and writing in school and outside of it. After-school programs surely need help gaining access to the specialized knowledge and experience about literacy development residing in the educational literature. But they themselves will still be responsible for forging a literacy-related identity that makes sense given their distinctive qualities as developmental institutions. And with their generally modest capacity, they will have to build this identity a step at a time.

Appendix: 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, strengthening the ability to think or imagine “ahead,” improving vocabulary, improving listening comprehension (and more general “attending” abilities), strengthening attachment to the book reader/care giver, and creating a reading “community” (Sipe, 2000, p. 252; Calkins, 2001). For some children, being read to (fluently) gives them a sense of experiencing a whole story and helps them see the deeper meaning in words or in the story as whole, benefits they might not get when they read themselves because they are working too hard (Allen, 2000). Because children’s oral understanding and listening comprehension are at a higher level than their print understanding, reading to children can be used to introduce them to higher-level books than they could read on their own, exposing them to perhaps 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 it would seem obvious that there is 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 time every day. Sustained silent reading provides a good opportunity to read for pleasure, which Resnick 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 (1990, p. 182).” As Calkins puts it, “Children benefit from daily opportunities to read books they choose for themselves for their own purposes and pleasures” (2001, p. 8).

Book Discussions

Text can be a stimulus for discussion and creative expression. Discussions about books can emerge from a story read to a group of children or silent reading of the same text. Talking about what has been read or heard allows children to connect text to other texts and to personal experiences. It allows them to develop—

and simply to recognize that they have—a distinct perspective (Wilhelm, 1997). Calkins (2001, p. 226) 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.” 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, to literacy themes, especially if they have knowledge of key concepts and the group leader helps with direction by asking key questions (Sipe, 2000). Others emphasize the value of some adult framing, for example, 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 (Cairney, 1991).

Story/Literature Dramatization

Dramatizing stories, plays, and other literature provides an active means of exploring text and one that is therefore more engaging for some children than simply reading. Acting out a story deepens children’s sense of character, plot, and narrative and provides an opportunity for deeper understanding of a narrative. Dramatizing stories affords children opportunity to gain a different kind of experience with—that is, to speak and act out—the distinctive language of literature, providing another pathway into literature. It helps make more abstract attributes of a piece of literature concrete. When children temporarily take on other identities, it leads them to 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 “retell” 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

Children have been noted to be 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, feelings, even questions. When children begin to write, they build on what they know, making knowledge of a few symbols or words go a long way (Clay,

as cited in Fleming, 1998). They draw also upon their experiences with other symbolic media—not only talk but drawing and dramatic play (Dyson, 1990).

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. Dialog journals (with a strong assurance of privacy and confidentiality) provide an opportunity for children to record responses to an experience or something they have read and share it with a teacher or another adult who responds in writing. Collaborative writing groups, as they write, for example, a play, allow children to stimulate, help, and critique each other constructively and to revise and connect their own ideas to those of others. Children sometimes enjoy reading what they have produced, and that process can be invested with a bit of ritual. One idea is to have an “author’s chair” designated for children to read their writing aloud.

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 reading and writing as tools to think and learn something that is of interest to them. Connecting books to field trips, art, and other activities, like making applesauce or apple crisp 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 through experiences such as reading a schedule to see what activities are happening, instructions for a game, and directions in a recipe. Children enjoy infor-

mational writing that combines words with pictures or diagrams (e.g., flowcharts, webs, maps, timelines, etc.).

Participation in Visual and Expressive Arts

The arts—drama (mentioned above), movement, photography, video, music, song writing, drawing, mural making, cartooning, and comic book illustration—provide other pathways into and starting points for literacy. The arts reveal unrecognized abilities in children, which can be a base for strengthening literacy, allowing children to lead from strength, to gain confidence to take risks. Some children express themselves better through other symbol systems than they do through writing and, in so doing, learn they have something to say. In some children, verbal imagination is sparked by visual imagination—expressing something first in pictures, then moving into words. Some children have difficulty ordering and “expressing” the ideas in their heads in words but might be able to practice that process using other art forms. For children who have begun to struggle with literacy, reapproaching it through and incorporating it into another art form removes some of the psychological baggage that may have begun to accumulate.

Arts activities allow children to work simultaneously across different symbol systems—words, pictures, music, movement—with the idea that working effectively in one symbol system can be a springboard to others. Crossing back and forth between different media—for example, acting out a poem through movement—also can lead to deeper 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. Because each art form has its own vocabulary and grammar, children also can be challenged to make connections between creative expression and language, learn correspondences between movement and sentences, or jazz notation and writing, and better understand narrative structure.

The arts help children understand the link, crucial to writing, between creativity and discipline. Cushman (1998, p. 1) notes that the arts “disrupt convention, control, predictability; they require discipline and mentorship.” The arts foster what Shirley Brice Heath (2001) has called conditional reasoning (“What if we tried this?”). They help children learn to distinguish the subjective from the objective, the concrete from the abstract, etc.

References

- Allen, J. (2000). *Yellow brick roads: Shared and guided paths to independent reading*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Antonacci, P., & Colasco, J. (1994). A literacy context for the 21st century child. In N. Ellsworth, C. Hedley, & A. Baratta (Eds.), *Literacy: A redefinition* (pp. 213–231). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bettelheim, B., & Zelan, K. (1982). *On learning to read*. New York: Knopf.
- Cairney, T. (1991). *Other worlds: The endless possibilities of literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. (1994). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. (1997). *Raising lifelong learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. (2001). *The art of teaching reading*. New York: Longman.
- Chicago Commons. (1910). *Chicago Commons Newsletter*. Chicago: Author.
- Chin, M., & Newman, K. (2002). *High stakes: Time poverty, testing and the children of the working poor*. New York: Foundation for Child Development.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Literacy and intrinsic motivation. *Daedalus*, 119(2), 115–140.
- Cushman, K. (1998). How the arts transform schools: A challenge for all to share. *Challenge Journal*, 3(1), 1–8.
- Damon, W. (1990). Reconciling the literacies of generations. *Daedalus*, 119(2), 33–54.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 280–298.
- Deschenes, S., Cuban, L., & Tyack, D. (2001). Mismatch: Historical perspectives on schools and students who don't fit them. *Teachers College Record*, 103, 525–547.
- Dyson, A. (1990). Symbol makers, symbol weavers: How children link play, pictures and print. *Young Children*, 45(2), 50–57.
- Dyson, A. (1993). *Social worlds of children learning to write in an urban primary school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ellowitch, A., Griswold, K., Hammer, M., Shelton, D., Townsend, L., & Wolfe, M. (1991). *Portraits of youth programs: Education after-school*. New York: City University of New York, Lehman College, Institute for Literacy Studies.

- Finn, P. (1999). *Literacy with an attitude*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Fleming, S. (1998, Fall). A Spanish-speaking second grader negotiates the writing process. [Electronic version]. *Currents in Literature*, 1(2).
- Gee, J. (1999). Critical issues: Reading and the new literacy studies: Reframing the National Academy of Sciences report on reading. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 31, 355–374.
- Graves, D., & Stuart, V. (1986). *Write from the start: Tapping your child's natural writing ability*. New York: Plume.
- Greenleaf, C., Schoenbach, R., Cziko, C., & Mueller, F. (2001). Apprenticing adolescent readers to academic literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71, 79–129.
- Halpern, R. (1990). *The role of after-school programs in the lives of inner-city children: A study of the Chicago Youth Centers after-school programs*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.
- Halpern, R. (2002). A different kind of child development institution: A history of after-school programs for low-income children. *Teachers College Record*, 104, 178–211.
- Halpern, R. (2003). *Making play work: The promise of after-school programs for low-income children*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Halpern, R., Spielberger, J., & Robb, S. (1999). *Evaluation of the MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) Initiative: Final report*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.
- Hawkins, D. (1990). The roots of literacy. *Daedalus*, 119(2), 1–14.
- Heath, S. (2001). Three's not a crowd: Plans, roles and focus in the arts. *Educational Researcher*, 30(7), 10–17.
- Hill S., Townsend, L., Lawrence, A., Shevin, S., & Ingalls, S. (1995). *Supporting community learning*. New York: City University of New York, Lehman College, Institute for Literacy Studies.
- MacLeod, J. (1987). *Ain't no making it: Leveled aspirations in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- McQuillan, J. (1998). *The literacy crisis*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Moline, S. (1995). *I see what you mean: Children at work with visual information*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

- Mosenthal, P. (1999). Understanding engagement: Historical and political contexts. In J. Guthrie & D. Alvermann (Eds.), *Engaged reading: Processes, practices and policy implications* (pp. 1–17). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Pellegrini, A., & Galda, L. (2002). The effects of thematic fantasy play training on the development of children’s story completion. In R. Deasy (Ed.), *Critical links: Learning in the arts and student academic and social development*. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, Arts Education Partnership.
- Resnick, L. (1990). Literacy in school and out. *Dadealus*, 119(2), 169–185.
- Robinson, K. (2001). Foreword. In G. Burnaford, A. Aprill, & C. Weiss (Eds.), *Renaissance in the classroom: Arts integration and meaningful learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Roth, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., Linver, M., & Hofferth, S. (2002). What happens during the school day? Time diaries from a national sample of elementary school teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 105, 317–343. Retrieved June 30, 2003, from <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentID=11018>.
- Shannon, P. (1990). *The struggle to continue: Progressive reading instruction in the United States*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Silberman, A. (1989). *Growing up writing*. New York: Times Books.
- Sipe, L. (2000). The construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in oral response to picture storybook read-alouds. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35, 252–275.
- Spielberger, J., & Halpern, R. (2002). *The role of after-school programs in low-income children’s literacy development*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.
- Stein, M., & D’Amico, L. (2002). Inquiry at the crossroads of policy and learning: A study of a district-wide literacy initiative. *Teachers College Record*, 104, 1313–1344.
- Stipek, D. (1992). The child at school. In M. Bornstein & M. Lamb (Eds.), *Developmental psychology: An advanced textbook*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Strickland, D., Bodino, A., Buchan, K., Jones, K., Nelson, A., & Rosen, M. (2001). Teaching writing in a time of reform. *Elementary School Journal*, 101, 385–397.

- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Trelease, J. (1985). *The read-aloud handbook*. New York: Penguin.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2000). 21st Century Community Learning Centers: Providing quality after-school learning opportunities for America's families. Washington, DC: Author.
- Varenne, H., & McDermott, R. (1998). *Successful failure: The school America builds*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Vargas Llosa, M. (2001, May 14). Why literature? *The New Republic*, 31–35.
- Wald, L. (1915). *The house on Henry Street*. New York: Holt.
- Wilhelm, J. (1997). *You gotta BE the book*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Contributor

Professor Robert Halpern is professor of child development and director of the Research Council at Erikson Institute. One of the nation's foremost historians in the field of human services, Halpern has written extensively on social theory, program evaluation, and parenting support programs. His current research focuses on the evaluation of after-school programs for poor children and their families. Halpern's most recent books are *Making Play Work, The Promise of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children* (Teachers College Press, 2003), *Fragile Families, Fragile Solutions: A History of Supportive Services for Families in Poverty* (Columbia University Press, 1999), and *Rebuilding the Inner-City: A History of the Neighborhood Initiatives to Address Poverty in the United States* (Columbia University Press, 1995). Professor Halpern received his doctorate in international developmental education from Florida State University. In addition to teaching at Erikson, he is also a faculty associate at the Chapin Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

HERR RESEARCH CENTER FOR CHILDREN
AND SOCIAL POLICY, ERIKSON INSTITUTE

PROFESSOR AISHA RAY, ACTING DIRECTOR

The Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy informs, supports, and encourages effective early childhood policy in the Great Lakes Region. The center generates original research and analysis that addresses unanswered questions about the optimal organization, funding, assessment, and replication of high-quality early childhood programs and services. Further, it provides comparisons of policies across states to determine which works best and why. Finally, through an array of publications, conferences, policy seminars, and advocacy efforts, it shares this research and analysis with state and local legislators, advocates, foundation officials, and other researchers in the field.

The center was established in 2005 with a gift from the Jeffrey Herr Family and grants from the Joyce and McCormick Tribune Foundations, as well as support from the Spencer Foundation and the Children's Initiative, a project of the Pritzker Family Foundation.

**Publications available from the Herr Research Center
for Children and Social Policy**

Applied Research in Child Development Number 1, After School Programs
Applied Research in Child Development Number 2, Father Care
Applied Research in Child Development Number 3, Welfare Reform
Applied Research in Child Development Number 4, Assessment
Applied Research in Child Development Number 5, Arts Integration
Applied Research in Child Development Number 6, Parent Support and
Education

Occasional Papers

“Lessons from Beyond the Service World,” Judith S. Musick, Ph.D.
“Harder Than You Think: Determining What Works, for Whom, and Why in
Early Childhood Interventions,” Jon Korfmacher, Ph.D.
“Child Assessment at the Preprimary Level: Expert Opinion and State Trends,”
Carol Horton, Ph.D., and Barbara T. Bowman, M.A.

“‘Does not.’ ‘Does too.’ Thinking About Play in the Early Childhood Classroom,” Joan Brooks McLane, Ph.D.

“Relationship-based Systems Change: Illinois’ Model for Promoting Social-Emotional Development in Part C Early Intervention,” Linda Gilkerson, Ph.D., and Carolyn Cochran Kopel, M.S.W.

Monographs of the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy, Erikson Institute, is one of three publications produced by the center and is published by Erikson Institute, 420 North Wabash, Chicago, Illinois 60611, USA, phone (312) 893-7160, fax (312) 755-0928. E-mail: research@Erikson.edu. Back issues of all Herr Research Center publications may be requested from Erikson Institute.

Copyright: All rights reserved. Reproduction, storage, transmission, or translation of any part of this work in any form or by any means beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law without permission of the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute is unlawful. Please contact the center for all permissions requests and inquiries.

©2006 Erikson Institute.

Erikson

MONOGRAPHS OF THE HERR RESEARCH
CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND SOCIAL POLICY,
ERIKSON INSTITUTE

420 North Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611-5627
www.erikson.edu