Critical Issues
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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 super-vision, 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.

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

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[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.

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—funders 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

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[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 straight-forward—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 considera-tion 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 selec-tion 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 reenact-ed stories, staged fairy tales, wrote and staged their own plays, and did dramat-ic readings of contemporary and classic plays. Some of the varied nonliteracy activities in after-school programs—debate, parliamentary law, cooking, stenog-raphy, 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

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[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-

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[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—itself 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., flow-charts, 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.

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Physical (In)activity Among Low-Income Children and Youth: Problem, Prospect, Challenge

Our young people live in a physical and social environment that makes it easy to be sedentary and inconvenient to be active.

U.S. Department of Education, *Promoting Better Health for Young People through Physical Activity and Sports* (2000)

The way Americans conduct sports has certainly not made us healthy, in any sense of the word.

George Vecsey, *New York Times* (December 16, 2002)

If left to choose, children instinctively seek the joy of movement.

Pete Egoscue, *New York Times* (May 10, 1998)

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 and suburban childhood for at least the first two thirds of the 20th century. Over the past 20 or so years, that has become less and less the case, and in the past few years physical inactivity among children has come to be viewed as a distinct social problem. In this paper, I examine the reasons for what some are calling an epidemic of inactivity among low- and moderate-income children and youth and discuss what it might take to address this problem. I examine 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.

My basic argument is that, in developing policies, programs, and a research agenda to address physical inactivity, we have to keep in mind that it has multiple, intertwined roots. 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) all contribute to the problem. This multicausality does not mean that discrete responses—for example, promoting youth sports—are destined to be ineffectual. The most useful responses to complex problems are often focused. Moreover, the development of one response often leads to awareness of the need for and subsequent development of others. At the same time, it does not make sense to invest in particular corners of children's lives without worrying about the other corners.

Considering Physical Activity

Physical activity is a broad and heterogeneous concept. It encompasses both organized activities and informal ones, games and play, sports and arts—basically whatever stimulates movement—from physical education and recess at school to taking dance classes, dancing at a rock concert, roaming the neighborhood, jumping rope, playing hopscotch and tag, wrestling and tussling with friends, or practicing capoeira. It is sometimes deliberate, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes the point, and sometimes a by-product.

Physical activity has important developmental dimensions. The meaning of, motivation for, and nature of physical activity change as individuals move through childhood and adolescence. Until the age of 8 or 9, children naturally explore and interact with the world physically as well as verbally, often through the medium of play. Physical activity (and being physical) is almost not a separate thing but how the self is composed and expressed, how learning occurs, how children explore and master the external world. Children "are programmed by nature to be little whirling dervishes" (Egoscue, 1998, p. A29). The exhilaration, risk, and loss of control associated with movement are sources of pleasure. In her study of children's play behavior on the school playground,

Thorne (1993, p. 15) was struck "not only by kids' rapid movements, but also by their continual engagement with one another's bodies—poking, pushing, tripping, grabbing a hat or scarf." She noted that children did not seem to experience these intrusions as antagonistically as adults might expect.

In the later years of middle childhood and into adolescence, physical activity not only declines in absolute amount[1], but also is shaped by different factors. What was natural and instinctive must, in many respects, be relearned and reincorporated. Being physically active becomes a matter of social learning and an element of identity development, as children look (and listen) to others—to parents, relatives, and other adults in the community; to siblings and friends; and, increasingly, to popular culture—as models of who and what they might be and how they should engage the world. For example, parents' own participation, enjoyment, and valuing of physical activity serve as an important influence on their children (Weiss, 2000).

Physical activity is strongly shaped by gender. There are gender differences in—or perhaps gender stereotypes about—the types of physical activity that boys and girls view as acceptable for themselves, and in their perceptions of their likely competence in particular activities (Lee, Fredenburg, Belcher, & Cleveland, 1999). Parents and children themselves believe that boys and girls have different natural abilities. Although both boys and girls cite having fun, being with friends, and developing physical skills and/or fitness as the main reasons for participating in organized physical activities, boys have been found to be more competitively oriented and girls more goal oriented in their approach to such activities. With respect to space, boys tend to define and use larger fixed spaces for organized games and sports; girls define smaller spaces and use them more flexibly.

Physical activity is also strongly influenced by social class and race. These shape the physical environments in which children grow up, the resources to which they have access, the goals of organized activities for children, parental priorities, and a host of other factors. For instance, close to three quarters of African American children in the United States grow up in "racially segregated, densely settled, and geographically restricted" neighborhood environments, with little or no safe, usable outdoor play space (Sutton, n.d.). Low-income

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[1] Between the ages of 6 and 18, boys' physical activity reportedly decreases by 24 percent and girls' by 36 percent (Baker, Freedman, & Furano, 1997, p. 4).

children and youth have significantly less access to organized sports than do their more advantaged peers, and the activities to which they do have access are more likely to be viewed as preventive or remedial interventions than as normative child development supports (Baker, Freedman, & Furano, 1997; Littel & Wynn, 1989). Meanwhile, parents of low-income children and youth are more likely than more economically advantaged parents to restrict their children from playing outdoors.

There are also, obviously, individual differences among children and adolescents in how they view and experience physical activity. Children have varying perceptions of their own physical competence and varying capacities for physical risk taking. They experience physical proximity and touch differently. Adolescents make very different meanings of their participation in organized physical activities. Larson (1994), for instance, found that ego-involved adolescents (i.e., those focused on winning and losing as measures of self-worth) appeared to get less satisfaction from sports participation than did mastery-oriented ones (i.e., those who focused on their own progress and performance).

Benefits of Physical Activity
The benefits of physical activity for children, though seemingly obvious, bear restating. Most immediately, they include cardiovascular health, muscle and bone strength, kinesthetic awareness, sense of vitality, and sense of physical competence and integrity. In some forms, physical activity appears to have self-regulatory benefits for behavior and emotional state and even a self-regulatory effect on chemical/hormonal balances in the body. Physical activity can reduce anxiety, feelings of stress, and, according to a few reports, depression. For all children, but particularly for those who are vulnerable for reasons of disability, temperament, traumatic experience, or the like, physical activity seems to have a "normalizing" effect. It fosters social inclusion and strengthens children's sense of self as not just physically but socially competent. Describing the effects of martial arts classes for girls who have had difficult life experiences, the director of the Center for Anti-Violence Education in Brooklyn, New York, said, "Moving the body opens you up, [because] anger and hurt live in your body" (Musick, 1999, p. 37).

For some children, physical activity becomes a principal means of self-expression and creativity. For older children and youth who have experienced little success in other areas of their lives, physical activities can come to serve as

a foundation for recovering a sense of competence in other domains. Not least, physical activity is an important vehicle for building social community in childhood. It operates through a universal language that can—though does not necessarily—bring children with diverse backgrounds together.

How Serious Is the Problem of Physical Inactivity?

The data point to a moderately serious and growing problem whose effects on children and society as a whole are just beginning to be understood. With respect to prevalence, there are numerous direct and indirect signs of a decline in day-to-day physical activity among children. For instance, walking and bicycling among children ages 5 to 15 declined 40 percent between 1977 and 1995 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, p. 10). One study found that fewer than 1 in 5 children in Georgia who live less than a mile from school walk to school on a regular basis (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 1999). In many low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, fewer children are playing outdoors—on sidewalks, in playgrounds, and in parks. Recess and physical education are disappearing from urban school schedules. More children are spending more time indoors at earlier ages, in institutional settings (day care, after-school programs, etc.), or at home. Time diaries and surveys suggest that children and adolescents are spending more time in sedentary activities, such as watching television, listening to music, and playing video and computer games. For these reasons and others to be discussed shortly, fewer than 1 in 3 adolescents currently get what is considered an adequate amount of regular physical exercise.

The effects of physical inactivity can be understood in part simply by subtracting from children's lives the numerous benefits noted above. More immediately, the medical literature is reporting an increase in a variety of pediatric health problems that appear to be caused by a combination of physical inactivity and increased calorie consumption.[2] As has been widely reported, childhood obesity has doubled over the past 10 years. A third of adolescents are either at risk of obesity or are already obese (Cohen, 2000, who also notes, p. 10, that "between 70 and 80 percent of obese adolescents will remain obese as adults").

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[2] Children are consuming 100 to 200 more calories each day than they did just a few years ago. Pollan (2003, p. 6) reports that "agribusiness now produces 3,800 calories of food a day for every American, 500 calories more than it produced 30 years ago.… So what's a food company to do? The answer couldn't be simpler or more imperative: get each of us to eat more. A lot more."

Recent research in San Francisco found that close to half of the local population of Latino children 6 to 11 years old were overweight, and more than half of adolescents.[3] Obesity-related pediatric health problems reported to be increasing in frequency (and to which physical inactivity contributes) include Type 2 diabetes (which has tripled in the just the past five years), incipient heart disease, sleep apnea, gallbladder and skin disorders, and orthopedic problems (Cohen). Obesity also causes or contributes to problems such as depression, social discrimination, and social withdrawal.

Causes of Physical Inactivity

The Disappearance of Childhood

Although there is a biologically and developmentally rooted decline in physical activity as children grow older, this decline may be occurring earlier than in the past, a specific expression of the more general phenomenon of "age compression" that has been noted among American children. Some have described this as the disappearance or erosion of childhood (Suransky, 1982). The rhythms, routines, and preoccupations of childhood have been lost. Constraints to physical activity that used to be characteristic of early adolescence are now found in 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds. Children are more self-conscious about their bodies at younger ages. Awareness of, and anxiety about, social and physical competition occur earlier. Adult agendas for out-of-school time intrude earlier in life. There has been, especially, a growing adult preoccupation with productive use of non-school time, seen in ubiquitous efforts to extend the school day for purposes of academic remediation.

INSTITUTIONALIZED CHILDHOOD. The earlier decline of childhood pursuits is attributable in part to the fact that more low- and moderate-income American children are spending more time in institutional settings during non-school hours than in the past. In 1986, Roger Hart presciently noted that as long as children had more freedom in the city, it did not matter that the play spaces and institutions created and controlled by adults were so restrictive and sometimes boring—but it was beginning to matter at the time, and it matters even more today. Some 25 percent of low- and moderate-income children now

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[3] In a recent conversation, the founder and director of a major youth-serving agency serving Latino children in New York City told me that obesity was rampant among the children and adolescents he served.

spend three to five afternoons a week in after-school programs, and the numbers are growing.

As I will discuss more fully later, institutional settings such as after-school programs tend to standardize and routinize children's activity, and in many programs children spend a majority of the time seated—doing homework, having a snack, or participating in crafts or table games. Lack of space in many after-school programs creates impediments to both informal and organized physical activity. More subtly, institutional settings tend to lack the necessary psychological, social, and temporal conditions for play to thrive (Suransky, 1982). Such conditions include physical and social space for spontaneity, physicality, and unrestricted movement, as well as a measure of privacy, lack of formal temporal structure (or schedule), freedom to manipulate the material environment, and at least a modicum of unpredictability. To cite just one common constraint, children in after-school programs are warned again and again to avoid touching others, to control their bodies, and to limit their movements.

Gender-Specific Constraints

There are a number of gender-related constraints to children's physical activity. For boys, there has been a narrowing of the range of behavior considered normal, i.e., a certain amount of aggression, rowdiness, and restlessness. We are seeing, for example, the medicalization of these behaviors with labels of conduct disorder or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, as well as greater attention to the phenomenon of bullying (Angier, 1994). The reasons for this trend are not clear. Extremes of aggressive behavior may be more common in low- and modest-income boys, due to perinatal injury, trauma, diet, popular culture, social despair, and loss of opportunity for less extreme physical outlets.

American society also seems to be in a particularly punitive era with respect to boys from low-income families, especially if they are members of a racial minority. Kozol (2000, p. 16) described what he saw as the "severe agenda that has recently been put in place for inner-city kids," including a preoccupation with discipline and punishment. One can see this exhibited in the martial environment that has been created in hundreds of inner-city school around the country. We are also in a period of heightened concern with crime, violence, and disorder. Minority boys from low-income families tend to experience the brunt of such social concerns, and their behavior is more closely monitored by teachers, police, and juvenile justice authorities than that of their white peers.

For girls, some gender-associated constraints to physical activity include lack of role models, social pressures, body image issues, lack of parental encouragement (important in part because girls reportedly rely on such encouragement more than boys do), and fewer sports choices. Starting in elementary school, girls assess their general athletic ability more negatively than boys do, regardless of actual performance. Girls sometimes feel less safe in public recreation spaces and use those spaces less for physical than for social purposes, including watching boys play sports (Youth Sports Leadership Project, 2002). The organizations (and individuals) that sponsor and teach selected sports, including wrestling, football, and, more selectively, martial arts and baseball, have been slow to welcome girls as participants.

Local Norms and Poverty-Related Factors

Although American culture as a whole—through all the factors discussed in this paper—exerts the major influence on children's activity patterns and levels, group and community norms, interacting with individual family needs, also play a role. Johnson (2000) noted that almost any activity can at times be prohibited or restricted for particular genders, ages, or reasons of religion or custom. Immigrant families may not feel that they know or trust the community environment well enough to release their children into it. And some—though certainly not all—immigrant communities have long viewed play and sports as frivolous, an unaffordable luxury relative to academics or work (Halpern, 2003).

In local Latino communities, youth are often expected to begin contributing economically to the family by age 15 or 16, one reason for drop-off in sports participation over the high school years. Latino girls appear to face particular constraints to pursuing physical activity, including parental discouragement, a significant burden of child care and other family responsibilities, cultural norms against girls' competitiveness, lack of public role models, and extreme parental restrictions on outdoor activity. In one *New York Times* article, a young Hispanic female softball player told a reporter that "a lot of Hispanic girls are more into makeup, hair and nails. In my whole family I was the only girl who played a sport. I was the only one outside playing with boys" (Williams, 2002, pp. C15–C16). In one sports league (primarily softball) for girls in the mostly Dominican Washington Heights/Inwood section of Manhattan, child care responsibilities were a significant issue, as was lack of support from parents, especially for older girls (Baker et al., 1997).

Some of the dynamics operating within local Latino communities may also be present in African American communities. Kane and Larkin (1997), for instance, cited a survey finding African American parents significantly more likely than Caucasian parents to say that sports are more important for boys than for girls. This may partly explain the finding in a study sponsored by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute that the decline in physical activity among girls over the course of adolescence is particularly great for African Americans.

POVERTY-RELATED CONSTRAINTS. Poverty places a variety of stresses on families that constrain children's time and opportunity for physical activity. Parents forced to do physically exhausting work for low wages may not view being physically active as a discrete, positive, or important value to promote in their children. (Literature on parents' roles in determining children's physical activity in fact finds that economically advantaged parents place a higher value on children's physical activity than do those who are economically disadvantaged. Women, who often head low-income families, are also less likely than men to put children's needs for physical activity ahead of other family needs.) Recent changes in welfare policy have led a greater proportion of adults in low-income families to work long hours, which reduces the amount of time parents have to link their children to community resources.

Low- and moderate-income working parents may place a variety of restrictions on their children's movements after school, wanting them in a defined indoor place, whether home, after-school or youth program, or library. Poverty-related family stresses such as divorce, single parenthood, and domestic violence also put a variety of pressures on children and youth that affect their psychological availability to participate and persevere in activities. Psychological factors such as worry, anxiety, depression, and shame contribute to social withdrawal as well as lack of energy.

Loss of Outdoor Play and Play Space
Common sense would suggest—and there is some evidence to argue—that time spent playing outdoors is a major determinant of children's physical activity levels.[4]

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[4] In a radio program, Dr. Jo Salmon of Deakin University in Australia reported on a study finding that "the single biggest predictor of children's activity levels, above and beyond anything else, is the time that children spend outside" (*Health Dimensions,* 2002).

Put somewhat differently, the spaces children inhabit, and are directed to, strongly shape the developmental experiences to which they have access, including the kinds and amounts of physical activity in which they engage. Over the past half-century, students of urban geography, plus a handful of sociologists and of ecologically oriented psychologists have argued that (a) being able to play and otherwise use the outdoor city environment is developmentally important to children (as one writer noted, the outdoors has an affective importance to them); (b) cities are becoming increasingly inhospitable places for children; and (c) children and adolescents appear to have less opportunity for unstructured outdoor play in particular.[5]

Colin Ward, writing of inner-city children and youth, noted already in 1978 that "there is no way which makes sense to them of becoming involved, except in a predatory way, in their own city (p. 21)." A more recent report described children's lack of access to the outdoor urban environment as a crisis (Aitken, cited in Monaghan, 2000). Writing in the *New York Times,* Pete Egoscue (1998) observed that most children's lives offer fewer and fewer opportunities for unstructured, spontaneous motion; he called this "motion deprivation." When staff at a network of inner-city after-school programs run by the Child First Authority in Baltimore asked children what they would like to see more of in their programs, "two answers dominate[d]: more outdoor play and more field trips." The staff had restricted outdoor play, "fearing harm from broken glass, drug paraphernalia and playground disrepair" (*Child First Times,* 2002, p. 2).

The inhospitality of the city to children's outdoor play is far from a new complaint; in fact, it has been a theme in municipal reform at least since the 1880s and was certainly a major concern of Progressive reformers early in the 20th century. For at least the first two thirds of the century, children nonetheless seemed to thrive on city streets, stoops, playgrounds, and play lots. They effectively borrowed the city for their own purposes, using walls, fire hydrants, lampposts, and manhole covers (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990). Children created and passed on games, developed their own small governments, and did what they could to resist adult intrusions into their world. Although adults criticized children's informal outdoor play as idleness, it taught children quickness of mind, self-confidence, and the ability to cope with all kinds of people and situations.

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[5] There is even some evidence that access to outdoor play spaces influences children's sense of loneliness (Parke & O'Neill, 1999).

Children's outdoor play was associated with a certain amount of risk and risk taking, in the positive sense of these concepts.[6]

At some point over the past 30 years or so, the balance between the developmental benefits and the risks of outdoor play environments shifted toward the latter. Informal social controls in inner-city neighborhoods thinned out, there was a shift from ethnically based or turf-driven gang conflict to drug-related violence, and adults were no longer willing or able to monitor children's and youth's behavior. In fact, neighborhood adults were transformed from protective figures to potential threats to children's well-being. Over the past 20 years, street culture, historically a source of play, learning, and experience for disadvantaged children, has become became much riskier for them. Parents in many communities no longer permit their children to use playgrounds due to perceived danger, especially drug dealing, and to neglect by parks and recreation departments. Equipment remains unrepaired for years. Playgrounds and parks are littered with broken glass, drug paraphernalia, and condoms, among other items. In general, children do not use their physical community as fully as they did in the past.

Popular Culture, the Media, and the Marketplace

For a variety of reasons, including parents' reluctance to let children or adolescents wander the community freely after school and the attraction of amusement and diversion, television watching, video games, computer games, and the Internet are contributing to sedentary "lifestyles." Across social class lines, children and adolescents are spending 3, 4, and in some cases 5 or more hours a day on such activities.

In an obvious and strict sense, TV watching and related activities combine physical inactivity with increased likelihood of snacking, a perfect formula for obesity. (Snacking is not just a parallel activity; intense advertising of snack food and soda during children's peak television viewing hours may actually stimulate

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[6] In discussing the general developmental value of children's self-directed outdoor play, Sutton-Smith (1990, p. 5) offered a long list of things that children were doing when they were "just playing": legislating differences, displaying power, clarifying meaning (of rules, etc.), changing meaning, redefining situations, distinguishing pretend from real, coping with exclusion, changing roles, dealing with conflict, and learning about space, boundaries, and territoriality. In a similar list, Middlebrook (1998, p. 16) included (among other things) finding refuge, exploring and developing relationships, and experimenting with authority and power.

eating.) More subtly, as Dargan and Zeitlin (1990, p. 169) have argued, modern amusements are "placeless; the world they create is on the screen, in the mind" and not on the block. As Aitken (cited in Monaghan, 2000, p. A21), put it, they create a "virtual reality that responds to cravings that are more likely to stulti-fy than enhance the development of the child." And their messages are designed to turn children and adolescents into consumers.

Childhood used to be at least somewhat protected from "the marketplace," but that is no longer the case. Children are now viewed by advertisers as a prime market, and the bulk of messages explicitly or implicitly targeted to children undermine the value of health, physical vitality, and activity. Children's bodies—not to mention their identities—are increasingly "commodified" and "branded" in television programming, magazine articles, and especially advertisements, which try to shape what children eat and drink, what they want to look like, whom they want to emulate, and what they should think and worry about. Oliver (2001, p. 144) noted, for instance, that girls are constantly "bombarded with messages about their bodies" suggesting that using particular products will make them more attractive. Indeed, the messages that girls get from teen maga-zines—messages that are "a very powerful source of information for the girls"—is that they are "bodies first and people second" (Oliver, p. 153). There is much that is positive about the girls' sports movement (itself an expression of a broad-er cultural movement reflected in the term "girl power"). But no sooner did it appear than it was co-opted by athletic apparel makers, who saw a new market that could offset stagnant sales in the traditional male market (Geissler, 2001). Nike and other companies are well aware that billions of dollars a year are spent on girls' clothing.

Boys too are increasingly susceptible to the marketplace's interest in chil-dren's bodies as sources of profit. One sign of this is the growing use of steroids and steroid precursors (such as androstenedione) by boys as young as 9 or 10 years old. As Egan (2002, p. A1) reports, more boys "are trying to find designer bodies, not just in a gym but also in a syringe of illegal steroids," which can "basically shut down normal adolescent development in male bodies." These damaging drugs, viewed by older children and youth as shortcuts to acquiring attractive bodies, are completely unregulated and are sold by the dietary supplement industry, which, like cigarette manufac-turers, protests that its marketing efforts are not aimed to those under 18 years of age.

The food subsidiaries of the large tobacco companies have begun to use the advertising techniques that have been effective in marketing cigarettes to young people. In a related vein, the (sometimes government-subsidized) overproduction of food by agribusiness has led to a phenomenon called supersizing:

> Since the raw materials of soda and popcorn, french fries and even hamburgers represent such a tiny fraction of their retail price (compared with labor, packaging and advertising), expanding portion size becomes a way to multiply sales without adding much to costs (Pollan, 2003, p. 6).

The supersizing of meals served to children occurs not just in fast food outlets but in schools, as well.

Close to a majority of high school students, particularly those living in moderate-income families, now work after school and/or on weekends, for as many as 20 hours a week. This work rarely contributes much to adolescents' development and may even cause developmental harm by limiting time for physical activity, as well as other extracurricular activity and schoolwork. Some or much of adolescents' desire to work in the out-of-school hours is driven by consumption, rather than by the necessity of contributing to the family—that is, by the desire to purchase whatever goods are being worn or used by friends or being pushed on television or in teen magazines.

The American Way of Sports

It might seem ironic in a paper on the causes of and approaches to addressing physical inactivity to identify sports as part of the problem. But in American society, much of how sports are organized, carried out, and celebrated may have the sum effect of contributing to inactivity. In the first place, Americans' tendency to equate leisure with amusement extends to sports, where primary forms of participation are vicarious and somewhat passive—being a fan or a spectator, glorifying celebrity, deifying star athletes, making them into heroes. Baker et al. (1997, p. 1) argued that being a fan can contribute to sports participation: "Youth watch sports on TV, don the attire of their favorite teams, plaster their walls with sports posters, and mimic their heroes in countless hours of informal athletics." This author believes, however, that in the long term the process is less positive, leading primarily to passivity rather than to activity. Nathanson (1992) described the experience of being a fan of a local team or famous athlete as being about "borrowed pride." He wrote (p. 353) that "those of us who cannot or dare not

compete on our own hire others to fight or play or contend in our stead." There may also be a degree of "borrowed" effort—the more we are inclined to watch others exert themselves, the less we are inclined to do that work ourselves.

In American society, children's (especially boys') view and understanding of sports come primarily from the media. In a provocative article entitled "The Televised Sports Manhood Formula," Messner, Dunbar and Hunt (2000) identified a number of recurrent themes in the televised sports programs most watched by boys. These include the positive value of extreme aggressiveness (including fighting); the importance of being willing to sacrifice one's body and health in the service of winning (it is heroic, rather than stupid, to play hurt); the derision of softness; the need to prove oneself constantly; a view of sports as war; a sexualization of women and, relatedly, the presentation of women as masculinity-validating props; and the idea that the costs of masculinity are worth the price. *New York Times* sports columnist George Vecsey (2002, p. D8) noted that "all the evidence suggest[s] that watching sports makes many of us surly, stupid, flabby, [and] passive."

The hypercompetitiveness, violence, and extreme aggression characteristic of professional sports have spread downward and outward, infecting all kinds of organized sports. Sports medicine specialists report seeing more and younger children with overuse injuries, children who sometimes have played through pain with the blessing of a coach or parent. Glorification of violence and aggression in both old and new media complicates children's, especially boys', efforts to find ways of expressing their natural aggression in manageable, appropriate ways. Such themes also serve to limit news and coverage of women's sports. Older children and youth who are not willing or able to buy into the dominant sports ethos may reject sports as a whole.

School-Related Trends

Two established school-related trends have contributed to the growth of physical inactivity among children and adolescents: the disappearance of recess and the decline in physical education. We violate the natural rhythms of children's and adolescents' lives by putting them in rigidly controlled environments all day and by not spacing out learning activities. A third trend, the "extension" of the school day into the after-school hours to provide academic remediation, is also becoming a notable problem. Less directly, as I noted earlier, in the name of improving the learning environment and general sense of order and structure,

there have been increasing constrictions on children's freedom of movement in school.[7]

Many reasons have been proffered for shortening or eliminating recess: the need for more time for academics and safety, health, and drug education; the fear of lawsuits; unsavory adults lurking around playgrounds; the shortage of willing supervisors. Johnson (1998) quoted an Atlanta school superintendent as saying, "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on monkey bars." Yet recess is beneficial for many reasons, in addition to sheer physical activity. It offers children a change of pace, a chance to decompress,[8] some novelty in a school day increasingly defined by repetition and routine, a modicum of escape from adult control, the opportunity to develop and practice social skills, and the chance to spend a few minutes outdoors.

The decline in physical education has three dimensions: (a) fewer children are participating in physical education in general; (b) those who do are participating fewer days each week, on average; and (c) the proportion of vigorous physical activity during physical education appears to have declined. For instance, Lowry, Wechsler, Kann, and Collins reported in 2001 that only half of all high school students have physical education at all; in addition, the percentage of high school students participating in physical education that involves strenuous physical activity declined from 34 percent in 1991—already low—to 21 percent in 1997. Baker et al. (1997) reported that only about 10 to 15 percent of physical education involves vigorous physical activity.

Dysfunctional Public Policies

Through sins of both omission and commission, public policy in a range of domains contributes to constraints on children's physical activity. At a broad level, one striking characteristic of child and family policy in the United States is a lack of public policy addressing normative child and youth development concerns (what in other countries is often called "youth policy"), other than

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[7] Also compounding the effects of loss of physical activity are the problems of unhealthy food served to children in school lunchrooms and schools as purveyors of fast food. For example, while two thirds or more of schools serve soft drinks, salty snacks, and high-fat baked goods, only 18 percent serve fruits and vegetables (Becker & Burros, 2003, p. A12).

[8] Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1996) found that when recess time was reduced, the intensity of physical activity during recesses increased.

those for formal education. The United States lacks any deliberate, coherent, public vision of the supports—and protections—to which youth are entitled as citizens and community members. That is why corporations feel free to exploit children and adolescents as a potential market for unhealthy products and activities, why recreation and sports programs have to fight for whatever crumbs fall off the public funding table, and why children's healthy development is considered a family responsibility. One reason that physical inactivity has been defined as a public health concern is that it is not obviously the concern of any other department of federal, state, or local government.

Neglect of environmental health threats. Among the basic protections to which children should be entitled are nontoxic environments, and there is a lack of public policy and law designed to protect children and adolescents from the damaging effects of severely polluted outdoor and indoor environments in low-income neighborhoods. This issue is, finally, on the radar screen of both the public health community and urban policy makers. Awareness first took root through the long campaign to force recognition of the prevalence and effects of lead poisoning in children. Researchers have recently begun to document the levels and effects of a broad array of environmental hazards, including air pollution, solvents, pesticides, secondhand smoke, PCBs, asbestos, rodent and cockroach feces, and mold. Almost all of these are present at significantly higher levels in low-income communities (inside as well as outside homes) than in advantaged ones, and in particular in communities with high proportions of Latino and African American children (Korenstein & Piazza, 2002).

There are no data on the extent to which environmentally induced health vulnerabilities in children affect day-to-day physical activity levels. In various combinations, these toxins have been demonstrated to affect children's respiratory, nervous, endocrine, and immune systems and to cause particular kinds of cancers in children. Children with environmentally induced asthma are likely to be less active (childhood asthma rates have increased 40 percent in two decades), as are children with endocrine and immune system vulnerabilities that affect day-to-day health status. Ironically, active outdoor play, by increasing respiration rates, can exacerbate children's exposure to environmental hazards.

Child-unfriendly urban planning and legislation. A number of observers have noted over the decades that Americans design urban spaces in

a way that is inhospitable to children's and adolescents' play—inhospitable even to their very presence (see, e.g., Jacobs, 1961). Americans appear to have a deep cultural ambivalence about where they want children and adolescents to be and be seen, and perhaps about children's and adolescents' physical activity itself, especially in public spaces. Aitken (1994, p. xi) argued that "we put children in their place." And James, Jenks, and Prout (1998, p. 37) wrote that children, when noted at all, are often perceived to be in the wrong place. One illustration of these arguments can be found in the growing restrictions on street play in communities around the United States, with local city councils banning such play and local police forces occasionally confiscating equipment. In a narrower vein, playground design in the United States has tended to focus on enhancing safety and limiting risk. This preoccupation has made playgrounds less appealing to children and has led to missed opportunity to create challenging and stimulating environments. It has been argued that the lack of sidewalks in some new housing developments is at best an example of lack of attention to children's needs and, at worst, a deliberate effort to restrict where children play.

Decline in municipal recreation budgets. In most cities there has been a long-term decline in municipal public recreation budgets, reversed modestly and briefly during the economic pseudoprosperity of the 1990s. Many of the older cities in the Northeast and Midwest have lost half or more of their parks and recreation staff. Chronic capital disinvestment in urban parks and playgrounds has led to a severe decline in the condition of recreation facilities, contributing to crime, safety concerns, and even more disinvestment. The capital needs of public parks and recreation programs have doubled in the past five years. (School playgrounds, sometimes considered part of urban playground space, have also suffered from neglect.). In part due to resource constraints, urban park districts have tried to use parks and athletic fields to generate revenue. That trend, combined with generally growing demand for athletic fields, has reduced or eliminated their availability to children and youth for informal sports and games.[9]

[9] At the same time that there are shortages of playing fields, there is often a significant amount of unused public (or privately owned) land in low-income neighborhoods, for instance, vacant lots seized for non-payment of taxes (Chavis, n.d.). But this land is typically not available for development as play and sports space for children. City authorities want to the hold it for sale for future development. Wealthy individuals sometimes also donate land to cities to be used for civic purposes, and this land also can be, but often is not, used to create play space for children.

The current fiscal crisis in city and state government is leading to dramatic cuts in discretionary spending, putting further pressure on parks and recreation budgets. Atlanta, for example, is facing a $5 million cut. (Parks and recreation departments that have independent taxing authority, such as Chicago's, are somewhat protected from current fiscal pressures.) The principal source of federal funding for capital improvement, the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program (run by the National Park Service), has been significantly underfunded since it was first created in 1978. The Bush administration quietly tried to "zero out" funding for the program but under intense pressure was forced to allocate $30 million, still a tiny sum when spread across scores of cities.

Responding to the Challenge of Physical Inactivity

At one level, the solutions we are looking for, the policies, practices, and ideas we want to promote, require attention to a variety of kinds of issues. How we think about and treat low-income childhood, how we design urban space, how we invest in urban environments, how we use municipal budgets, how we balance work and family life, what happens in school, what we let the mass media do, how we think about and try to address our culture of celebrity and hero worship, how we understand and promote health itself—all of these must be considered. However, the broad agenda of needed responses is nowhere in sight.

There are, still, a number of positive developments to be built on. The problem of physical inactivity among children and adolescents is on the verge of becoming a public issue. (In American society, that means an issue discussed in the media and among policy/political elites.) In recent years, numerous stories in print and broadcast media have noted physical inactivity as a problem, usually in relation to obesity. Recent congressional sessions have seen a handful of bills intended to promote physical activity (offered by Senator Bill Frist, Representative Bernie Sanders, and a few others). Some funding from the Department of Transportation, through the Transportation Equity Act for the Twenty-First Century, and the Department of the Interior, through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, is available for developing bike paths and trails, creating safe routes to school, and improving park space and other recreational amenities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has an initiative called Active Community Environments, designed to promote walking, bicycling, and accessible recreation facilities.

The public health, preventive/behavioral medicine, and exercise science communities have also taken note and begun responding to the problem of physical inactivity. For the most part, this has meant designing and testing school- or clinic-based "lifestyle interventions" that employ health behavior modification approaches and focus on specific causal factors. For example, Robinson (1999) designed a school-based intervention to help elementary children learn to self-monitor, and become more selective about, television watching.[10]

A handful of foundations and corporations—the Skillman Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Nike (which has a program that provides grants to community organizations to refurbish or construct running tracks), and General Mills (which has a program focused on improving children's nutritional habits)—have concentrated resources on the problem of physical inactivity. There are numerous national, and a handful of state, organizations and coalitions addressing this issue. Examples include the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity (which has a Physical Activity for Youth Policy Initiative); American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance; and New York State Physical Activity Coalition. There are organizations and advocacy efforts focused on factors that contribute to physical inactivity, for instance, the Trust for Public Land (on outdoor play space) and the Children's Environmental Health Network (on environmental health issues).

On the other side of the equation, there is little public pressure for government to address the problem of physical inactivity, in part because of the plethora of domestic and international issues already confronting federal, state, and local governments, from the poor performance of public schools to continuing threats of terrorism and the ongoing war in Iraq. And, in spite of rhetoric from the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, the Surgeon General, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, current federal funding directed toward this problem is less than a drop in the bucket. The Bush administration habitually gives rhetorical support to needed action on social problems while actually trying in its budget requests to reduce or "zero out" funding for programs designed to address those problems. As noted above, the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program is barely alive. Some newer federal programs,

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[10] This intervention was found to be effective in reducing television watching and "adiposity" but did not increase physical activity or fitness. The investigator subsequently designed an intervention—ongoing—that directly incorporated a physical activity component.

for example, the Carol White Physical Education for Progress Program (which the administration also tried—unsuccessfully—to zero out) and the National Youth Sports Program have extremely small budgets, in the tens of millions. Spread out over hundreds of communities, such funding simply disappears. The decision by the Bush administration not to help the numerous states facing budget constraints bodes ill for state discretionary spending on parks, playgrounds, recreation, physical education, preventive health concerns, environmental health, and other items that address obstacles to physical activity.

A Role for After-School and Youth Programs?
Funders and preventive health specialists have tended to look to the schools, and in particular to a renewed emphasis on physical education, as the key to addressing the problem of physical inactivity. An argument can be made that other institutions make as much or more sense in this regard. Physical education certainly needs to be made more regular, active, engaging, and inclusive. Newer approaches, for instance, focus on fitness, a reasonable emphasis for most children, rather on than competitive sports, which many children do not appear to enjoy. But numerous students still do not have physical education more than once or twice a week for 30 weeks, the time allotted is still minimal, and many students still have negative perceptions of it.

The nonschool hours are in many respects better suited to efforts to renew physical activity, and in that light some have argued that after-school and youth programs should have a role. Such programs in fact offer significant, though largely unrealized, potential as bases for physical activity, as well as some important limitations. At present, the majority of after-school programs are not consciously and deliberately attentive to children's need to be physically active after a day at school. As adult-controlled, rule-bound institutional settings, after-school programs typically limit children's movement, choice, privacy, and territoriality. It is not uncommon to see after-school programs keeping children at desks for the majority of time they are at the program (in part because homework now takes up so much time). After-school programs often operate in physically constrained space, and between a third and a half are forced to rely on shared or borrowed space. Not least, as children move toward adolescence, they usually participate in after-school programs on a more irregular basis, that is, for fewer hours per week.

On the positive side, after-school programs take place during hours in which school-age children historically concentrated their physical activity. They have

flexible mandates and schedules and can more easily be nudged in new directions than can schools. They are sometimes sponsored by organizations—boys' and girls' clubs, YMCAs, municipal parks, and recreation departments—with a history of promoting physical activity. And after-school programs reach a growing number of low- and moderate-income children. Some 25 percent of these children ages 5 to 14 now participate in after-school programs (not including those focused on academic remediation) on a more or less regular basis (Halpern, 2003). Over the next decade participation rates should reach 40 percent or more. (Participation rates in programs serving high school-age children are much lower and patterns of participation are more irregular.)

At their best, after-school programs have certain qualities that make them good settings for children to explore physical activities of interest and to acquire skills, without the costs of excessive competition and comparison. The relatively small groups in after-school programs reduce the intensity of social comparison and give children opportunity to explore new activities and build skills at their own pace. After-school programs cope well with individual differences. They work well as gender-integrated settings. As noted, because their agenda is not as full as school's, they afford time to pursue activities in depth, at least theoretically. Adults play supportive, nonjudgmental roles, children usually feel safe psychologically as well as physically, and there is a relatively low risk of failure.

Even programs with limited space can be a base for many kinds of physical activity, for example, dance and martial arts. In such activities, one can see the integration of a variety of skills and developing capacities—aesthetic, kinesthetic, self-regulatory, physical strength, even narrative. Martial arts seem particularly compelling, with their combination of discipline and self-regulation, carefully sequenced rankings that recognize growth in skill, and "special teacher-pupil relationship, based on formal rules of respect and obligation" (Musick, 1999, p. 36). As noted earlier, this particular form of movement can offer a variety of benefits to children and youth who have few other reasons to feel competent and who, by the time they reach early adolescence, may have experienced years of assaults on their sense of self, and sometimes real assaults on their bodies:

> Moving the body opens you up, [because] anger and hurt live in your body. . . . There is time and space [here] to act out your feelings and actions you take with your body can have an effect. The physical training counterbalances feelings of powerlessness— imparting the sense that your body is for more than just for men (Musick, p. 37).

For older children and adolescents, the drop-in recreation center or youth program is a common site for sports activity, whether "pick-up" or organized. Three studies suggest that such programs offer both potential and some problems as bases for sports participation (Halpern et al., 2000; Wilson, White, & Fisher, 2001; Youth Sports Leadership Project, 2002). Sports activity in these programs is typically inclusive, accommodating of those with modest skill or ability, enjoyable, and not overly competitive. Participating youth have a sense of ownership of the space and activities. (For example, youth typically set their own rules.) At the same time, the majority of programs typically have male-oriented, if not male-dominated, cultures. Although girls are welcome, and some sports activity is coed, girls sometimes feel marginalized. They can use gyms or outdoor sports space as long as boys are not using them, but they tend to be pushed aside when boys want to play. As noted earlier, girls sometimes do not feel completely safe in sports-oriented recreation programs, and staff do not always intervene appropriately to stop gender-related problems. (It is particularly problematic that staff members sometimes belittle girls' complaints of sexual harassment.)

Youth Sports

Sports are, potentially, an important component of a broader approach to addressing the problem of physical inactivity. When conducted in a developmentally appropriate manner, sports have a number of qualities that make them attractive to children. They are strongly social; they are activities in which children are simultaneously working and playing, engaged for external reasons and for intrinsic ones; and they can work equally well as an organized physical activity and as an informal one, with little or no adult involvement.

Organized youth sports are ubiquitous in the United States and have long been a staple of suburban life. As Baker et al. (1997, p. 2) put it, youth sports "constitutes a substantial part of the cultural, social, organizational and physical landscape of childhood in this country." Different sources put participation rates in youth sports at somewhere between 30 million and 40 million children and adolescents. The majority of traditional youth sports organizations have not yet figured out how to get organized in inner-city communities, where an earlier tradition of sports leagues has all but disappeared. That is, in part, because they are usually not aware of, or remain unconnected to, the local organizations that could help with this task—churches, after-school program

providers, community development corporations, settlements, and so forth. Nonetheless, while still uncommon, organized sports have begun to reappear in low-income urban neighborhoods, including the most disenfranchised ones. The activities are sponsored by a diverse array of mostly newer organizations—some sports focused, others not; some public, some private; some national, some local; some that work across sports, others that focus on one sport. They are based in schools, youth-serving organizations, settlement houses, and parks and recreation departments. And they take diverse forms.

Some initiatives in low-income communities tie sports to other goals, most typically academics, but also workforce preparation and delinquency prevention. The soccer organization D.C. Scores (which has grown into America Scores) involves school-based soccer programs, complemented by twice weekly writing workshops. Site coordinators, some of whom are teachers, are paid a $1,500 stipend. High school students help out, and the local major league soccer team, D.C. United, provides some assistance. In Chicago's After-School Matters initiative, one component, Sports 37, prepares high school youth to serve as coaches and referees in local sports leagues and lifeguards in municipal pools. The goal is to give youth marketable skills—and to create an avenue for them to contribute to their community. Sports are also emerging as a focus for community organizing. In the San Francisco Bay area, a local organization called Team Up for Youth is sponsoring the Community Sports Organizing Project. In specific neighborhoods, a lead agency is selected and a local collaborative is formed, which develops a neighborhood plan to reinvigorate sports for children and adolescents.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH SPORTS.[11] As with physical activity in general, there is a growing literature on the benefits of organized youth sports. As noted earlier, such participation helps children internalize a sense of skill, competence, and strength and incorporate physical activity into their emerging identities. Participation in youth sports especially may change the metric girls use to evaluate themselves, for example, with less reference to boys, media images, and other girls and more to their own growing physical strength

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[11] There are also risks associated with sports participation, and these are often ignored in discussions of youth sports. For instance, physically active girls, especially serious athletes, are at heightened risk of body image and eating disorders—caused by the media, coaches, parents, and peers, as well as by general self-consciousness (Kane & Larkin, 1997)—and of exercise-induced amenorrhea and bone loss.

and skill. Some sports, such as martial arts, appear to be a vehicle for strengthening self-regulatory capacities in children.

Experience with sports in middle childhood seems to be a helpful bridge to sports participation in adolescence, connecting children to a peer group that will tend to be more involved with sports in high school. (Participation in sports has been noted to "provide a sense of affiliation and belonging for young people at a time of life prone to alienation"; Baker et al., 1997, p. 6.) For high school students, the structure, regularity, and even time commitment entailed in sports participation seem to have a disciplining effect on participants' use of time. There is even speculation that participation in sports may dampen smoking in participating youth, preventing it from becoming a habit.

It is important to note that many of the benefits noted above depend on how sports are organized and implemented. Children who are verbally abused by coaches may not develop a sense of physical competence and will quickly lose motivation to persist with a sport, the key to building skill. It is also important to avoid simplistic claims for the role of sports in addressing academic and social problems. In a longitudinal study of a sample of middle- and working-class boys, for example, Larson (1994) found that sports participation had no influence on delinquency during the middle school years—the two in fact coexisted—but did have some influence in high school. He found that sports do "integrate adolescents into a social world" with a coherent set of norms, but they tend to further integrate those who are already somewhat integrated into that world (p.60). The author concluded more generally that

> there is no indication that participation in sports is successful in the mission of promoting generalized prosocial behavior—or specifically, suppressing antisocial behavior. This may not be surprising, given that the worldview of sports does not encourage identification with a single social whole but rather separates society into "us" and "them." Other activities with less emphasis on competition appear to be more successful in this pro-social mission (p. 53).

SPORTS-RELATED ISSUES. If and as youth sports grow in low-income communities, it will be important to attend to a variety of concerns and challenges, some inherent, some related to the larger cultural context for sports in the United States. The central challenge is to keep organized sports developmentally appropriate, maintaining a balance between play and work, fun and seriousness. Adults sometimes get upset at children's tendency to incorporate play, fool-

ing around, and socializing into their sports activity, forgetting or failing to realize the developmental appropriateness of such behavior. There has been a tendency, too, for the adults involved to forget that children are children and instead to expect them "to think and play as adults" (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997).[12] Yet when children are asked why they participate in sports programs and what they want out of them, the first answer is having fun, then building skills, being with friends, becoming fit, and experiencing success. Children do get a sense of pride from persevering, but it can be developmentally inappropriate at times to push them to persevere. For older children and adolescents, there is sometimes a tension between skill building, which requires practice, persistence, and a strong goal orientation, and participation in sports as one way of experimenting with identity.

To the present, youth sports programs serving low-income children have reflected a good balance, being low-key and participatory in orientation and avoiding the competitive excesses that have become characteristic of organized sports for more advantaged children and youth. Youth sports organizations have also been sensitive to children's and adolescents' varying predispositions with respect to organized sports (i.e., the fact that organized sports are not for everyone). The key will be to maintain this child-centered orientation. The goal of widespread participation in sports leagues and programs serving low-income children clashes with a cultural trend toward earlier and earlier "professionalization" and competition in the larger youth sports world.

The fact that youth sports sometimes require parental support, encouragement, and involvement can be an issue in communities in which such activities may be a relatively low priority. In the D.C. Scores program, it is reported that parents "rarely attend games or indicate their availability to chaperone outings or away games" (Baker et al., 1997, p. 50), although the reasons are not stated. To the extent that a community depends on volunteers to organize and sustain sports activities for children, this requires a community-specific design, sensitive to family pressures and structures. There may also be some misapprehension about what it takes financially to support children's participation in sports. When asked about obstacles to children's participation, low-income parents often mention lack of money for equipment and transportation. While these can

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[12] Of even greater concern, Baker et al. (1997, p. 12) reported that 45 percent of young athletes have been "verbally abused" by coaches.

be real obstacles, parents' understanding of the money needed for children to participate in specific sports is sometimes very exaggerated (Cohen, 2000). When there are real obstacles, often they are manageable, with commercial and nonprofit sources of funds to help out.

More generally, we increasingly assume that children's sports have to be organized and supervised by adults to be beneficial to children. Organized youth sports have been described as "rational recreation" and "serious leisure"—even as a "career" for some children. We have to ask, Beneficial in what sense, from whose perspective? Moreover, there is some reason to worry about organized sports pushing aside the remnants of informal sports, although this applies more to boys than to girls. Peer-oriented sports activity is structured and experienced differently than adult-led sports activity. As Mahoney (1999, p. 201) noted,

> On a playground you hear kids laugh, shout and show all the signs of pure play or fun. But on a soccer field or baseball diamond in other youth sports leagues, you rarely hear the sounds of laughter. Rather you hear coaches barking out orders and parents exhorting their children to win.

Further, sponsors have always attached instrumental aims to programs and activities for low-income children. As Cottle (1993), Kozol (2000), and others have argued, low-income children have surprisingly little opportunity simply to have fun, a measure of joy in their daily and weekly lives.

Reclaiming and Redesigning Public Space for Play and Recreation

Moore (1986) argues that a strong and rich set of childhood memories of particular places, their qualities and associated experiences, is an important foundation for adulthood. It produces a store of attachments and roots community in a sense of place. While such memories can be generated by institutional settings or organized sports leagues, they are most likely to be generated by the kinds of informal, unstructured play experiences that have all but disappeared from low-income children's lives. Having children and youth out and about in the community—visible, playing games and sports—is not just healthy for children themselves; it is an important contributor to the quality of life in the community. As Cook (n.d., p. 2) wrote, "When people use space they make it a place . . . people infuse space with meaning by playing games in alleyways, gathering in school yards and parks." Inner-city children and youth might be less afraid of public spaces if they were out together, using them for a collective purpose

such as sports. Having children out and about contributes to adults' own sense of investment in the community. (Jacobs, 1961, noted that having children out on the streets brought adults out to watch, a kind of multiplier effect.)

Since children and adolescents cannot effectively compete with adults for public space, they need to be afforded some. Where feasible, older children, adolescents, and parents should have a role in decisions about the use and design of public spaces. And a core principle of municipal urban development policies and community development initiatives should be that a healthy community needs children outside, in public spaces, playing games and sports.

There continue to be many small-scale efforts to claim or reclaim land for public purposes, led by community development corporations and land use groups. These have included efforts to build or refurbish playgrounds, to create community gardens, and to establish pocket parks. For example, in New York City the Trust for Public Land convinced the city to transfer land held by the tax department to the parks department for development as recreation space, with the proviso that if the local community did not use it well, it would be transferred back. Community groups, such as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, have persuaded local authorities to grant them eminent domain over vacant land. These efforts have yielded both real gains and a number of cautionary lessons. One lesson from playground and community garden development work is that it is much harder to protect and maintain such spaces in low-income neighborhoods than to get them built.

Looking to Other Countries

There are potentially useful ideas from other countries about promoting physical activity, if we take them with a grain of salt. First it should be noted that the apparent decline in children's physical activity, and the attendant worry about it, are not unique to the United States. Many of the economic and cultural forces at work here are global in nature. As in the United States, health authorities in Europe are beginning to respond with specific initiatives. For instance, the author came across a Web site describing a citywide initiative in Sheffield, England, called Active Sheffield, an effort led by local health authorities to mobilize a variety of institutions to promote physical activity across age levels. But Europe also differs from the United States in ways that are worth analyzing.

European countries have been more attentive to the developmental needs of children and adolescents in their urban planning efforts than has the United

States. Urban planning in Europe has been influenced to some extent by a group of influential social geographers and sociologists concerned with childhood who have written extensively about the effects of environmental arrangements on children and on children's need for social and physical space (see, e.g., James et al., 1998). Europeans have been more sensitive to—or at least less ambivalent about—the importance of play in childhood and have viewed a certain degree of riskiness "as important to [child] development" (Ennew, 1994, p. 136). Local school systems in France and other countries have incorporated long periods of unstructured play into the school day, recognizing children's need to alternate academic activity with physical activity.

Playground design in Europe tends to be more creative and developmentally appropriate than in the United States, where playgrounds, it is said, are designed primarily by insurance companies. The "adventure playground," which originated in Denmark and was tried only briefly in the United States before it disappeared, is worth reconsidering (Cooper, 1974). It is basically a large play area, preferably one in which the ground is not asphalt, and it contains irregular features. There is no fixed equipment in the playground; a variety of building/construction/play materials are left for children, who are free to build, construct, dig, plant, destroy, climb, tunnel, hide, redirect water, and the like. Such playgrounds are designed to be supervised, but with the adults staying in the background, not shaping children's play activities.[13]

Europeans have, finally, more quickly recognized the dangers inherent in the commercialization and professionalization of sports and have begun wrestling with the attendant issues. Anderson (2001), for instance, described a municipal law in Copenhagen reserving "prime time" (4 p.m. to 8 p.m.) in all city sports facilities for children's activities.

A Research Agenda

As valuable as the medical, public health, and exercise science communities are to the challenge of understanding and responding to physical inactivity, it is critical to engage researchers from disciplines such as child development, sociology,

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[13] The adventure playground is an example of an influential environmental design theory posited by the geographer Simon Nicholson. According to the theory of loose parts, "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of [manipulable] variables in it" (Nicholson, 1974, p. 223). Kennedy (1991, p. 45) puts it more directly: Children need environments that convince them that the world is not " a finished product."

urban planning, and geography. My admittedly limited look at the literature points to a number of questions bearing attention from a broad, cross-disciplinary research community. How do children learn to become physically inactive? Does failure to develop physical skills—"movement literacy"—earlier in life make it more difficult to acquire such skills later? Are children losing the "play spirit" earlier or do they seek ways to play regardless? Have children really lost the ability—as some claim—to design and carry out their own games, with adult assistance? How do children from particular cultural groups view physical activity and sports? What is the meaning—if any—of the link between low levels of parental education and lack of physical activity in children and adolescents? How do the spaces to which we direct children and youth affect their perspective on specific developmental and social issues, for example, the extent to which children and adolescents are valued as important member of society? How do the physical environments and community features prevalent in most low-income urban communities shape outdoor physical activity and play?

Conclusions

For many of today's older adults, the memories of unorganized outdoor play—and the world they created for themselves—are among the most vivid memories carried into and through adulthood. In 2005 we nonetheless have to address a problem that was unthinkable 40 or 50 years ago. Moreover, when it comes to children's physical inactivity, the present creates the future—not just of a worsening epidemic of adult obesity, chronic disease, and musculoskeletal pain, but of a new generation of parents who will be poor role models of physical health, vitality, and activity for their children.

That said, I would argue that we have to think of physical activity not as something discrete, a set of behaviors to promote through an intervention program or module added to a health education curriculum, but as part and parcel of our societal arrangements for low- and moderate-income children. To start with, the underpinnings and attributes of health and physical activity interact and reinforce each other. Children and adolescents are more likely to be physically active when they are healthy; being healthy requires living in healthful circumstances, with safe, decent physical surroundings, minimal environmental pollution, access to affordable sources of healthy food and to decent-quality primary medical care, opportunity to observe healthy adults behaving in healthy ways, having a sense that society cares about their health and well-being, and so forth.

We have to broaden our view of and understanding of health in American society. That view is currently shaped by a focus on preventing and addressing specific diseases, rather than on promoting healthy conditions and lives. Pediatricians, for instance, rarely ask about children's physical activity patterns (or eating habits) in well-child visits, unless a child is obviously obese. Even when health is addressed in a broad way, its economic and political dimensions are neglected. A widely cited report on the problem of physical inactivity among children (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) makes no mention of the role of business, the mass media, disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods, environmental degradation, and other broad factors as causes of this critical public health problem.

We have to attend to the fact that the temporal, spatial, and organizational arrangements that adults create for children also have a direct effect on physical activity. We have created a "tightly organized world for children" (Johnson, 1998, p. A16), but that organization seems to derive from adults' needs, not children's. Childhood is defined not only by greater supervision of children and adolescents by nonfamilial adults, but also by less and less opportunity for play, self-directed activity, and what Egoscue (1998, p. A29) described as "opportunities for unstructured, spontaneous motion." As Shamgar-Handelman (1994, p. 52) argued, "Not only do children not control their own lives, but they are asked and/or persuaded . . . to invest their own resources—physical strength, intellectual capacity, emotional power—in goals not of their choice."

It is important to remember that the patterns of behavior we sometimes worry about in children and adolescents are suited to their developmental period. For physical activity to work for children, they need a mixture of structure and freedom; for children to be inventive and engaged, they need some control. In designing activities and environments it will be important for adults to attend to what motivates younger versus older children, and boys versus girls, to try out and persist with activities, and, conversely, to stop trying. We cannot forget the social goal of creating social and physical arrangements that allow children and adolescents to experience some of the simple joy of unrestricted play and physical activity—of climbing, hiding, building, and tearing apart.

We need to create forums for debate about how we organize, promote, and view sports. In particular, we have to debate whether we want to continue to let market interests have such a powerful influence in sports. Adults may have something to learn by the ways in which children participate in sports, with

their motivation to have fun and their tendency to be playful and social. As Cook (2001) noted, when children participate in sports, they "disrupt the basic distinctions produced in and by competition," that is, the production of winners and losers, the sense of combat. Indeed, the competitive behavior of coaches and parents can seem a moral transgression. On the other hand, children's sports have become intertwined with our societal propensity toward violence and aggression in adult sports, and these are difficult for children and adolescents to sort out on their own.

As with related social needs, there is an enormous shortfall in public resources going to address the causes of inactivity in children. The problem of physical inactivity is, nonetheless, not just about lack of money—it is not even primarily about money. It is about power, priorities, values, the hegemony of the marketplace, the fact that childhood is now consumed by consumption itself. Yet money is needed—for after-school and youth programs, both of which are severely underfunded institutions; for capital improvement of urban parks and playgrounds, including school playgrounds; to pay for skilled instructors; to clean up the physical environment of low-income neighborhoods; and for a dozen other things.

Where might significant new funding for supporting physical activity, including but not limited to youth sports, come from? For the moment, public funding appears unlikely. Some observers view the enormous profits earned by the professional sports industry (teams, individual athletes, apparel and equipment makers, media companies) as a potential source of funding for youth sports in low-income communities. Baker et al. (1997, p. 8) wrote that

> the size of these profits—coupled with the fact that they are earned by companies, teams and individuals in highly visible industries concerned about maintaining a positive public image—bodes well for efforts aimed at plowing some of these profits back into the lives of youth.

If history is a guide, such funding—a combination of corporate welfare and voluntary sin tax—would be unreliable and come with a variety of strings attached. Some have argued for taxing tickets sold at professional sporting events or taxing sales products such as liquor or soda. There is modest logic to this position as well. To the extent that physical activity is best thought about (and promoted) as a by-product of other activities, such as performing arts, one could hope for a return from investments in such activities. But they are under assault as well. In the past, national foundations have stepped in to address—

and make a national issue of—problems affecting vulnerable children, families, and communities. Perhaps that is what we can hope for with respect to physical activity, especially if this problem is understood in appropriately complex terms.

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THE CHALLENGE OF

SYSTEM BUILDING IN THE AFTER-SCHOOL FIELD:

LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

Sys·tem. *n.* **1.** A set or arrangement of things so related or connected as to form a unity or organic whole . . .

"Thank God we have personal relationships because there is nothing
that makes us collaborate."
A Chicago after-school leader at the outset of the MOST Initiative

"There's starting to be that coming together, that pulling together."
Another Chicago after-school leader after 3 years of MOST activity

The heterogeneous, decentralized, and fragmented nature of the after-school field in the United States 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. Yet, as societal interest and investment in after-school programs have grown, 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. Thus, for instance, the tasks of increasing supply and strengthening program quality are often complicated by lack of city-wide capacity for collecting and analyzing information, planning, and priority-setting. 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.[1]

If the world of after-school programs is to be made more coherent, that process will occur mostly (and is being attempted mostly) at the city level. In this paper, I analyze the tasks, questions, and challenges associated with what can be described as system building in the after-school field, focusing on city-level efforts. My basic arguments are that (a) system building has to be understood as a long-term process, tied to broader field building; (b) though concerted efforts at system building are needed in the after-school field, such efforts have to be respectful of the qualities that make after-school programs a distinctive developmental resource for low-income children (e.g., diversity of sponsorship, large numbers of modest-size programs, strong community roots); (c) no one institution or group can claim authority (or legitimacy) to govern a local after-school system; rather, governance has to be more or less democratic and consensual in nature; and (d) in general, the attributes of well-functioning after-school systems need much more debate than they have received to the present.

The paper draws on my personal experience studying system building in four cities—Boston, Chicago, Seattle, and Baltimore—on my general familiarity with efforts in other cities, and on a small literature on this topic. In Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, Julie Spielberger, Sylvan Robb, and I studied system-building efforts that were part of the Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund's MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) initiative. In Baltimore, Carol Horton and I studied the systemic dimensions of an after-school initiative that was part of the Safe and Sound Campaign, itself part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative.[2]

The Concept of an After-School System

Over the years I have asked many people what the concept of an after-school system meant to them, and what they thought of the after-school system in their city. It was clear from the responses that the concept—with respect both to after-

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[1] In this paper I define after-school programs to include those that serve children of elementary and middle school age and that provide a mix of care and supervision, enrichment, and fun, along with some homework time/help. Not included are programs designed or intended to provide primarily academic remediation.

[2] See Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001, and Halpern & Horton, 2003.

school programming per se and to the idea of service systems in general—evokes varying images.[3] Some people thought of particular clusters or types of providers, some assumed the after-school system was an extension of the school system, some said there was no after-school system in their city, some equated the after-school system with particular initiatives or approaches, and some equated the concept of "system" with large public bureaucracies like education or child welfare.

I will discuss the challenge of conceptualizing after-school systems shortly, as a central system-building task. For the moment, the after-school system can be understood as all of the institutions that have a stake in after-school programming within some defined geographic boundary (providers, funders, regulators, resource organizations, and families themselves); the policies, procedures, regulations, initiatives, and norms shaping the behavior, interactions, and relationships among these institutions; and, perhaps, the resource base for providing and supporting after-school programming. While one can consider the elements and functioning of after-school systems at any level, from neighborhood to nation, the city level makes particular sense, for a number of reasons. Cities embody most of the key elements of after-school systems. Different stakeholders, for example, after-school providers and cultural and arts institutions, interact most regularly within the boundaries of a city. Cities tend to have high concentrations of low- and moderate-income families, whose children comprise the majority of participants in after-school programs. And each city has a distinct after-school history and infrastructure, political and institutional culture, and neighborhood structure.

The Current Status of City-Level After-School Systems

Like after-school programs themselves, city-level after-school systems can be seen as very alike or very different, depending on one's lens. In general, such systems can be said to be decentralized, loosely coupled, open, and heterogeneous. There is no one institutional locus; there are no widely accepted gover-

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[3] The discussion in these pages deliberately holds aside the large, interdisciplinary field of study known as systems theory. This field encompasses many preoccupations, strands, and ideas but in general treats such concepts as part-whole relationships, the interconnectedness (and interdependence) of things, patterns in relationships, self-organization, entropy, equilibrium, dynamism, complexity, chaos, etc. While potentially interesting, this theoretical frame would have overwhelmed the paper.

nance mechanisms, no overarching goals, policies, or regulations guiding or constraining programs, and no commonly determined decision-making structures or procedures. Boundaries are porous and shifting. Leadership is diffuse and informal, based largely on length of involvement in the field, and, to some extent, self-selected. Different priorities and requirements are stipulated by numerous individual funders and sponsors, often without much attention to what others are requiring (or to the mission of long-standing after-school providers).

In most cities, and in some neighborhoods, there are many kinds and sizes of providers. The largest general categories are private, nonprofit social service agencies (including child care providers), youth-serving organizations (such as Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs), and schools (which sometimes serve as bases for programs run by other community agencies). Parks and recreation departments provide some after-school programming; libraries have begun to sponsor organized programs after school; and churches sponsor some programming and provide sites for programs sponsored by community groups. Surrounding core providers is an assortment of organizations whose mission links them to the after-school field, through provision of volunteers, mentors, tutors, specialists, or other resources in the arts, literacy, athletics, culture, technology, or other substantive domains.

Historically, the majority of after-school programs have been small-scale enterprises, serving anywhere from 10 or 15 to 50 or 60 children daily. (That is changing somewhat with the newer school-based programs, some of which claim to serve hundreds of children daily at specific sites.) Though there are still some drop-in programs to be found, the large majority of after-school programs serve a defined population of children on a more or less daily basis. Providers sometimes operate in dedicated space, sometimes in temporary space, whether in their own buildings or in borrowed or rented space in other institutions, such as schools or churches. Core staff typically have a high school degree and some college credits, work part time, and earn slightly more than minimum wage. In a growing proportion of programs—but still the minority—core staff are supplemented by the volunteers and specialists noted above.

Providing funding or otherwise supporting after-school programs can range from the sole mission to a minor activity for particular stakeholders. In that sense, local after-school systems are reliant on and actually made up of parts of other systems—social services, early childhood care and education, public

schools, parks and recreation, the cultural and arts sectors—that typically are larger, better funded (at least in relative terms), and have their own dynamics and preoccupations. This pattern has a number of consequences. Other systems sponsoring after-school programs may try to bend such programs to their own purposes, as has happened with the public schools. They may apply a licensing and regulatory framework to after-school programs that was really designed for their core services, as has happened with early childhood care. They may assign staff with little background in after-school programming to administer after-school programs, as has happened with some park districts. When these other systems are under stress, their marginal activities—including after-school programs—are particularly vulnerable.

The after-school landscape in some cities is shaped also by large programmatic initiatives, which promote a particular approach, model, or site for after-school programming. Although initiatives bring new resources to a local system and contribute to growth in supply, they tend to be internally preoccupied and often try to create their own reality. Like the larger service systems that sponsor some after-school programming, initiatives often try to bend programs and resource institutions to their own purposes. (Initiatives do eventually begin to turn outward, recognize that they are not working in uncharted territory, and consider where they fit and how they might work with a range of stakeholders, including other initiatives. Often it is late in their funding cycle, as they begin to realize that they cannot sustain themselves without relating to the larger after-school community.)

Most city-level after-school systems lack capacity and mechanisms for citywide planning, priority setting, information collection, and analysis. There is, thus, little systematic information on a range of issues critical to investment in the field: how much money is being spent on after-school programs, how many children participate in which kinds of programs in which neighborhoods, what the central obstacles to participation might be (e.g., money, information, transportation, scheduling), what programs in that city look and feel like, and what training and technical assistance supports are most needed by providers. Lack of information makes it difficult to deploy financial and other resources effectively (regardless of what criteria one might have). Some low-income neighborhoods are well served by after-school programs; others have few or no programs. Some providers are recognized and valued; others are not. Families are sometimes not aware of programs that might suit their children. Many programs needing

resource supports have insufficient information about what might be available, while many resource organizations are unable to reach programs most needing their resources. In most cities, there is no registry of individuals or local groups that can provide training and curriculum support in specific areas.

With respect to resources, both financial and human, the after-school field operates barely above a survival level. A typical program, for instance, has revenues that cover two thirds to three quarters of costs (Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001). Most cities have few (or no) funding sources for resource and support organizations, facilities construction or improvement, professional development, or other quality improvement strategies. There are, moreover, no mechanisms for marshaling and rationalizing the use of existing resources or for agreeing upon how best to allocate new resources. Some revenues are year-to-year, and providers are accustomed to seeking out what funding they can find at a particular moment and adapting to the (often competing) goals and priorities of multiple funders. Providers and resource organizations rationalize funding as best they can, integrating funding from multiple sources with different aims, priorities, and expectations. But the vagaries of funding make it impossible to plan for more than a year at a time and lead programs to grow or shrink, add or subtract elements for no logical reason.

Strengthening After-School Systems

Envisioning a Well-Functioning After-School System

A variety of system-building tasks can be inferred from the typical characteristics of city-level after-school systems. Some are conceptual, many are practical. One basic task, for instance, is to describe (or agree upon the defining features of) the prevailing after-school system in one's city. The other side of that task is to debate and begin fleshing out a vision of what the ideal local after-school system would look and act like. Such a vision would, in my view, have to reflect some balance between bureaucratic attributes and "antibureaucratic" ones. As models, bureaucratic service systems, with their hierarchical structure, centralized control, strict boundaries, elaborate rules and regulations, extensive record-keeping, and emphasis on standardization and economies of scale, address many system development problems, for instance, creating a sense of order, organization, and accountability. At the same time, in system after system, front-line providers' and clients' experience with bureaucracy has been largely

negative.[4] Alternative system-organizing principles emphasize—not surprisingly—decentralization, open boundaries, flexibility, ad hoc networking, smaller-scale service units, ease of access and use, and adaptation to community characteristics and individual needs. Policy makers and funders are usually uneasy with this latter set of principles, yet it is worth considering from the outset rather than at a time of great frustration or crisis.

Mobilizing and Organizing Stakeholders

At a practical level, describing the prevailing system and fleshing out principles to guide system development require the creation of structures or bodies through which individual stakeholders can come together to share information, debate important questions (e.g., what after-school programs should be about and what arguments to use to advocate for after-school programs), identify problems needing attention, engage in joint planning, find areas in which to work together, coordinate activities, and make decisions. In some cities stakeholders may choose to become active politically, for instance, forging a political agenda or developing working relationships with and trying to shape the agendas of mayors, city councils, school boards and school superintendents, prominent business people, and so forth. These new structures or bodies may be viewed as providing a governance function, or, less assertively, may be defined as networks, affinity groups, partnerships, and so forth.

Planning, setting priorities, and creating agendas require information, and another key system-building task is to build capacity to define, collect, and analyze information needed for decision-making. Assuming an effort to strengthen the funding base for after-school programming, it is often just as important to develop mechanisms for thoughtful distribution of funds and monitoring of their use.

Building Program Support Capacity

One central motivating purpose—if not the central purpose—for system-building efforts is to strengthen citywide capacity to support after-school programs in their daily work with children. Supporting and strengthening programs often

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[4] Bureaucratic service systems have been justly criticized for being unresponsive, inflexible, preoccupied with rules and procedures, self-serving, and unable to individualize. Meaningless paperwork, excessive categorizing and labeling, undermining participants' sense of agency, and a lack of collaborative spirit have also been cited as problems.

entails an effort to develop or strengthen training and technical assistance inter-mediaries and the development of strategies to link arts, sports, cultural, or other curricular resource organizations to after-school programs. Other program improvement strategies that may need design and nurturing include licensing, development of program standards, accreditation (linked to standards), work with higher education institutions to develop specialized postsecondary courses and course sequences, development of strategies to reduce staff turn-over, and development of facilities and equipment improvement funds.

Building a Sense of Community

Some system-building tasks are more subtle, or at least less concrete. These include, for instance, building a sense of community among stakeholders, a belief that they are part of a common enterprise and have a voice in shaping that enterprise. Other tasks include helping potential stakeholders (e.g., higher education institutions, neighborhood groups and organizations, politicians, founda-tions, etc.) understand the field and find a useful role and, as implied earlier, fig-uring out how to relate to and work with overlapping or neighboring service systems, notably child care, education, and parks and recreation. How, for example, will the rules, regulations, and priorities of these systems be meshed with the goals and unique structure of the after-school system? Where might resources be shared or jointly developed?

Table 1 lists the range of system-building tasks faced in most cities.

Stimulating the System-Building Process

In most fields of service, system building occurs in two ways. Fundamentally, it is tied to the broader process of field building, which itself occurs over a long period of time, incrementally and organically. A critical mass of providers is reached; a body of specialized knowledge and methods crystallizes; a profession is declared; providers seek status and recognition (typically through a national organization); a niche in the larger human service environment is sought; pub-lic funding develops; funders seek accountability and greater efficiency (i.e., control); rules, regulations, and other elements of bureaucracy develop; and so forth. Established fields like social services (i.e., child welfare, family services) and education went through these processes beginning in the late 19th century, continuing through the first half of the 20th century. The early childhood care

Table 1: **Key System-Building Tasks in the After-School Field**

- Developing a conceptual model or vision of a local after-school system.
- Strengthening the funding base for after-school programs.
- Developing mechanisms for distributing funding in a coherent, thoughtful, and equitable manner.
- Strengthening capacity to collect and analyze information and to engage in planning and priority-setting.
- Developing governance and decision-making mechanisms that are clear and have the support of stakeholders.
- Formulating a broad, coordinated strategy for supporting and strengthening the quality of after-school programs.
- Supporting the development and functioning of intermediary and resource institutions; developing mechanisms to link them to providers.

- Developing realistic, flexible quality control and financial accountability mechanisms.
- Supporting organizational development for providers (e.g., management, policies and procedures, fund-raising).
- Building a sense of community among stakeholders—a belief that they are part of a common enterprise and have a voice in shaping it.
- Helping potential stakeholders (e.g., higher education institutions, neighborhood groups and organizations, politicians, foundations, etc.) understand the field and find a useful role.
- Figuring out how to relate to and work with overlapping or neighboring service systems, notably, child care, education, and parks and recreation, as well as with the diverse cultural and arts sector.

and education field, first cousin to after-school programming, began organizing at an accelerated pace in the mid-1980s and, though much further along than the after-school field, continues to struggle with many important tasks.

Although after-school programs have been part of the human service landscape for well over a century, for most of that time they operated at such a modest level that field-building processes were barely stimulated.[5] A clearly defined profession never developed; relevant theory, child development knowledge, and methods were never elaborated; funding remained inadequate and erratic; governance and control mechanisms never emerged. Since the mid-1970s, some after-school programs have been implicitly "governed" by the fact of receiving public child care funding, which requires them to meet child care licensing standards. United Ways have historically imposed reporting requirements, intended, ostensibly, to assure quality control (but in practice leading mostly to a kind of numbers shell game). Tentative efforts have begun in a handful of cities, including Boston and Kansas City, to professionalize the field, engaging higher education, improving compensation, and elaborating career paths. Yet after-school

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[5] For a history of the after-school field, see Halpern, 2003.

programs have seemed—and still appear to many as—an expression of community rather than an identifiable part of the human service system.

Over the past decade, as societal interest in after-school programs has increased, field-building processes have accelerated modestly. There is still no recognized after-school profession, and no specific credentials are required to work in an after-school program. Virtually anyone can be hired as a front-line provider, in many agencies without even a criminal background check. There are, nonetheless, a growing variety of community college courses available, and a handful of certificate programs. Large youth-serving organizations (and a handful of large-scale initiatives) have also begun to elaborate their own internal training programs. There remains only modest agreement about the purposes of after-school programs. Yet (in seeming contradiction) there appears to be growing consensus about the types and qualities of experiences children should have in the after-school hours. There are a growing assortment of curricula and resource materials that give substance to after-school work. And since the mid-1990s, there have been a number of efforts to develop and promulgate standards for the field (or for particular local after-school systems), the most notable of which are the NSACA (National School-Age Care Alliance) standards. There remain few signs of bureaucracy or centralized control in the after-school field. Yet as funding has increased, so has funders' desire to control and monitor use of that funding; assure compliance with promises, rules, and regulations; and, in some cases, impose a particular vision.

Deliberate System-Building Efforts

The distinctions between organic and deliberate system building in the after-school field are not straightforward. Almost any investment can be seen to strengthen a local after-school system. When a large youth-serving organization such as the Boys and Girls Clubs or the YMCA develops a quality assurance mechanism or starts a new curricular initiative, these often affect numerous local programs. When a "capacity building" intermediary, like PASE (Partnership for After School Education) in New York City or School's Out Consortium in Seattle, holds a conference, runs a training workshop, provides technical assistance to a provider, or helps disseminate a particular set of curricular materials, those activities are contributing to the strength of the after-school system, even if in small measure and whether or not they are conceived as system build-

ing. When a grant is given to a local child care resource and referral agency to strengthen its capacity to generate data on school-age care, or to a local arts organization to strengthen its capacity to work with after-school programs, those investments, too, are system building. Even direct service funding, such as child care subsidies, leads to strengthening such program-level functions as management or information collection and, in that light, add a modicum of strength to the system as a whole.

At the same time, there have been numerous efforts in recent years to address deliberately one or more system-building tasks in the field. Some have been initiated by private funders such as foundations or United Way, others by mayors, others by key local or national intermediary organizations, still others by the sponsors of key models. These efforts have varied along a number of dimensions: how many system-building tasks a particular initiative has tried to address at once; how many and which kinds of providers an initiative has included; how many and which kinds of stakeholders have had a voice in shaping and governing an initiative; the extent to which an initiative has sought to take the lead or even take over system building within the boundaries of a city; and the extent to which system building has been a central aim or a corollary one.

Because system-building tasks are interdependent, system building should (at least in theory) be most effective when it involves orchestrated work on a number of fronts at once. It is, for instance, easier to convince potential funders to make investments in the local after-school system when good data exist to guide those investments and when the local after-school community has debated and agreed upon where investment is most needed. That in turn requires identifiable convening structures and an active planning and priority-setting process. It is, once again, easier to design a citywide professional development strategy when structures for convening relevant stakeholders on neutral ground already exist and are functioning and trusted. Efforts to build supply require simultaneous attention to issues of accessibility, affordability, and quality, as well as sustainability. Supporting one kind of program improvement strategy, for example, promoting standards, is more useful if there is also an ongoing effort to strengthen capacity to provide training and technical assistance, or if standards are tied to funding.

Most system-building effort has, nonetheless, focused on specific tasks, for instance, convening stakeholders, developing networks or affinity groups, developing a more coordinated financing strategy, collecting information on the

amount and location of after-school provision, developing or better organizing training and technical assistance resources, strengthening a city's professional development activities, and developing support networks among providers. Participants in such activities may or may not see their work in the context of a larger agenda and may not even describe what they are doing as system building. The following illustrate the range and varied ambitions of discrete efforts under way around the country:

- In the Kansas City area, Partnership for Children, a local child advocacy agency, took the lead to create and convene an Out-of-School Time Collaborative, made up of all kinds of institutions—public and private providers, funders, higher education, police and sheriff's departments, community groups, and so forth. The collaborative has been working to create a comprehensive plan for strengthening the regional after-school system.
- Sacramento County in California has developed a Youth Services Provider Network, sponsored by both public agencies and local foundations, through which providers meet every few months for a half-day to share information on resources and discuss key conceptual and implementation issues. The network members have reportedly begun to develop a set of common principles for after-school work and to develop an agenda that would allow them to advocate for greater funding.
- In Boston, 14 funders have joined to create the After-School for All Partnership.[6] The funders have collectively committed $24 million to be used over a 5-year period to pursue common goals and undertake selected collaborative activities, while retaining their own "initiatives and investment options." They have created an executive committee and three major working groups, organized around the three major goals of the partnership—learning, expansion, and sustainable financing. Smaller working groups are assembled to work on specific initiatives. These groups and the partnership as a whole are staffed by two people housed at the United Way.
- In San Diego, the city's Community and Economic Development Department has assumed responsibility for fiscal management and monitoring of funding for a citywide after-school program in the schools. This includes developing and monitoring contracts with community-based agencies that run programs

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[6] This group includes the city of Boston, the United Way, the Boston Foundation, Harvard University, a number of corporate foundations, and an organization called Massachusetts 2020.

in the schools, monitoring program compliance (through program reports and site visits), auditing, and so forth.

• In a handful of cities, including Boston, Detroit, and Seattle, the mayor's office has created an office or initiative that plays some convening role and is designed to further particular system-building aims. For example, an initiative in Columbus, Ohio, promoted a locally developed set of standards for after-school programs. Mayors have the prestige and influence to heighten awareness of after-school issues and to bring stakeholders together—especially various municipal agencies—who might otherwise pursue their own priorities. That same prestige and influence can be helpful in addressing systemic problems. Boston's initiative, called Boston 2:00-to-6:00, has worked to create new programming by making it easier for community-based organizations to run after-school programs in schools.

A Growing Role for Intermediaries in System building

Local capacity-building intermediaries play a distinct role in a handful of cities and are beginning to focus more explicitly on system building. Examples include PASE (Partnership for After-School Education) in New York City, School's Out Consortium in Seattle, and the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD) in San Francisco. Intermediaries run conferences, sponsor forums, provide training workshops and institutes, provide technical assistance to individual programs, serve as resource centers, develop directories of providers and resource organizations, gather data useful to their own and others' planning[7], serve as information hubs, and undertake advocacy.

Intermediaries sometimes serve convening functions, as well. For instance, CNYD has been gathering basic data on the status of the local after-school system (e.g., on supply, funding, and related indicators) and will be using that data as a basis for convening and fostering dialog on systems issues among private and public sector stakeholders. PASE in New York City actually views itself as "a consortium of . . . youth-serving organizations." It relies heavily on member organizations (as well as independent contractors) to staff the training, techni-

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[7] PASE has worked with the community mapping project of the local Public Interest Research Group to map the location of after-school programs throughout the five boroughs, classifying programs as arts, literacy, multiservice, youth leadership, or "other." The resulting citywide and borough-specific maps made dramatically clear the neighborhoods in which programs were highly concentrated, well distributed, or lacking. They also created a picture of the (im)balance in different concentrations among programs.

cal assistance, mentoring, and other activities that it designs and sponsors. It develops networks and affinity groups that are meant to develop their own agendas and take on a life of their own (while remaining under the PASE umbrella). PASE's work is guided by a program council, made up of the directors of well-regarded programs and agencies, that addresses issues internal to its own activities and affecting New York City's larger after-school system.

The activities of intermediaries appear to reduce the sense of isolation among providers, create and strengthen ties among stakeholders, and help give definition to the local after-school system. A directory of providers and resource organizations, for instance, has an important defining value, creating a coherence and aggregate identity for a large number of diverse organizations. Intermediaries are often perceived as honest brokers and, from that perspective, are effective agents for convening stakeholders around important issues and challenges. At the same time, the program- and organizational-level capacity-building tasks in the after-school field are so great that they can easily consume—and perhaps should consume—the energy of intermediary staff. Moreover, intermediaries sometimes struggle to figure out whose and which interests they are supposed to be promoting (and responding to).

The Promotion of Specific Models
The promotion of particular models or approaches to after-school provision often entails work on a range of system-building tasks and can effectively create a minisystem within a city's larger one. New York City's TASC (the After-School Corporation), in which an umbrella organization has been created that contracts with community-based agencies and specialized organizations to provide after-school programming in schools, is paradigmatic. It includes such system-building features as strategic planning, raising funds and managing their distribution through a request-for-proposal (RFP) process, development of internal training and technical assistance capacity, mechanisms to link after-school sites to external resources, and collection and analyses of data for quality control/accountability purposes. LA's Best, a citywide program working in more than 100 schools in Los Angeles, has also developed a number of these systemlike attributes. It has an infrastructure that includes separate divisions for governance and operations. Functions of the former include fund-raising, advocacy, coordination with other initiatives, and development of various "partnerships." The operations division does grants management, data collection, qual-

ity control, training, and technical assistance, the last two through "activities consultants," traveling supervisors (one per every five schools), and external training partners.

Both TASC and LA's Best have also been distinctive in the attention their leaders have paid to the political dimensions of the system-building process. That leadership has worked hard to cultivate strong relationships with elected officials, school leaders, the business community, and other citywide elites. These relationships have had both benefits and some costs. For instance, preexisting relationships have been critical in times of fiscal stress. They have been helpful in getting stubborn problems addressed, for example, opening up school facilities to community-based organizations. At the same time, such relationships have required a high degree of responsiveness to external agendas.

Specific program models like New York City's Beacons Initiative (which has now been disseminated to other cities, most notably San Francisco) also have had to address system building as they have grown. Like TASC and LA's Best, the organizations promoting the Beacons in each city (e.g., the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York and, until recently, CNYD in San Francisco) have had to help foster and manage relationships between schools and community-based organizations, develop quality assurance mechanisms, develop capacity to do site-level training and technical assistance, develop mechanisms to rationalize funding from numerous funders, bring stakeholders together to plan, and so forth.

In general, system building through promotion of a specific approach or model has strengths and limitations. It stimulates new resources for the local after-school system as a whole and may provide a new funding source for community-based organizations and intermediaries. It creates a locus or "center" for cross-program functions. It creates a recognizable "brand" that may be easier to sell to some potential funders and site-level hosts, and it may raise the general visibility of after-school programming. It creates a standardized framework for minimal quality standards. Having a program model with defined requirements and components makes new program development somewhat more straightforward.

At the same time, model-specific initiatives tend to be only moderately inclusive. Providers and resource organizations that are not grantees, and therefore do not benefit from an initiative's efforts, may feel little or no investment in its success. The leaders of such initiatives (sometimes including funders) are, naturally, committed primarily to growing the particular initiative or model. Even

when leaders are committed to the goal of strengthening the overall after-school field, they are usually preoccupied with the need to constantly raise large amounts of money for their own initiative and with the challenge of maintaining quality while "going to scale." The immediate demands of managing direct services—developing and reviewing RFPs, monitoring grantee compliance and performance, organizing training, working with struggling grantees to improve services, and so forth—consume enormous time, energy, and attention, distracting initiative leadership from longer-term tasks.

Case Studies in System Building: MOST and Baltimore's After-School Strategy

As implied earlier, there have been only a few multifaceted (or integrative) system-building efforts in the after-school field, and those few have faced major constraints. On the following pages I describe two initiatives, one ended, one ongoing, that can be said to fit this category, although both are still only partial in scope, if not ambition. Funding for both was extremely modest. Key stakeholders remained on the sidelines. Key tasks remained in gestation.

MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School-Time)

In 1995, the Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund (WRDF) launched a three-city (Boston, Chicago, and Seattle) after-school initiative that would demonstrate both the possibilities of and constraints to system building in the after-school field. The fund's conceptual partner in this initiative was the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST, known at the time as the Wellesley School-Age Child Care Project). The goals of MOST were to contribute to the supply, accessibility, affordability, and quality of after-school programs, especially for low-income children, and to strengthen the overall coherence of the after-school system in each of the three cities. The fund's and NIOST's conception of after-school programs as a city-level system was a breakthrough for the field. This would be the first time anyone had asked how the pieces of the after-school system were working together and how different pieces might be better linked to lead to richer experiences for children.

MOST was launched in each city with a yearlong planning exercise involving a wide cross section of stakeholders. Participants created an action plan that would guide an initial 3-year implementation phase. The fund provided $1.4

million over the 3 years to each participating city, of which $200,000 was designated for facilities improvements. The cities combined their WRDF grants with matching public and private dollars leveraged with those grant funds. In each city, MOST funds were channeled to community foundations, which then contracted with a lead agency (or agencies).[8]

The lead organizations in each city oversaw a multifaceted implementation strategy derived from the original plan, and priorities were set anew each year. This strategy involved two sets of activities. The first was to create reasons, opportunities, and structures to bring stakeholders in the after-school program system together—to share information, coordinate activities, forge new links, do joint planning—and generally to develop citywide strategies for addressing the challenges facing after-school programs as a collective. The second set of activities, focused directly on the goals of supply, affordability, accessibility, and quality, involved provision of funds directly to after-school providers (to increase "slots," open new sites, provide subsidies to families and address other accessibility issues, improve facilities, support a variety of program improvement activities, add new program elements, etc.) and to resource organizations (to provide training, technical assistance, curricular resources, specialized instructors, information and referral, etc.). Table 2 summarizes the wide range of strategies implemented in one or more of the cities during the first 3 years of the initiative.[9]

In the service of having MOST become an after-school convener in each city, the lead agencies created two sets of collaborative structures: some kind of governance or oversight group and some number of domain-specific working groups or committees. The former tended to be responsible for reviewing and refining the original strategic plans, identifying emergent needs, and setting priorities each year. The latter, sometimes led by one or more members of the oversight group, were responsible for planning in their respective areas (e.g., supply-building, affordability, new program development, curriculum, professional

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[8] The lead agencies were Parents United for Child Care in Boston; the Day Care Action Council in Chicago; and a collaborative of four organizations—School's Out Consortium, Child Care Resources, the Human Services Department, and Seattle Central Community College—in Seattle.

[9] Although I lack the space here to discuss MOST efforts focused directly on supply-building and program improvement, MOST yielded many valuable lessons regarding these two tasks. A detailed description and analysis of MOST strategies and the lessons learned from them can be found in Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb (2001), and, more briefly, in Halpern (2003).

development, inclusion, resource development, etc.) and, in some cases, for deciding about distribution of funds. Membership in both types of groups was voluntary and consisted of varying combinations of providers, staff from resource and support organizations, staff from licensing agencies, other city agency officials, community leaders, parents, and others. MOST lead agency personnel "staffed" many of the committees formed.

Table 2: **Summary of MOST Strategies**

Building supply and improving access

- Funding the start-up of new programs, focused largely on underserved neighborhoods and/or underserved populations, an providing technical assistance to those programs for a minimum of a year
- Funding the creation of satellite sites for existing programs
- Partially or fully subsidizing new slots in existing programs
- Providing funds to make existing slots more affordable
- Providing grants to allow programs to hire more staff
- Funding facilities improvements that would increase capacity
- Preparing programs and their staff to be able to serve disabled children (thus increasing access to after-school programs for those children)
- Collecting information on and addressing transportation-related obstacles to access
- Public education efforts to raise awareness of the need for more after-school programs
- Developing and disseminating information for parents on the availability and location of programs
- Generating information on the distribution of existing programs and supply, for planning purposes

Program improvement

Investing in facilities, equipment and materials:
- Funding facilities and equipment improvements (e.g., rehabilitation or reorganizing existing space, building new space, fixing up a playground, refurbishing gym floors, purchasing gym equipment, purchasing air conditioners, upgrading wiring, etc.)
- Providing grants for the purchase of curricular and learning materials (e.g., science packets or books or art supplies, camera equipment or computer software)
- Supporting technical assistance on facilities- and space use-related issues (e.g., help from an architect or space design planner)

Investing in individual program staff:
- Supporting the creation of post-secondary courses, and trying to encourage higher education institutions to develop specialties in after-school programming
- Subsidizing tuition for post-secondary courses
- Sponsoring conferences, workshops, and training events
- Support for mentoring of new staff by experienced staff
- Funding on-site training on specific topics
- Supporting the development of standards or competencies for staff (including development of school-age certificates)
- Supporting efforts to develop career lattices or pathways

In addition to forging governance committees, MOST created a variety of new venues whose immediate purposes varied (from training to information-sharing to addressing particular problems, such as transportation or inclusion) but whose larger effect was to thicken the web of connections among stakeholders. These venues included directors' roundtables, 1-day conferences, training workshops focused on specific issues (e.g., creating a balanced schedule, group man-

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Program improvement continued

Investing in/working with programs as a whole:
- Promoting "quality" standards, and funding programs to undertake structured self-assessment guided by those standards (set by and linked to an accreditation system sponsored by the National School-Age Care Alliance)
- Supporting long-term and short-term technical assistance, focused on programs as a whole or on particular issues (e.g., inclusion, classroom design), sometimes linked to grants for other purposes (e.g., program start-up grants)
- Providing grants to start new program components or activities (e.g., a choir or photography club)
- Developing mechanisms and providing funds for linking "curricular" resource organizations (e.g., in arts, sports, culture) and after-school programs, or providing funds for them to manage their own RFP process
- Helping link organizations that provide volunteers to after-school programs
- Developing resource libraries
- Creating mutual support networks among after-school programs, and support for collaborative efforts between programs

System building

- Bringing together different stakeholders in the after-school system, in committees and working groups, for joint planning, priority-setting, and information sharing
- Nurturing leadership within the after-school community, by involving a variety of people and organizations in the governance and implementation of MOST
- Working to expand stakeholders' understanding of the diversity of the after-school system
- Facilitating the creation of new working relationships, collaborations, and networks
- Encouraging public institutions to support school-age care
- Broadening the funding base for school-age care
- Engaging in public education and advocacy
- Using MOST funds to leverage other resources for supply-building, improving access, and program improvement

agement, arts programming, active indoor games), and neighborhood-level provider networks. When practicable, meeting sites were rotated among programs within a neighborhood or across neighborhoods, giving staff a first-hand sense of other programs in their community. Many kinds of MOST activities in fact served the dual function of addressing immediate needs—for example, helping link arts specialists to front-line providers, addressing transportation issues, and helping programs develop plans for facilities improvements—while simultaneously creating new links among stakeholders that would help with longer-term tasks.

Lessons from the MOST Initiative. Although MOST would continue for a second 3-year period, a number of lessons about system building emerged from the first 3 years' efforts (see Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001).[10] To start with, MOST demonstrated a hunger among stakeholders within the after-school field for opportunities to come together, share, learn, debate, and, not least, experience some external validation for their mission and efforts. Ongoing planning for MOST and, as time passed, joint concerns about survival of new services and other activities brought together local leaders and representatives of different segments of the system on a sustained basis. The regularity and long tenure of these committees allowed for the gradual building of relationships and mutual understanding. The likelihood of coordinated action increased. The head of child care and school-age care programs for the Chicago Housing Authority told the author and his colleagues that her role on the MOST governance committee was helpful because "I know we're going to see each other once a month, that alone. Do you know what it would take just to coordinate the effort to bring us [program and agency heads] in proximity to each other?"[11]

The debates within MOST committees about whom to target and fund gradually broadened stakeholders' perspectives on who belonged in the after-school field. MOST also brought new voices into the local after-school debate. In Seattle, for instance, where key figures from the public and private sectors already worked together closely, concerns centered around increasing the involvement of underserved and underrepresented communities in decision-

[10] The Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund chose not to continue evaluating the initiative after the first 3-year period.

[11] Comments of MOST participants taken from MOST field notes.

making about after-school resources. Seattle MOST strove to give underserved communities a voice in after-school system governance, in part by including representatives of these communities in its principal governance body, the Community Oversight Group.

Because decision-making structures with some legitimacy were already in place, relationships among key stakeholders already existed, and information about providers and their support needs was available, the after-school community was able to respond quickly and effectively to opportunities (and threats). For example, in Chicago the Park District was overhauling its approach to after-school programming during the first phase of MOST. Working through the MOST staff development committee and lead agency staff, the Park District was persuaded to link its own initiative to a number of MOST activities, particularly training. In Seattle, the MOST oversight committee was enlisted to help shape proposals for use of funds generated by the Families and Education Levy, a special tax whose revenue was devoted to children's services and that was up for voter renewal.

In spite of the need to start from scratch in creating both a clear identity and a measure of legitimacy, MOST itself came to be recognized as an honest broker. Planning, priority-setting, decision-making about use of funds, and other governance activities were genuinely collaborative, and efforts were made to reach and involve as many stakeholders as possible. Stakeholders reported that distribution of resources was reasonably rational and equitable, within the purview of the resources MOST controlled. Participation in MOST helped some stakeholders feel less isolated, others to become more aware of the service and support needs of particular groups of children or particular communities, and still others to develop a broader vision of who and what belonged to the after-school system. Providers became aware of new resources for their work. New working relationships emerged in each city, sometimes through the committees, sometimes brokered by the lead agency, sometimes stimulated by MOST grants (e.g., a series of grants to link curricular intermediaries to programs). MOST helped very different kinds of organizations develop partnerships that would have been unlikely in the natural course of events, for example, a local park district office and an ethnic self-help organization.

The limitations of the MOST Initiative were due partly to its limited size and leverage, partly to the structure of the field itself, and partly to strategy.

Although the relatively flexible resources provided by the Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund were helpful to a resource-starved field, they proved too modest either to alter the priorities and behavior of many key stakeholders or to seriously support the program improvement strategies that emerged. Some major providers and key resource and support organizations in each city remained at the margins of the initiative, for different reasons. Getting large public (and, to a lesser extent, private) organizations to see themselves as part of an external enterprise proved a slow process. Large providers sometimes had an "inward" focus, acting by their own distinct logic and tending to view themselves as unique. A large provider such as the YMCA might prefer to go to a funder as itself, rather than as part of a large, diffuse initiative. Both large and smaller providers recognized the need for greater coordination, yet also expressed some concern about loss of control and about the potential for "oversight" by some (e.g., community representatives) who did not understand the after-school field. They were also worried that new policies and standards would not be accompanied by the resources to make them achievable.

MOST also developed varying relationships with resource and support organizations—some excellent, others more tension-filled. MOST was in part a new resource and support organization itself, and this led to a degree of wariness among some existing organizations, such as Child Care Resource and Referral agencies. One source of confusion was whether MOST was a direct provider of support—whether, for example, its role was to sponsor training and/or professional development and to serve as a resource center for curriculum materials, or whether it should facilitate such activities. In fact, MOST played both kinds of roles.

The hedged commitment of a few larger providers, the confusion about appropriate roles, and the strained relationships with a handful of intermediaries were symptomatic of a larger problem of identity. MOST lead agency staff and key stakeholders were ambivalent about whether they were better served by promoting MOST as a long-term sponsoring vehicle for system building or by assuming that the goal was to make MOST itself disappear, leaving presumably self-sustaining structures in place. If MOST was the engine for system building, how could it—and why would it—strive to disappear? When MOST went to new foundations to ask for support, what was it asking for? And when MOST's collaborators and partners went to seek funding, what was their responsibility to MOST?

At a practical level, using volunteer committees for system building required a serious commitment of time and energy from lead agency staff. To the range of daily tasks that went with managing a large initiative, they had to add preparing for meetings, following up on decisions made, working with individual committee members, and coordinating among committees. Committee members found that building consensus on a range of issues was time consuming and sometimes exhausting. Executive tasks such as planning, priority-setting, communicating, coordinating, collecting and analyzing information, decision making, and, in some cases, distributing and monitoring the use of new resources proved to be burdensome tasks for volunteers, even when they had the backing of staff. One participant in Seattle's oversight group noted, "We've had a very rich discussion and . . . I think that it is kind of beneficial for us to all be working in that kind of pressure, but people are tired. It's a very exhausting process and way to do business."

Many MOST committees lost energy and participants over time. The excitement and sense of purpose waned, there was less formative work to do, and tasks became more administrative in nature. The MOST coordinator in Seattle explained, "There was lots of good energy around [at the start], but it kind of fell flat . . . there was a division between people who were ready to be more task oriented, get more involved in some sort of project planning, [and those who] were more interested in just doing the big picture of public policy, decision making . . ." Some committees were eventually combined. Decisions that earlier in the initiative were made by the committees later came to be made by lead agency staff, out of necessity. Some who had volunteered their time for 2 or 3 years wondered why new people were not stepping up to relieve the burden of carrying the initiative. It was especially difficult to keep scores of small programs and agencies engaged in broad "system-building" tasks.

A final challenge faced by MOST staff and collaborators was balancing the demands of overseeing MOST's multiple strategies and managing its many specific grants and activities with finding time to think, to sort out what MOST's appropriate role should be and how the work should be done. By the 3rd year of Phase One, lead agencies in all three cities were becoming more strategic and less preoccupied with the minutiae of implementation. They recognized the need to set priorities among the many activities that MOST had promised in its early plans and initiated during the first 2 years. They balanced the difficult tasks of attending to plans and responding to unexpected opportunities and events. And

especially by the 3rd year, MOST staff and collaborators in each city had become aware of the need to take advantage, as best they could, of changes set in motion by other actors and forces.

Baltimore's After-School Strategy

Baltimore's After-School Strategy, still under way, bears similarities to MOST. Like MOST, it has focused principally on improving program quality and building supply, and it has had a system-building spirit and a citywide lens. As with MOST, the After-School Strategy's program improvement and supply-building efforts have themselves strengthened the underpinnings of the local system. At the same time, Baltimore's After-School Strategy has not focused to the same degree on creating and nurturing collaborative governance structures, committees, and working groups. The lead agency has also played a less active role than those in each MOST city. Baltimore's lessons for system building are more indirect, yet also speak to the intertwined nature of system-building tasks.

The After-School Strategy is a component of the Baltimore Safe and Sound Campaign, itself part of Robert Wood Johnson's Urban Health Initiative. Begun in late 1995, this ongoing initiative is intended to improve the health and safety of children (as measured by key indicators of children's well-being) in each of five cities through a broad, collaborative, communitywide effort over an 8-year period. In early 1998, after a 2-year planning phase, Robert Wood Johnson committed $1.2 million to each city for 4 years, with gradually decreasing grants over an additional 4 years. Baltimore's After-School Strategy has been a central component of its efforts under this initiative. (Other components in Baltimore include early childhood family support, literacy, and reduction of gun homicide. Baltimore arrived at these priorities through a "consensus-building" process that included street-corner conversations, community meetings, and a citywide assembly.)[12]

The goals of program improvement and supply-building on a citywide scale almost by definition required stakeholders to consider systemic questions. In

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[12] In Baltimore and, perhaps, in other cities, stakeholders appeared to believe that if enough children and youth were reached with developmentally supportive services, it would be possible to move citywide indicators in such areas as school achievement and high school graduation, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy. As a corollary, if one could demonstrate the human and economic benefits of investments like after-school programming, that would convince business and political leaders to substantially increase financial commitment to such investments (mobilizing public/political will on behalf of children), in part or whole by forcing big public systems to shift existing resources from the "back end" to the "front end."

addition to defining what these two goals actually meant, Baltimore stakeholders had to consider what program improvement strategies to adopt, which providers to include, what infrastructure existed and what might need to be created, how to make key policy and implementation decisions, and how to develop the information needed to make decisions. The strategy's goals also required concerted effort to increase the local funding base for after-school programming, along with development of criteria and mechanisms for distributing new funding, both important system-building tasks.[13]

Safe and Sound chose not to concentrate on development of formal after-school governance mechanisms early in the initiative. Its staff assumed that leadership and governance would emerge and coalesce over time. In lieu of a governance group, Safe and Sound constituted an "ad hoc" after-school strategy team, composed largely of senior-level staff from local funders, service providers, and one external leader in the field (whose role was to link the team's efforts to the larger body of work in the field). Over a 6-month period, the team elaborated an action plan that included developing local standards for after-school programs; directly funding a wide array of programs and requiring them to work toward achieving standards as a condition of (continued) funding; developing an initiative (later called the A-Teams) to provide skilled instruction and apprenticeship in arts, sports, and academics in both generic after-school programs and in separate settings; and establishing a new training, technical assistance, and network-building intermediary (later known as TASI, or the After-School Institute).

An approach to building supply was also fleshed out, focused both on creating new slots and on more fully utilizing existing ones. Funding for new slots would be directed to neighborhoods where the need was greatest, based on analysis of the amount and distribution of existing supply and on indicators of child risk and well-being in different neighborhoods. Baltimore's after-school programs were seen to have a long-standing problem with underutilization of existing program capacity, due to underenrollment, dropping out, and erratic

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[13] In order to support program improvement efforts and build new supply, Safe and Sound pursued an aggressive fund-raising strategy, and over a 4-year period managed to secure some $25 million in new funding. Private funds were raised from the Open Society Institute of Baltimore, the Baltimore Community Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation; public funding was secured from surplus TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), the Baltimore Department of Social Services, the mayor's office, the Police Athletic League, and a state program called the Maryland After-School Opportunity Fund.

attendance. Improving program quality would be one key to addressing this problem. Establishing a data collection and management capacity capable of clarifying existing capacity (i.e., holding aside new funding, how many children existing programs should be able to serve), determining the extent of underutilization, and, eventually, monitoring attendance would also help address it.

The Family League of Baltimore, one of 24 local management boards statewide, was recruited to serve as the operational arm of the strategy. These boards were created by the state legislature in the early 1990s to help stimulate human service reform and rationalize the human service system (child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, welfare) by bringing public agencies together to plan, set common goals, and better coordinate their activities. (They are also allocated a certain number of public dollars for these functions and have periodically been used as the funding vehicle for innovative grants programs.) Although after-school programming was a new area of involvement for the league, its experience with contract management made it a logical choice for overseeing distribution of money raised from different funding streams. The Family League worked closely with Safe and Sound to develop a plan to assure coherent use of new funds and to design contracts and a contract management system that would further the program improvement and supply-building goals of the After-School Strategy. It has also served as the design base and clearing-house for data collection and analysis.

The implementation of standards was, in many respects, placed at the center of Baltimore's program improvement efforts. An informal standards work group fleshed out two sets of standards, the first largely reflecting NSACA's framework and the second, a new set of substantive standards.[14] The work group also developed accompanying indicators that a standard had been met and a workbook to guide self-assessment. Using standards as a program improvement lever required consideration of a variety of issues with systems implications—how to assess where programs stood at the outset, what help programs would need in order to make progress in achieving standards, whether

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[14] Organizational standards focus on human relationships; indoor environments; outdoor environments; safety, health, and nutrition; and administration. Program standards are divided into two sections: activities and program areas. Activities standards cover daily schedule structure, opportunities for youth choice, organizational integrity, and material supports. Program standards are divided into six subtopics: cognitive development, recreation, workforce development, artistic development, civic development, and open time.

expectations of progress and achievement would be the same for all programs or individualized, how much progress programs would have to demonstrate each year, how to measure progress, what the consequences would be for lack of progress, and how to mesh the standards with requirements of various funders and the internal policies of different provider organizations.

A subgroup of the After-School Strategy team fleshed out the implementation approach to the use of standards and to improving utilization. The group initially decided that programs funded under the strategy would be required to fully achieve the Baltimore standards within 3 years (a decision that was later modified). Funding would be set aside, or designated, for program improvement efforts and would also be tied to progress on program improvement (as well as to compliance with other contractual commitments made, for example, with respect to attendance). Each year, programs would assess themselves as to where they stood in meeting standards. In the contracts that they signed with the Family League, they would indicate which standards they would focus on in the forthcoming year and how much it would cost to do so. Periodic reports during each contract period would indicate progress and problems. Funded programs also had to commit contractually to enroll a predefined number of children and maintain a predefined attendance rate, as well as to participate in a management information system that focused on attendance reporting. They would also have to make a contractual commitment not to use new funds to replace existing ones; in effect, they had to create new "slots."

During the first 3 years of implementation, some 50 provider organizations with 90 after-school program sites were funded within this framework, through one of four funding streams, and for periods of between 1 and 3 years. (This diverse group of sponsors is responsible for slightly more than a third of all after-school programs in Baltimore.) Safe and Sound and the Family League jointly prepared RFPs and oversaw proposal reviews. The Family League oversaw contract management and monitored compliance and progress. A team of four contract managers, one per funding stream, attended to the unique requirements of each funder while assuring a common approach toward program improvement and supply-building across funding streams.

The A-Teams initiative supplemented the larger effort to require programs to work toward and achieve standards. The Baltimore Community Foundation provided $2.5 million over 3 funding cycles to 30 agencies to offer enrichment in arts, athletics, or academics (thus, the *A*) at their own sites or at those of other

ongoing after-school programs. Grant funds had to be used to serve middle-school children residing in Baltimore's "highest risk" neighborhoods. The projects developed by A-Team sponsors were designed to meet at least three times a week for 8 weeks. Instructors had to be certified in some appropriate manner to be skilled in the domains in which they were working. And children served had to be provided "regular opportunities to practice, master and publicly demonstrate" their new skills.

Finally, the newly created After-School Institute provided support to after-school programs in their own improvement efforts. (Modest support might be a more accurate description because, in addition to a director and office manager, TASI had only two full-time staff members to work with the 90 funded program sites, as well as almost twice that number of nonfunded ones.) TASI carried out its capacity-building work through four mechanisms, open to and largely free of charge for all after-school programs in Baltimore. These were monthly "network meetings" (which funded providers were required to attend), periodic training events and workshops, short-term technical assistance to individual programs, and informational resources. Network meetings typically had a central topic, such as staff turnover or use of volunteers, selected by an informal "program committee." They also included time for smaller discussion groups and announcements. Training events likewise were thematic, focusing on such topics as infusing literacy into after-school programs, advancing youth development, and preventing adolescent pregnancy. Technical assistance, provided mostly at the request of individual programs, was brief and catch-as-catch-can.

Emergent lessons. Although Baltimore's After-School Strategy is ongoing, it has already yielded a number of valuable lessons. For one thing, with funding as leverage, it is possible to develop and secure buy-in to a citywide program improvement strategy. Using the Family League as a base to forge a coherent, coordinated approach to managing different funding streams was important to the linkage of funding and program improvement effort, guided by standards. Baltimore has also been distinct in its emphasis on data as a basis for making funding decisions and monitoring the effects of those decisions. Less progress has been made in developing a broad strategic vision of the after-school system as a whole and in nurturing effective leadership and governance mechanisms for that system.

Linking a new grant-making initiative to a defined set of standards, tying standards to an active contract management process, and setting aside funding

for efforts to achieve standards have presented both predictable and unpredictable challenges. The time frame imagined for programs to achieve standards was unrealistic. Program improvement is an inherently slow, uncertain process in the after-school field. In Baltimore, an inclusive funding strategy required that the standards be interpreted for a diverse group of programs, from small and fragile single-site providers operating barely above survival level, to youth-serving organizations with their own quality frameworks, to local sites of large bureaucracies, which sometimes had to be kept as part of the initiative for political reasons. The program improvement challenge was heightened by the social and institutional context in which many programs operated—large numbers of very vulnerable children and families, difficult neighborhood conditions, long-term disinvestment in many neighborhood institutions, and so forth. These conditions complicated after-school programs' daily work and, ironically, tend to dilute the impact of new resources.[15]

Baltimore's supply-building strategy and efforts have met with mixed success. Improving utilization—especially attendance—proved just as slow and stubborn a problem as improving quality. Seasonal factors (early darkness, weather), flux in children's lives, reluctance to work with more vulnerable children, lack of resources to follow up on enrolled children who have not been coming, and other factors create a complex causal story. The idea that better quality programs would attract and hold more children may or may not be simplistic but has, at any rate, been held hostage to the slow pace of program improvement. While some programs were able to assure that After-School Strategy funding did not replace existing funding, many others were not. As has long been customary—and necessary—programs used the new funding to replace lost funding from other sources.

Finally, Safe and Sound's neglect of the task of nurturing a governance group left something of a leadership vacuum for the After-School Strategy. After the ad hoc strategy team disbanded, there were no forums for providers, resource organizations, community leaders, regulators, funders, and other stakeholders

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[15] In addition, few programs, other than the handful that served as A-Team sites, have had the wherewithal to develop strong components in the arts or sports—their staff simply did not have the specialized expertise and experience necessary for teaching in these areas. And although the A-Team strategy of supporting cultural, arts, and sports organizations to bring specialists into programs made infinite sense, it too was undermined by the minimal level of functioning of some after-school providers, which could not or would not help the specialists who showed up at their door.

to come together on a regular basis to build relationships, discuss the challenges facing the after-school community, debate what program improvement strategies were needed and how those should be implemented, talk about money, continue to analyze and shape the strategy, and so forth. The assumption that leadership would emerge organically was not borne out, suggesting that there is no substitute for the kinds of labor intensive processes that characterized MOST.

Conclusion: The Challenge of System Building

Through both organic processes and deliberate initiatives, system building is well under way in the after-school field. In most cities, infrastructure is slowly developing, as is a thickening web of linkages and relationships between providers and resource organizations. There is more convening going on than in the past, somewhat more dialog among stakeholders, more strategic partnerships, and more attention among funders to systemic issues. Basic information on after-school provision has been gathered in a number of cities and is beginning to be digested. At the same time, the system-building activity discussed in this paper points up a range of questions needing sustained conceptual and empirical attention. These pertain to the nature of after-school systems and to system building itself, to the challenges inherent in strengthening provision, and to the questions of how best to conceptualize and elaborate governance structures for local systems and how best to integrate new friends and advocates into the field.

What, for instance, is the measure of a well-functioning system? How many system-building tasks have to be addressed simultaneously, or in what order or priority should they be addressed? What kinds of investments make sense in a field characterized by large numbers of relatively small programs that simultaneously lack adequate resources, are inefficient in using the resources they have, and may lack capacity to absorb new resources, including technical assistance and curricular enrichment? Who can and should take the lead role as convener and agenda setter in system building? And how should an individual, group, or institution for this role be selected? Should planning, priority-setting, and decision-making be broad, collaborative, democratic processes or more closely held ones?

Although I have tried to clarify it in this paper, the very idea of an after-school system remains difficult to bring into focus. The way of looking at and

thinking about after-school systems that I have proposed needs debate, argument, and revision, as does my conceptualization of system-building tasks. Not everyone would agree with me that the heterogeneous, patchwork, and cottage industry–like qualities of the after-school field are as much strengths as limitations. Not everyone would see value in labor intensive, largely voluntary governance structures with little political clout. Some might prefer a single institution as locus for the field, a much clearer definition of the social problem addressed by after-school programs, or a more explicit advocacy agenda.[16]

Some observers have argued that because there is so much to do and so little to do it with, after-school system-building efforts have to be far more strategic than they have been up to the present. That in turn may mean focusing investment on particular types of providers or program models, or particular program improvement strategies. It may imply being more attuned and responsive to shifting policy and funding priorities. Currently, for instance, most politicians and funders view the schools as the logical base for growing the after-school field, and urban children's academic difficulties as the problem to which after-school programs are a logical response. I would argue that it is critical to keep supporting a variety of kinds of institutions in the after-school field, even at the cost of some efficiencies, in part to serve as a counterweight to the hegemony of the schools; in part because smaller, community-based providers are an important part of the fabric of low-income communities; and in part because such providers fill microgaps in provision.[17] I would also argue—and have argued in all of my writing over the years—that viewing after-school work through the lens of children's academic difficulties not only fundamentally

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[16] A student at Brown University recently examined the development of after-school programming in Boston as a political and public issue, to interesting effect. See Restuccia, 2002.

[17] The schools' involvement has heightened an already pressing need for settings in which stakeholders can discuss what low-income children's experiences in after-school programs should be like and what those experiences should be about. In addition to heightening the need for dialog about philosophy, the growing involvement of schools has heightened dilemmas of power and control. Community-based providers have often found that such terms as partnership, collaboration, and "shared accountability" mask a very unequal relationship when it comes to philosophy and goals, rights to space, control (if not supervision) of after-school staff, assuring security, and locus of accountability. Even more worrisome, history is replete with programmatic movements—for example, summer school, vocational guidance, and, more recently, early childhood education—that have started out as partnerships with schools and eventually found themselves coopted.

distorts what after-school programs are about developmentally and socially, but also is, in practical terms, a no-win proposition.

Like program improvement and expansion strategies, governance-related strategies will have to be city-specific. With respect to conveners, for instance, some have felt that community foundations make the most sense; others favor United Ways; still others, mayors' offices. Funders have used their leverage to create all kinds of committees and working groups, some of which have in fact come to work as a kind of local "center" for after-school activities. With respect to decision-making, what seems clear is that given the heterogeneous and loosely coupled nature of a city-level after-school system, no one institution or group can claim authority (or legitimacy) to govern it, in the strict sense of the word. Stakeholders with independent power, whether because they control funds, because after-school work is only a small part of their mission, or because of sheer size, will give up only a measure of autonomy.

Governing the after-school system really means taking a lead role as "sheep-herder," convening a diverse collection of individuals and institutions, seeking areas of common ground where individual clusters of stakeholders can work together, holding stakeholders' attention, mobilizing stakeholders around opportunities and threats, and so forth. (Sometimes a city primarily needs a group or place to bring those involved with various initiatives together, to share what they are doing and try to encourage some coordination.) In part because of power imbalances and in part because individual stakeholders will give up only so much autonomy, governance in the after-school field has to be more or less democratic and consensual in nature.

Specific initiatives have to wrestle with governance issues that parallel the broader ones faced by cities as a whole. In creating governance, planning, and priority-setting bodies, they have to decide whether to engage in a broad, collaborative, democratic process or a more closely held one. That means, in part, deciding what is negotiable and what not. In general, the mission, goals, and assumptions of a particular system-building initiative have to be both clear and partly open to negotiation in order to secure buy-in of stakeholders. This creates a tension, well-illustrated by the Seattle MOST coordinator, who noted that "MOST is a city-wide initiative that anyone can participate in as long as they support the goals we are trying to achieve and the values and approach we have chosen to use" (Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001, p. 215).

System building in the after-school field has been both enriched and complicated in recent years by the presence of new friends and stakeholders from the

corporate and political sectors. These new players usually bring a very different perspective to system building, one that includes a "can do" philosophy and little patience for uncertainty, process, complexity, and nuance. They often bring energy and focus to system building. At the same time, they tend to be unaware that they are entering an arena with a long history; they tend to dismiss the inherently loosely coupled, shifting nature of local after-school systems and the uncertainty of results from particular investments; and they may have a need to be recognized and given credit for what many view as common and cumulative accomplishments.

It is, finally, critical, for those committed to investing in and promoting after-school programs to understand that the field is still near the beginning of what will be a 10- or 15- or 20-year process. This is a field that, though not without strengths, has been undernourished for a long time. It is unquestionably frustrating for an initiative that has contributed new resources to come to feel—as have the funders and leadership of some recent initiatives—that its investment and effort has made barely a dent in the quality and aggregate capacity of local programs. Yet the investments made by such initiatives are filling in the fragile foundation of the field. The MOST and Baltimore initiatives found that even modest investments stimulate programs to strengthen management functions and reflect on the work they are doing with children, effects that may not be obvious to funders. Moreover, current system-building efforts are part of a larger narrative that is well over 100 years old now. It is critical, as well, for proponents to accept the inherent patchwork quality of a field with diffuse boundaries and different kinds of organizations, each having some but not all of the strengths needed to meet children's developmental needs. The after-school field needs a strong enough sense of self to allow it to negotiate the range of external pressures it always experiences.

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After-school programs have long had a diffuse and flexible mission. In each historical era, they have been defined in part by providers' own idiosyncratic visions, in part by broad societal worries about particular groups of children. Over the past decade, one such worry—inadequate academic achievement levels among children from low- and moderate-income families—has stood out and 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.

In this paper I analyze the expectation that after-school programs help boost academic achievement. I argue the urgent need to abandon that expectation, step back, and undertake the basic, grounded research that might yield a more consonant set of expectations and might shed light on the range and size of program effects for children of different dispositions, ages, and life situations and for different types and qualities of programs. I argue that a useful program of research will require a perspective that considers the breadth of developmental tasks of children of different ages and of the tasks after-school programs are best suited to help address; sensitivity to the fact that different children need and want different things from after-school programs; and respect for the diversity of programs in the after-school field.[1]

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[1] I assume—but do not discuss here—the importance of a complementary program of research addressing the questions of how best to support after-school programs in their efforts to provide good developmental experiences for children, and how best to strengthen the field as a whole. In fact, some would argue that the after-school field is not ready for outcome-focused research at all. I believe that research focused on clarifying appropriate expectations will point to the developmental domains to which after-school programs should be attending and will thereby help organize and focus the daily work of programs and their staff.

The arguments in this paper are rooted in a particular ideological position. In my view, after-school programs are best understood and supported as a historically distinct child development institution rather than an extension or element of any other, and as a normative developmental support rather than a vehicle for prevention or remediation of particular social problems. More concretely, after-school programs are well suited to providing the types and qualities of developmental experiences that other institutions (e.g., the schools and public play spaces) can no longer provide for most low- and moderate-income children. These experiences, whether in the arts, humanities, sciences, civics, physical activity, or other domains, include play and sheer fun, exploration, and learning from adults skilled in different domains. They are marked by respect for children's individuality, learning and producing through collaboration and mutual assistance, a measure of choice and control by children, activity that uses all the senses and symbolic systems, and adult feedback that is focused on the learning process and tasks at hand and includes recognition for tasks well done. After-school experiences nurture such capacities and dimensions of self as creativity, aesthetic sense, growing skill in specific domains, self-expression, interpersonal skill, sense of agency and voice, identification with home and community culture, individuality and relatedness, compassion, and physical vitality. It is in domains such as these—there are many more, to be discussed—that we would begin the gradual, difficult process of identifying and developing measures of program effects. And we would engage in this process not to determine if after-school programs deserve public funding, but to clarify what they should be supported in trying to accomplish.

Background

For most of their 125-year history, after-school programs remained a modest institution, at the margins of social provision. They were not unimportant to the children and communities served and, in fact, provided memorable, defining experiences for some of those children (Halpern, 2003a). Men and women involved in after-school provision took their responsibilities seriously and argued seriously about purpose, philosophy, and role in children's lives. But, to the extent that they took notice, elected officials and the public viewed after-school programs as a community institution and a component of local philanthropic efforts. Beginning in the late 1970s, after-school programs benefited modestly from new public subsidies for child care, through Title XX, community

development, and Social Service Block Grants, and later through Child Care and Development Block Grants. Even so, they remained largely outside of national awareness and public debate.

This changed during the 1990s. After-school programs became more widely recognized and promoted, which simultaneously allowed them to compete for additional public resources and required them to fight for a share of such resources. Longstanding providers were caught off guard by the rapid pace of events in their field. Philosophically, they were inclined to continue arguing for after-school programs in broad developmental terms. But they also knew that a meaningful share of scarce resources would not be secured by arguing that low- and moderate-income children deserve the same access to fun, enrichment, and challenge as their more advantaged peers. These traditional providers were nonetheless too diverse, decentralized, and perhaps inexperienced in public advocacy to unite in order to develop the simple, resonant, problem-oriented storyline demanded of a public issue in American life.

Meanwhile, new constituencies were discovering the after-school field and quickly defining it in relation to their own concerns. Most new proponents had little knowledge of the field and its history, nor much inclination to consult the organizations and individuals with years of experience in providing after-school programs. And though delinquency, drug use, and related social problems had brief tenures as defining concerns, most new proponents were preoccupied with one particular issue—the academic achievement gap between more and less advantaged children and among different racial and ethnic groups. During the 1990s, elected officials at all levels of government latched on to this issue and made it a central social problem of American society. Consequently, the overriding argument that emerged for support of after-school programs—in political if not public consciousness—was that they offered potential to boost children's academic achievement. Lip service was given to child care needs and broader developmental aims, but success or effectiveness was defined largely in terms of academic goals.[2]

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[2] One irony here was that when testing pressures forced school systems to reduce time during the school day for arts, physical education, and other activities not deemed to contribute directly to higher test scores, after-school programs, whether school or community based, were implicitly asked to take on the role of providing such non–test-related activities. Funders then turned around and told after-school providers that they would be judged by their effectiveness in contributing to higher test scores, forcing them to consider reducing time devoted to arts, physical activities, etc.

As noted earlier, after-school providers had always been responsive to larger social preoccupations (see Halpern, 2003a). But external pressures in the 1990s were qualitatively different. Public and private funders compelled after-school providers to make promises about academic effects that the providers knew were unrealistic. (One provider called the perceived, continuing need to make unrealistic promises "the big lie.") New public and private initiatives were creating a broader base for after-school programming in the schools, making providers further susceptible to school-related agendas.

The emphasis on academic outcomes has continued in the past half-decade. The 2005 Performance Plan for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the largest federal after-school initiative, requires that local programs demonstrate year-over-year gains in academic achievement for children served (i.e., gains over and above those that children would have made absent participation). Virtually every one of the many new public initiatives in states and cities throughout the country is justified by the need to improve academic achievement. For example, in California's After-School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership Program, local programs will have to be recertified every three years, based on attendance goals and children's progress on standardized tests. Linked to this narrow outcome focus is a growing tendency to view after-school programs through the kind of social engineering lens prominent in the 1960s and 1970s. Funders want to know the optimal timing, intensity, duration, breadth, and target populations for demonstrating effects. Is one year too little? How many kinds of activities per week suffice?[3] Should program slots be "set aside" for high-risk children? Public and private funders seek "promising" or "proven" models to replicate and "outcome-driven" or "results-oriented" organizations and systems.

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[3] The confusion—and confused thinking—surrounding participation is well illustrated by a recent review (Chaput, 2004) that argues for the importance of "breadth" of participation. According to the author, studies suggest that "participation in a variety of out-of-school-time activities, either within a single program or in the course of week, is associated with beneficial youth outcomes . . . youth need to participate in multiple activities within a program to maximize the benefits of participation" (pp. 3, 29). The author ignores, among other things, the exact tendency for after-school programs to involve children superficially in a wide range of short-lived activities; the value of getting into activities or projects in depth; children's frequent preference for doing so, especially as they get older; and the importance of thematic or single-focus programs to the field.

Expectations Translated: The Current State of Evaluation in the After-School Field

Evaluating the effects of social programs is inherently challenging, regardless of the field involved. Common problems include lack of clarity about the theoretical underpinning of a particular program's approach, challenges in conceptualizing and measuring the "treatment" received, uneven implementation, necessary compromises in research design, attrition (or other changes over time) in treatment and comparison groups, and challenges in choosing the right "outcomes" to measure and measuring them adequately. Evaluators can be constrained by the specifications in requests for proposals, by their own lack of knowledge of a particular type of program, or by issues of timing (programs not only need time to mature, but they also evolve even after reaching maturity). Often evaluators must propose a very elaborate plan before gaining first-hand knowledge of the programs they are proposing to evaluate, and then they have little freedom to refine or alter their approach as they learn more about the programs.

Additional challenges arise from the unpredictable interaction of particular developmental settings with each person's unique combination of capacities, vulnerabilities, predispositions, interests, and history: Individuals differ in what they bring to particular settings, how they experience them, and what they get from them. Discrete experiences are integrated into complex, evolving selves in ways that are poorly understood, difficult to parcel out, and hard to measure. The influence of any one developmental setting is commingled with that of other settings. (Indeed, what individuals can do—and how well they are doing—at any point in their lives is multiply determined, by biology, by cumulative experience, and, in the present, by the multiple people and settings of their daily lives.) And, especially for children and adolescents, important effects of any discrete set of experiences may become apparent only over time.[4]

A Distinct Set of Challenges for Evaluators of After-School Programs

Efforts to evaluate after-school programs have been subject to most of the difficulties noted above, expressed in forms that are characteristic of the field. For

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[4] For all the reasons noted above, evidence from widely varying fields suggests that discrete social programs have inherently modest effects. The evidence is surprisingly consistent across such fields as parent support and education, preschool education, compensatory education (Title I), youth employment, and preventive mental health, drug, and delinquency efforts.

example, most front-line providers in after-school programs can state only very generally what they are trying to accomplish and why they do what they do (i.e., the theoretical rationale for a program's overall design, particular use of time, daily and weekly content of activities, staff skills and qualities sought, framework for adult-child relationships, etc.). Providers and programs included in a typical multisite study often vary in mission, focus, emphasis, and structure. The nature and quality of children's experiences in after-school programs are widely variable, even in initiatives with some focus on program quality.[5]

Patterns of participation in specific after-school programs also are often variable, for reasons that are planned and accidental, explainable and not. The wide age range of children participating in a typical program creates a variety of distinct complications. A package of good developmental experiences for a 7- or 8-year-old will be different than that for an 11- or 12-year-old. As children grow older, they tend to participate in particular after-school programs differently, for example, attending only or primarily when there is an activity that interests them. Even within programs, activities for older children are usually different in structure and emphasis than those for younger children.

Although children are affected in different ways and to different degrees by any seemingly common developmental support, this variability may be especially prominent in after-school programs. Experiences during the school day affect children differently, and they want and need different things after school, psychologically, physically, cognitively, and socially. In many after-school programs, children have a measure of choice in the focus and degree of engagement. Children of different ages bring different capacities to shape their own developmental experiences. (Children are better at using resources to their own ends than adults sometimes think they are.) More generally, children's out-of-school lives are complex puzzles, with many pieces; any discrete programmatic experience may be a modest piece of that puzzle.

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[5] Although there is widespread agreement that program quality is a problem in the after-school field, there is less agreement on the exact nature of the problem. Although there are a number of obvious constraints to program quality, including inadequate funding, inadequate staffing (and high levels of staff turnover), lack of intentionality and clarity of purpose, and program isolation, the quality problem is confounded with other issues facing the field. These include lack of agreement about expectations and understandings of what after-school programs should be about (the subject of this paper); the decentralized and heterogeneous nature of the field, with many kinds and sizes of sponsors; and the difficult, resource-starved community contexts in which many of the children served by after-school programs grow up. For a full discussion of the issue of program quality, see Halpern (2003a, chap. 5).

In other words, deciding where, how, when, and even whether to look for program effects is particularly challenging in the after-school field, given so many sources of variability. *One would anticipate that a significant (and illuminating) part of the story told by outcome evaluations in the after-school field would be about the challenges evaluators have faced in figuring out what to measure, how and when to do so, and what design to use to capture so many kinds of variability and "individuality." But that has not been the case.*

Sidetracked by the Wrong Focus

Unlike neighboring fields such as public education and early childhood care and education, the after-school field has a limited history of applied research and evaluation. The 1990s brought some initial research activity by academic researchers and contract evaluators. The first generation of research, strongly developmentally oriented, created promising ground for a longer-term research program. But it was soon sidetracked by the instrumental, and especially the academic, pressure within the after-school field. This pressure strongly influenced the focus of a number of major evaluation studies, compelling contract evaluators to devote inordinate time and energy to a search for academic outcomes. Notable among these are the studies of LA's Best (Huang, 2004); the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Dynarski et al., 2004); the After-School Corporation, or TASC (Welsh, Russell, Williams, Reisner, & White, 2002); and the San Francisco Beacons (Walker & Arbreton, 2004).

Evaluators of major initiatives have chosen not to—or believed they did not have the liberty to—begin their work with a period (at least a year, preferably two) of intensive, qualitative fieldwork aimed at inductively uncovering developmental domains in which program effects appeared to be occurring. (This lack has been especially problematic in initiatives that serve as funding streams rather than as purveyors of a particular program model.) Even when evaluators have been attuned to the broad developmental terrain in which programs were operating, as is the case with the San Francisco Beacons, they focused on the outcomes insisted upon by sponsors and funders (Walker & Arbreton, 2004, pp. 2, 72). In most instances, this has meant adoption of enhanced academic achievement as a central desired outcome and use of standardized tests in reading and math as a primary method of determining whether that outcome has been achieved.

Evaluators generally have been forced to make a virtue of necessity, using tests administered by local public school systems as part of their routine testing at specific grade levels. In other words, they have worked with measures selected for—and data collected for—purposes having nothing to do with the after-school programs they are evaluating. Designs have varied but have mostly been quasi-experimental, using matched comparison groups of various kinds. Analytic strategies have also varied but have tended to use sophisticated statistical techniques to examine whether, in aggregate, changes in program participants' test scores over two or more points in time differed from what would have been expected for those children in the absence of treatment (predicted trajectories) or from actual patterns of change in comparison children, or both.

Findings of after-school program effects on academic achievement (as measured by test scores) have been extremely modest, at best. As has been widely noted, the first two rounds of outcome research for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers found no program-favoring academic effects for samples of elementary- and middle-school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Dynarski et al., 2004). The evaluation of TASC found no effects on reading achievement test scores; there was a negative effect size of .08 on math achievement after one year of participation (.2 is considered a small effect size), a positive effect size of .12 after two years of participation, and a positive effect size of .06 after three years of participation (Welsh et al., 2002, pp. 25, 27). The San Francisco Beacons evaluation found no program effects on grades or academic achievement (Walker & Arbreton, 2004, pp. 75–76, 116–117). Likewise, the LA's Best evaluation found no program effects on academic achievement in English language arts or math (Huang, 2004, pp. 38–44).

There is some evidence in these studies (the 21st Century Community Learning Centers evaluation being an exception) of a relationship between greater participation (regularity, duration) and slightly stronger academic effects. This evidence derives from analytic strategies that are creative but exceedingly complex, loaded with contingencies and assumptions and thus tending to overwhelm the delicate structure of findings. Although it is often very difficult to ascertain how many children are included in which analyses and which findings, there seems to be a pattern of shrinking samples, both in pre-post analyses and in much of the complex statistical modeling performed by evaluators. (Some of this is certainly due to program attrition, some to missing data, and some to a need to fit children to particular profiles and rules, e.g.,

minimum number of days in attendance.) It appears, for example, that analytic requirements shrank sample sizes for some analyses in the TASC evaluation by a factor of 10 or more. It is very difficult to ascertain how particular subgroups of treatment children may have been different than the larger groups from which they are drawn, and how they differed from comparison children. (Comparability is a general problem, regardless. In a secondary review/analysis of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers report, Kane, 2003, p. 9, notes of the middle-school study that "participants and non-participants who were matched to be similar on an initial set of variables were subsequently revealed to be quite different when additional measures from the parent and school data bases became available.")[6]

It is important to note that results of reading and math tests were not the only program effects examined by evaluators in these large, signal studies. Through self-report on participant surveys, plus focus groups and other qualitative methods, evaluators examined such variables as sense of self-efficacy, sensitivity to others' perspectives (Beacons), conflict resolution, cooperating with others, and decision making (LA's Best). Taken as a whole, the qualitative data from these large studies suggest a pattern of modest, mostly positive effects. (But even in these domains, most outcome measures have been preselected, rather

[6] The reports of these studies are full of interesting statements that, although at best are difficult to interpret, raise questions about designs and measures. To cite just a few examples, Huang (2004, p. 19) found that LA's Best participants engaged in basically the same types and amounts of extracurricular activity when they were and when they were not at the program. Huang (p. vii) notes that on a baseline survey, most program participants reported "being able to do well in school and able to finish all their homework on time. They studied hard for tests and always tried to do well in school." (She also notes that program participants "started very high" on self-reported social development, p. vii.) If this is an accurate portrayal, then they appear to be a quite unusual group of inner-city children. Yet LA's Best seems to have been serving a cross section of children, and one would have expected a good deal of variability in most domains. The TASC evaluators report that "students who were active participants in at least one of the years they were enrolled in a TASC after-school project showed significantly greater gains in mathematics test scores after two years of participation, compared to similar non-participants" (Welsh et al., 2002, p. 26). But who would be a "similar non-participant" to children who displayed such a particular, distinctive pattern of TASC participation? In attempting to control (or account) for potentially important unmeasured differences in characteristics between TASC participants and comparison children, the TASC evaluator included "prior-year test scores in the equation for predicting expected gains on test scores and [used] prior year school attendance" (Welsh et al., p. 23). Yet this strategy risked further confounding findings and adding another loop of circularity to what was already a design full of such complications.

than refined from a more open look at children's experiences and conversations with program staff.)

What specifically is problematic about the idea that improved academic achievement is an appropriate outcome for after-school programs and about the subsequent use of standardized achievement tests to assess that outcome? In the first place, academic achievement is a product or consequence of schooling, and after-school programs are neither schools nor extensions of schooling. Regardless of where they happen to be located, after-school programs comprise a distinct child development institution, one with its own history, logic, social role, and place in the broader human service landscape. (Conversely, academic remediation that happens to take place after school—for example, remediation paid for by the supplementary education services funding under the No Child Left Behind Act—is something schools, not after-school programs, do.) In a world in which the concept of "academics" was fundamentally broadened to focus on many dimensions of development and include all kinds of learning experiences, the work of after-school programs might be considered "academic." But that world, if it exists at all, is receding.

Even if a funder or policymaker, understandably preoccupied with the academic achievement gap between groups of children in American society, wanted to focus all possible resources on that problem, after-school programs would be low on any list of solutions. Much higher on the list would be reduction of social and economic inequality, reduction of various forms of segregation (especially housing), improving the quality of housing and health care for low- and moderate-income families, changing the demands on less-skilled workers so parents can be more available to their children, improving the conditions of urban schools (renewing physical plants, reducing overcrowding, reducing class size, strengthening nonclassroom resources, etc.), strengthening instructional processes, and generally making schools more positive teaching and learning environments, characterized by what Tharp (1993) calls "jointness." Put differently, the minute gain to be had by diverting after-school programs to this critical societal goal would not justify the loss of what after-school programs can do well.

With respect to the specific issue of standardized achievement tests as an outcome measure for after-school programs, most of the experiences children have in most programs, beyond doing homework, have little or nothing to do with the narrow, specific, disembedded skills measured on such tests. Take, for example, a group of middle-school children who spend a year working on a mural.

How is their learning from that experience—about design, planning, drawing, color, form, teamwork; about particular cultures, their own heritage, social history, public art, etc.—not to mention the ways in which they personally grow through it, going to be captured on a standardized achievement test in reading or math? Take a group of children who participate in an African drumming class once a week throughout the year. How are the musical, rhythmic, kinesthetic, narrative, cultural, creative, interpersonal, and other dimensions of that experience captured on a standardized achievement test?

Take a shy child who makes a few friends and begins to learn to hold his or her own in social situations; an English-language learner (required to spend each day in a school environment that ignores and may even prohibit expression in his or her first language) who has the chance to explore the traditions of his or her country of origin and perhaps read literature in his or her native language; a child struggling with self-regulation, who learns through martial arts how to calm and "center" him- or herself; a child who had no idea that he or she had something to say; a child whose parents are not able to help celebrate a good grade in school. One can substitute for these examples any of dozens of varied developmental experiences, types of projects, or ongoing activities—from dance to photography, from ecology to urban study, from informal play to organized sports—and any of scores of individual child profiles and ask how what is learned or acquired might be captured on standardized tests.

Even if we set aside their lack of validity in capturing most of the possible effects of after-school experiences, achievement tests are inherently limited measures of children's learning and growth, whether in school or outside it. The tests ignore important domains of learning (e.g., literature, the natural sciences, the social sciences, the arts); many important cognitive skills (e.g., synthesizing information, applying knowledge, using what one knows creatively); and social goals of schooling (e.g., perseverance, self-discipline, communication, social responsibility). They ignore important attributes and skills in the domains they do measure (e.g., whether reading is becoming a habit, whether a child enjoys writing). Standardized tests often fail to evoke children's optimal performance in a domain (they do not allow children to express/demonstrate what they know and/or can do); they are susceptible to children's unfamiliarity with the format and/or content (put differently, responding to multiple-choice questions is an unfamiliar way for children to express what they've learned); and evident skill or performance is partly, if not largely, context dependent. Time pressure, anxiety,

and novelty affect performance, and some children are simply not good test takers. Standardized tests are particularly poor measures of knowledge or skill for children of color and English-language learners. A test is a one-shot, high-stakes measure—if a child is tired, distracted, worried, or not feeling well, scores can be strongly affected. Finally, the meaningfulness of standardized tests as even narrow and partial measures of learning is increasingly doubtful as more teachers spend significant amounts of time on test preparation and more children take test preparation classes from private companies hired by school districts.[7]

The most common approach to the use of standardized tests to measure after-school program effects—the departure of "treatment group" children from predicted trajectories (i.e., test score gains) over time, whether their own or those of comparison children—is also problematic. Meaningfully altering children's "predicted" growth or trajectory over time on a standardized test score is difficult even for powerful educational interventions whose central goal is to do so. (Most after-school programs serve a wide cross section of low- and moderate-income children, in terms of academic risk. Even if after-school programs were considered to be a form of academic remediation—which, of course, they are not—one would not expect test score effects for children who are already faring decently.) Reliably charting children's predicted trajectories is, at any rate, an uncertain art, complicated by changes in tests and test items from year to year and in how test data are analyzed and reported, differences in growth rates as children grow older, the shifting composition of target groups of children (due to residential mobility, changes in school populations, changing rules about who takes tests), and a variety of other confounding factors. (On a minor note, standardized testing tends to be concentrated at specific grades. Test data may thus be lacking on some after-school participants at any point in time.)

Finally, some have argued that even if we accept the after-school program as a distinct institution with its own purposes and acknowledge that the activities of the programs are unrelated to skills measured on standardized achievement tests, the knowledge and skills acquired in after-school programs should "transfer" to performance in school and even on achievement tests. The nature,

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[7] Delandshere (2002, p. 1478) argues that "current educational assessment is for the most part a relic of the past. It has limited purposes and methods that generate limited data; it is based on poorly articulated, ad hoc theories and assumptions of learning and knowing; examinees submit to the process without active and equal participation (e.g., critique, reflection, self-reflection); and secrecy, reward and punishment are still key concepts."

amount, and conditions necessary for such transfer remain open questions. General evidence suggests that knowledge, skills, principles, and strategies developed in one setting and/or one particular domain do not transfer straightforwardly to others. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33, note that "even so-called general knowledge only has power in specific circumstances.") Each developmental setting has a distinct motivational structure, locus of control in problem solving, degree of abstraction in learning tasks, and type of teaching-learning relationship. There are also individual differences in capacity to transfer knowledge and skill from one setting to another (Resnick, 1989).

Framing Expectations, Discerning and Measuring Effects: An Alternative Approach

The challenges of evaluating social programs in general and after-school programs in particular, and the invalidity of standardized tests as measures of after-school program effects, are not causes for pessimism. Lack of evidence of program effects on standardized achievement test scores says nothing about the benefits and limitations of after-school programs, their role in children's lives, the conceptual and practical challenges faced by the after-school field. The principal result of the focus on such tests has been *to delay the necessary work of finding appropriate ways to define expectations, measure effects, and use evaluation activity to help program staff reflect on and, as necessary, refine their work with children.*

Defining appropriate expectations of after-school programs and figuring out where to look for program effects require a respect for complexity and a process that is at once deductive (top down, outside in) and inductive (bottom up, inside out). The deductive part of the process requires (a) consideration of the full breadth of developmental tasks for children of different ages, growing up in different communities and (b) an effort to define the distinctive qualities of after-school programs as developmental settings and therefore their distinct role in supporting children's work on various developmental tasks. At the same time, in any actual evaluation study, the "narrowing" process has to accommodate three complicating variables: the possibly wide age range of participating children; individual differences in what children within any narrow age range want, need, and get from their after-school program experience; and the diversity of programs in the after-school field, in terms of purpose, focus, and resources.

The inductive part of the process of defining expectations and, especially, deciding where to look for program effects, requires the evaluator to look in depth at the experiences children have in the programs he or she evaluating—which children are being served; how time is used; how language is used; what, exactly, happens during particular activities; teaching and learning processes; types and qualities of engagement; distribution of responsibilities; relationships between adults and children and between children; how problems are handled; overall climate, etc. The evaluator then has to marry the two perspectives—to embed what he or she sees in the larger frame of developmental tasks and after-school program roles.

On the following pages, I begin the deductive process that I believe is necessary for the field, concentrating primarily on the first two elements noted above. They provide the foundation, as it were, for a new program of research.[8]

Starting With Developmental Tasks

In considering where to look for after-school program effects, it makes sense to begin by laying out the range of developmental tasks that preoccupy children of different ages. These "tasks" are generated both internally—by children's growing physical, cognitive, social, and other capacities and by their interests, concerns, and inner drives—and externally, by family, community, and broader cultural demands (Silbereisen & Eyferth, 1986). (The idea of developmental tasks originated with Robert Havighurst [1953, 1972]. Other terms that have been used to capture this idea include salient developmental issues [Sroufe, 1979], life tasks [Dittman-Kohli, 1986], and personal projects [Little, 1983]. Erikson [1950, 1968], of course, also identified key tasks at each stage of development, which he variously called achievements, accomplishments, or developmental crises.)[9]

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[8] In effect, what I am trying to do here is model the thinking that I believe needs to occur if research on after-school programs is to be more fruitful than it has been to the present.

[9] Until mid- to late adolescence, with the rapid growth of self-awareness, children are not conscious of working on developmental tasks (although they can state immediate goals, such as learning to get somewhere alone). Children do become increasingly conscious of being evaluated—by adults and peers alike—for competence and performance (Eccles, 1999, p. 32) and in that sense are aware of the need "to work on" what is culturally valued. More generally, developmental processes as such tend to be subterranean, or at least not transparent (Silbereisen & Eyferth, 1986). And, as children get older, such processes have "no guaranteed direction" (Mitchell, 1998, p. xiv). As Kroger (1996, p. 174) puts it, "there is no map when it comes to matters of maturing."

The developmental tasks most relevant to after-school programs are, naturally, those of middle childhood and adolescence. The former is marked by shifts in cognitive and relational capacities, participation in new institutions whose demands children have to adapt to and master, and generally increased participation in the broader social and cultural world. Adolescence brings another significant advance in personal (and interpersonal) capacities, combined with the numerous biological and psychosocial changes of puberty and the need to begin planning for the demands of adulthood.

Erikson (1968) characterized middle childhood as the age of industry. During this period, children begin concerted work on the tasks seen by their culture as important for effective adulthood (Weisner, 1996). In the United States, those that stand out at first seem school related: acquiring literacy and numeracy, developing verbal facility, developing general analytic skills, beginning to understand different knowledge domains and disciplines (and beginning to learn how to think in ways characteristic of those disciplines; Sternberg, 2003, p. 5). Children also have to learn to function effectively in school as a developmental setting. They have to learn to work with the artifacts of school—tests, textbooks, textbook assignments (Bereiter, 2002). They have to develop a range of capacities and skills central to success in school: recognizing and regulating emotions and behavior, paying attention, persisting in abstract tasks, seeking assistance, being punctual and learning time discipline, coping with competition, dealing with large groups, following adults' orders without always understanding the rationale, and deciphering teachers' expectations.

There are, nonetheless, many dimensions of children's developing selves that cannot be tied as closely—or at least exclusively—to the demands and opportunities found in school. Some of these involve capacities that teachers (and other school staff) lack the time or incentive to help nurture. Some involve tasks that may be more central or may find different expression (or take different form) outside of school life. And some involve qualities of self that may even be antithetical to what is needed or nurtured in school, or that school experience actively undermines in particular groups of children.

Close to home, children are beginning the long-term task of "individuating" and, in some contexts, beginning to assume responsibilities for family maintenance. In the social or interpersonal domains, outside the family, children are learning to develop and maintain friendships and generally manage social relations with peers. With both peers and adults in different settings, they are learn-

ing to reciprocate, to negotiate, to influence others in appropriate ways; they are also learning to act and function independently, to be more self-reliant (and less parent reliant) in making decisions and solving problems. They are learning to listen to and evaluate others' perspectives (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002), to give and receive feedback, "to reflect upon [their] own interests and coordinate them with those of others" (Kroger, 1996, p. 11). Older children begin to seek a balance between connectedness and autonomy and to learn to use solitude in constructive ways—for emotional renewal, planning, regrouping, processing, and reflecting (Buchholz, 1997).

Middle childhood is the time in which the internalized experiences of early childhood—the way in which young children were treated inside their families, as well as in other settings—begin to "externalize" as a distinctive capacity for empathy, kindness, and concern for others (and, it should be noted, a distinctive sense of humor). Formative experience, combined with growing cognitive capacities, also shapes the growing capacity for moral reasoning and development of a moral compass. On a broader canvas, children are beginning to define themselves in relation to other children and are developing a better understanding of social structure and social processes, of where they, their family, and their community fit in the larger society. Kagan (1984, p. 140) notes that once children begin to recognize the categories to which they belong, they also begin to "assume that they should match their qualities to the proper category."

In middle childhood, children extend the settings and ways in which they test their sense of agency. Children are learning to master the larger community environment in which they live—to explore, map it out in their minds, and use community resources. They begin to acquire, play with, and, later, increase their competence in using various tools for self-expression—language, print, image, movement, etc. (They are, in other words, beginning to master the principles, techniques, and "artifacts" of different symbolic systems.) They begin to learn how to express preferences and set limits with others.

Children are also starting to channel creative impulses into culturally valued forms, especially through the arts. Developmental work in creative and artistic domains encompasses a range of new capacities. Children are beginning to engage the arts as "maker, critic and audience" (Greene, 1991). They are starting to understand the creative and productive processes in the arts, e.g., where a work of art comes from, the background knowledge needed, the preparatory work involved, the stages and process through which it is created. Some chil-

dren are ready to choose a particular art form to work at seriously. Such children will begin to learn about the many tasks that accompany commitment, for example, how to practice and to make use of practice for personal and creative ends. In general, sources of creativity begin to change in middle childhood, with the un-self-conscious creativity of early childhood beginning to be reined in by caution and worry about criticism. In that sense, as they grow older children need to relearn creativity—what to draw on, how to take appropriate artistic (i.e., expressive) risks. Their aesthetic taste, sensibility, and judgment increasingly require some education (Greene).

To an increasing degree, an important task for children in the United States is maintaining physical vitality. In the later years of middle childhood and into early adolescence, physical activity not only declines in absolute amount, but also is shaped by different factors. As with creativity, what was natural and instinctive must, in many respects, be relearned and reincorporated (Halpern, 2003b). Being physically active becomes a matter of social learning and an element of identity development, as children look (and listen) to parents, relatives, and other adults; to siblings and friends; and, increasingly, to popular culture as models of who and what they might be and how they should engage the world. In a loose sense, physical vitality is at the core of a general sense of vitality in facing the world.

Differentiating, by age and context. The centrality and expression of the tasks described above naturally change as children grow older. Family demands gradually increase. Children have a growing desire to make a contribution to their family and community. As children move toward and into adolescence, self-awareness deepens, self-appraisal becomes more accurate, views of self become more complex, and self-differentiation from others (including parents) becomes clearer. Interests gradually become defined; commitments solidify and become more consistent. Children begin to imagine the future in more concrete terms. By mid-adolescence, issues of identity become prominent: deciding what is important to do, choosing whom one should identify with, learning what one is interested in and good at, deciding what one is for and against, determining who and what one might become. Adolescents try to figure out what their place is, where they fit, and who might accept them—in family, peer group, school, community, the economy, and society.

Developmental tasks are shaped as well by the contexts in which children grow up. Growing up poor, in a devalued group, in a neglected neighborhood,

for instance, complicates children's and adolescents' efforts to address the tasks of both age periods. It alters the meaning of almost every activity, from developing school-related proficiencies to learning friendship, mastering the neighborhood, and exploring interests. It alters the normative calculus, including the potential costs, of both experimentation and commitment. It increases the perceived costs of curiosity and enthusiasm. It alters the normative balance between day-to-day preoccupations and long-term goals. It gives a particular meaning to academic success—standing out—and in that way shapes children's and adolescents' choices about where to focus energies. It affects the ways in which teachers and other authority figures view children. In other words, it limits opportunity, in a host of ways, to exercise growing capacities.

Context has a particularly powerful effect on children's developmental trajectories. The longitudinal picture for low-income children differs from that of their more advantaged peers and is marked by a steeper decline in commitment to school, sense of self as a capable learner, sense of self-efficacy, expectations (as opposed to hopes) for the future, and related variables. By adolescence, many inner-city children's lives have been marked by the kinds of experiences that pull children off track—preoccupied or erratic parenting, inordinate responsibility to care for self and siblings, loss of family members through separation or death, family or community violence, pressure from gangs, and contact with police, juvenile justice, and child welfare authorities. Such experiences can lead to questioning of self and mistrust of others (Lee, 1994; Nightingale, 1993) and can sap the psychic and physical energy needed to address normative developmental tasks.

Supporting Children's Work on Developmental Tasks: The Distinctive Role of After-School Programs

Work on the wide range of developmental tasks of middle childhood and adolescence both builds personal resources and, as suggested just above, requires them. Such work requires openness to new experience and willingness to take some risks, the maintenance of curiosity and motivation, and the sense of an (at least partly) open future. At each age a foundation is being built for the work of later ages. Developmental work also requires social resources—environmental opportunities and challenges; the opportunity to exercise growing capacities and to observe, learn from, and identify with experts in different domains; recognition from valued, authoritative others; a sense of psychological safety

combined with some freedom of movement and some privacy; times and places for moratorium and renewal (time to process, to integrate the variety of new demands that come with growing up); and opportunity to develop one's own point of view without fear of belittlement or ridicule.

Although it is obvious that no one institution or setting can assume sole responsibility for the tasks and attendant range of supports outlined above, it is not clear how the roles and boundaries of different institutions are best sorted out. Historically, roles and responsibilities have been repeatedly negotiated and renegotiated. What seems important is recognition that different institutions are not interchangeable; they have different strengths and limitations, and these dictate distinct roles in addressing developmental tasks.

After-school programs are a particularly flexible institution, filling gaps, complementing the primary institutions of family and school, and, notably, providing opportunities, supports, and resources that these other institutions cannot or will not provide, especially to low- and moderate-income children. For instance, because they are not a mass institution, because they have no fixed set of knowledge and skills that all children have to master, and because they have no sorting and labeling responsibilities, after-school programs cope well with individual differences. Children can be themselves without worrying that they do not match some mysterious (to them) set of institutional expectations. Challenges created for children can be individualized. After-school programs can respond to children's interests and concerns, giving participants a measure of control over what they do every day, putting them in active roles as learners, and attending to their point of view. Together these attributes may support the development of a sense of agency and self-efficacy, nurture self-expression, and convey a sense that it is all right to be oneself, to have one's own views and perspective.

After-school programs have the flexibility to provide developmental experiences in a range of domains that schools lack time for and that low- and moderate-income families may lack resources to purchase in the marketplace. These include, of course, the visual and performing arts, humanities, civics, physical activities, and sports. (One might even argue that the natural sciences have to be added to this list, given declining attention to them in school.) After-school programs' flexible temporal framework affords time for children to sample different kinds of activities and to pursue selected ones in depth. In some programs, children can work with adults skilled in a specific craft, art form, or discipline. Under such circumstances, children can be exposed to the basic concepts and

techniques of a discipline, craft, or art form; experience practice or rehearsal; begin to learn what it takes to become skilled at something; begin to think like an expert; and play with particular identities. They can exercise creativity and learn about "creating," including the need to take risks "to gain the experience that helps you make good risky choices" (Bereiter, 2002, p. 358). In general, activities tend to be relatively more "real," less symbolic, and less abstract than in school, affording opportunity to create products and performances that are relatively concrete and authentic.

Activities in after-school programs tend to be something to enjoy, not something to "get done" for some adult-defined purpose. That in turn may help children learn to enjoy process as much as "product." Feedback from adults is easily integrated into the learning process, an important lesson for children for whom feedback is too often summative and set apart from everyday performance. Because there is a relatively low risk of failure and because adults are in nonjudgmental roles, children usually feel safe psychologically, as well as physically. Summative assessment, when it occurs, is "low stakes": The director of a martial arts center says, "By the time we invite [students] to test [for the next rank] we have already determined that they will pass the test. There are two ways you can fail . . . one by giving up, and two by being disrespectful of yourself, your partner or teacher" (Musick, 1999, p. 38).

After-school programs are supportive of the social and interpersonal dimensions of children's development. Their activities involve children sharing, collaborating, helping each other, working and playing together. They therefore provide opportunity to learn about the social dimensions of creating and producing. (As Bereiter, 2002, p. 352, puts it, "Very quickly 'my' idea must become 'our' project, or it will amount to nothing.") After-school programs allow children to learn how to do "friendship" in a protected setting, and when they are older, to make new friendships in a psychologically safe setting. The social nature of both formal and informal activity lets children learn to listen, negotiate, work at understanding others' intentions and interests, influence others, be responsible for others, and monitor the effects of their behavior on others. Differences among children may contribute to growth in a sense of empathy and flexibility. Being broader than family but often rooted in children's home communities, after-school programs can also easily 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).

After-school programs may also offer distinct potential to help address not just the normative tasks of childhood and adolescence, but also the range of vulnerabilities—self-doubt, mistrust, lack of basic skills, and self-disqualification—resulting from growing up under conditions of resource scarcity, social isolation, and depredation. As noted, such vulnerabilities can impede both the exploration and the commitment important to children's work on varied developmental tasks. After-school program staff have the luxury of attending to children's developmental struggles without labeling or defining them by those struggles. The activities and relationships in after-school programs may support a modest reworking of self. They offer the possibility of rebuilding capacity for trust, for dependence, and for openness to learning, and for strengthening young people's sense that they have something to say and are worthy of being listened to, that their aspirations and struggles matter to the larger world around them.

Enriching school domains. Even with developmental tasks closer to the heart of schooling, after-school programs have a distinct role, offering potential to foster capacities that schools too often ignore. With respect to literacy, for instance, the programs can help children explore varied reasons to read and write, strengthen their sense of ownership of reading and writing, and foster a belief that they can use literacy for their own ends (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002). They can afford children the "freedom" to have their own deeply personal reactions to texts (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 21). They 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.

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. Since 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. Not least, 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.

Other Factors Important to Research Design: Children's Ages,
Individual Responses, Diversity of Programs

Enumerating children's developmental tasks and identifying the tasks that after-school programs are well-suited to help address point to the general direction in which evaluators (as well as sponsors and funders) might look to define appropriate expectations, conceptualize and measure program quality, and consider possible program effects. Three additional variables nonetheless complicate the task of "narrowing down" and thus require conceptual attention in the design of specific studies. One is the fact that after-school programs serve children in a very broad age range, with the implication that different clusters of children in after-school programs will be working on different developmental tasks (or on different dimensions of childhood-long tasks), will have different kinds and qualities of experience (including different patterns of participation), and will have differing abilities to "demonstrate" (i.e., make visible) new skills or capacities. As they grow older, children use after-school programs differently, perhaps choosing to attend only on certain days. In other words, the meaning of participating in a particular after-school program is sometimes different for younger and older children.

The second complicating variable is the fact that even within a narrow age range, children bring different histories, predispositions, and capacities to their after-school experiences and therefore may want, need, and get different things out of those experiences. Children bring to developmental experiences varied capacities for openness, risk taking, engagement, and learning itself. They bring different interests, worries and preoccupations, and levels of energy and physical well-being. Some children stop thinking about school when the school day ends, but others bring the experiences of the day with them to the after-school setting, to be sorted out and processed. All these predispositions help determine what and whom children are drawn to in a particular program.

A third variable, complicating design in studies of initiatives or multiple programs, is the variability among after-school programs, even those in a common network or initiative. Programs vary in mission, activity emphasis and structure, staffing, climate, and many other ways that affect children's experience. Some programs are eclectic, some focused; some more socially oriented, some more task oriented; some highly organized, some low key and less structured. Auspices, physical setting, and community context contribute to program diversity, as well.

The larger point of enumerating these additional factors is that it does not make sense that a small handful of outcome measures, even carefully considered, could do justice to what are likely to be age-specific, program-specific, activity-specific, and individually distinct effects of after-school programs. It also does not make sense to employ designs and data analytic strategies that are better at capturing average effects. If an evaluator has a large number of programs and children to account for, he or she has to gain a sense of the kinds of variability that are significant for both, and then develop conceptually meaningful categories. It may then be possible to tentatively sample programs and children within each category for the inductive work that must be done before figuring out what to measure.

THE LIMITS OF DEDUCTION. Deducing appropriate expectations, places to look for program effects, and likely sources of variability can take the evaluator a long way. Also needed, however, is an inside-out process that begins with simply spending adequate time coming to know the programs one will be evaluating, on both a daily basis and over time. Examples include the kinds of experiences particular clusters of participants have every day, or over the course of a week or a few months; what developmental domains are engaged and nudged; and where one might look periodically for changes in skill, behavior, performance, products, and, more subtly, in qualities of self. The evaluator may have to spend regular time over a period of months in a number of different programs, observing, talking to staff and children, and then organizing and categorizing before recommending sets of domains in which to concentrate measurement for different groups of children. (He or she may have to hand-craft measures, as well.)[10]

In other words, evaluators have to refrain as long as possible from committing themselves to particular measures of program effects. If they are going to use a design that involves repeated measures, they will have to select or build a comparison group only after they have been through the necessary deductive and inductive processes described above. If, as the approach I have outlined suggests, they are to try to stay as close as possible to participating children's daily experience (and the artifacts produced in or by that experience), they will face the challenge of finding comparable experiential domains and measures for comparison children.

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[10] This is not the same as elaborating a logic model or theory of change, which tend to be far too general and abstract and rarely reflect intimate knowledge of everyday work with children.

A MEASURE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE. As implied by the discussion in this paper, the after-school field faces a significant measure development challenge. Off-the-shelf tests and measures will not capture the growth in discipline-specific knowledge and skills, social/interpersonal skills, executive skills, and dimensions of "self" implied in the earlier description of program experiences. For children in "treatment" groups, technologies exist for enlisting program staff and children themselves in some of the work of producing evidence of growth and development. Portfolios can be a useful tool when used systematically, not just as "dumps" for anything a child does. Project plans provide important sources of information. For some types of projects, for instance, there will be key vocabulary, concepts, procedures, and techniques to master at different levels. Although it is important to observe children's performance and behavior, it is also important to draw on the knowledge of the front-line staff, who see children every day in the after-school environment. If they understand adequately that their observations of children's growth are not meant as a reflection of their own performance, they can be critical sources of insight about the children they work with. Discussing children's growth with front-line staff is also a tool for reflection, an activity that receives too little support in too many programs.

Conclusion

Although the after-school field is old, the research tradition in the field is young. If we are thoughtful and patient, we can build a richly creative tradition that respects after-school programs and their work, provides information helpful to programs, and clarifies appropriate expectations of them. For that tradition to take shape will require financial support and, perhaps more important, a disentangling of after-school programs from other agendas, particularly school agendas. There is a natural tendency to want to seek continuity—what some call alignment—between developmental settings. Nonetheless, a measure of discontinuity (or "misalignment") between schools and after-school programs is far from being a problem. It is, in fact, critical, both for the continued development of the after-school field itself and for the millions of children who do not seem to get in the school context the nurturance, validation, identity building, and capacity building they need.

One critical task in keeping the separate identities of the two child development institutions clear is to de-enlist after-school programs from the task of

closing the academic achievement gap between groups of children. The most concrete way to accomplish this is to stop using academic achievement tests as an outcome measure. It is important to note once more that even within the field of education, the role of achievement tests remains sorely problematic. As Bereiter (2002, p. 440) recently noted, "To draw politicians and business people away from their fixation on achievement test gains, one must offer them the vision of a superior kind of outcome. The failure to do that is, I believe, the most profound failure of [educators] in our epoch." The after-school field's need to move beyond this outcome measure is, possibly, even more urgent.

What, then, should proponents and researchers tell the politicians and funders who seem to want a simple storyline about the benefits of after-school programs? Would these stakeholders accept the argument that after-school programs have to be supported to be themselves, whether or not good developmental experiences, in a range of domains and focused on a range of dimensions of self, spill over to school and contribute to boosting participating children's academic achievement? No one knows. If we think that the scientific, developmental, or moral arguments are too modest, subtle, or ambiguous, then we are free to tell the politicians and funders whatever we want. There is not much difference between a small lie and a big one.

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