



The Lives of Urban Youth

BY MICHAEL BITZ

The Comic Book Project was launched originally as a way of putting into practice some of the most important educational research of the last decade—that is, the correlation between involvement in the arts and performance in academic subjects (Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999).

Between October and December of 2002, 733 fourth- through eighth-graders in New York City sketched, plotted, wrote, and designed original comic books. The project involved 48 teachers at 33 sites. The goal of the project was to forge an alternative pathway to literacy via the visual arts. While the results demonstrated that the pathway had been realized, something equally important came to light. The children used the comic

book format to depict their lives as American urban youths—what they experience, how they respond to extraordinary circumstances, and how they struggle with daily hardships.

This article is not necessarily about comic books; it is about children expressing themselves through an artistic format. The Comic Book Project demonstrated the ability of the artistic process to engage and empower children and teachers. Yet the project also highlighted the importance of working towards a product, which is where the comic books enter. The participating children were not interested in making art and certainly not interested in building literacy skills. Rather, they wanted to create comics, share their final designs, and witness their work displayed in schools and online. This combination of process and product is important for art educators to understand because it speaks to the needs of children who are not regularly immersed in art making of any kind—that is, the majority of children. This article shares the processes and products of The Comic Book Project and is highlighted by samples of the children's work.

Background

With the publication of *Champions for Change* (Fiske, 1999), the educational community became aware of what art educators had known or suspected for some time: children in arts-intensive settings are strong in their abilities to express thoughts and ideas, exercise their imaginations, and take risks in learning (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999). The report also showed how integral the arts are to urban education despite the challenges that urban arts programs face, including safety concerns and the lack of affordable or appropriate instructional opportunities (Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 1999). While much of the literature focuses on artistically talented children, the goal of The Comic Book Project was to reach the many inner-city children who may not have been identified as talented, or who may, in fact, have never been exposed to making art at all.

The reasoning behind the use of comic books as the medium for this project was based on two factors. The first was a motivational factor drawing upon the popularity of comic books. The relationship between comic books and popular

movies has brought comic books back into the realm of popular culture and into the education system (Wax, 2002). Worldwide popularity of Japanese animation has revived American young people's interest in comic book art (Toku, 2001). The second factor behind using comic books was pedagogical. The connection between words and visual art in comic books is natural; therefore, the process of creating a comic book would be one of the most direct pathways between creative arts and literacy. This relationship between words and images is highlighted by Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat (2002), who demonstrated how children's creation of comic books can help improve literacy through an engaging artistic process in which words fit intuitively with pictures.

Whereas professional comic books are traditionally focused on superheroes and fantasized stories, the analysis showed that the children's comic books were focused on the hard realities of urban life.

The concept of creating comic books with upper-elementary and middle school children also fits well with art education theory and research. Lowenfeld (1947) identified stages of artistic development. In particular, the "Dawning Realism" stage (ages 9-11) and the "Pseudorealistic" stage (ages 11-13) capture the very essence of comic book art. The comic book format also enables children to step into later stages of aesthetic development such as "expressiveness," "style and form," and "autonomy," by focusing on social issues, stylistic approaches, and meaning (Parsons, 1987).

McFee (1998) and Thompson (2002, 1997) have explored the important relationship between children's art and their real-life contexts and cultures. Moreover, extensive research by Brent Wilson and others demonstrates that art derived from popular models such as comic books enables children to investi-

gate meaningful dimensions of the world that are typically absent from traditional school art (Wilson, 1997; Wilson, Hurwitz, & Wilson, 1987; Wilson & Wilson, 1979, 1977). Hence, while art educators may be trained and interested in traditional art, popular art can also offer valuable learning and development opportunities for children.

The precedent for encouraging the creation of original comic book art by under-served children in New York City was set by Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) in the 1980s (Garrels, 1989). Rollins and his collaborators—high school students from the South Bronx—made works based on texts ranging from Kafka to the X-Men.® The children responded positively to Rollins's method, and their artwork has been displayed around the world.

The Project

The children who participated in The Comic Book Project were members of inner-city after-school programs. These sites identified most of the children as low performing, and more than half of the participating children were identified as English language learners. The children began the project by writing comic book manuscripts. Using a template called the *Manuscript Starter*, they sketched their ideas as they wrote, a process that encouraged visualization of the story lines. From this initial drafting stage the children moved to the creation stage via another template called the *Comic Book Canvas*. These templates were eight-page booklets developed for the project with the help of a comic company called Dark Horse Comics. The results were fully designed and detailed comic books originated and completed by the children.

The connection to literacy was evident as the children met or surpassed performance standards identified by the Board of Regents in New York State. What was truly intriguing, however, was the content of the comic books. The research team conducted a content analysis that focused on three areas: story design, character development, and artistic devices. Whereas professional comic books are traditionally focused on superheroes and

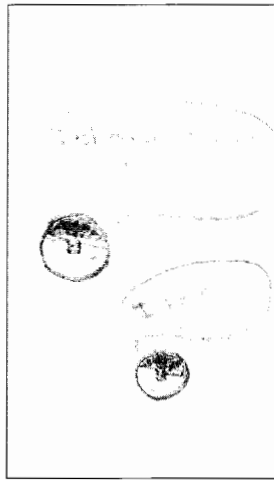
fantasized stories, the analysis showed that the children's comic books were focused on the hard realities of urban life. A complete assessment report of the project can be obtained from the sponsoring organizations: The After-School Corporation (<http://www.tascorp.org>) and the Partnership for After-School Education (<http://www.pasesetter.com>).

Overall Trends

Of the 733 children who participated in The Comic Book Project, 513 featured themselves in their comic book stories. While this fact may not be surprising given the age range of the participants, it does demonstrate the children's need or desire to express what they experience in their daily environments. The authors were usually the main characters, but they rarely acted as heroes. They were often at the mercy of uncontrollable circumstances, such as a random gunshot or a hit-and-run accident. At the end of the stories the authors remained alive, but many of their friends and relatives, both real and fictionalized, had either died or been put in jail for life sentences. Some of the comic books had a moral, such as "don't do drugs," but just as many were tales of futility in which the main characters were doomed despite bold efforts to overcome struggles.

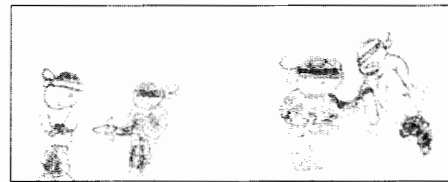
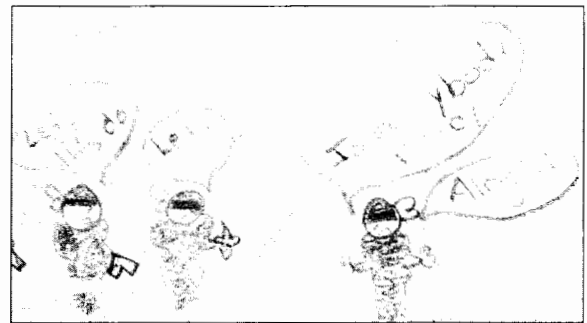
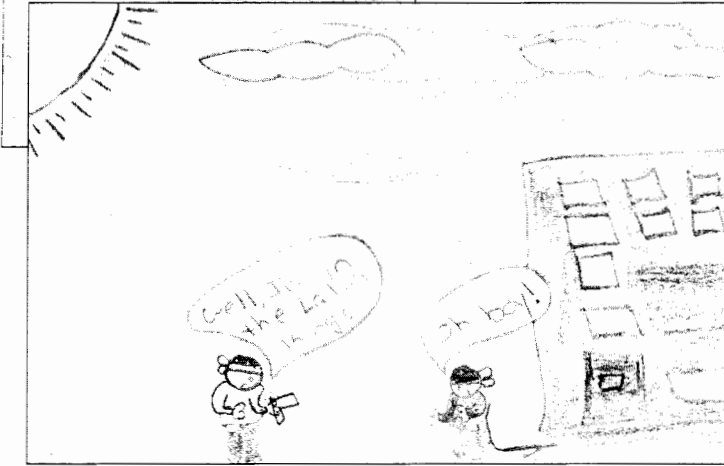
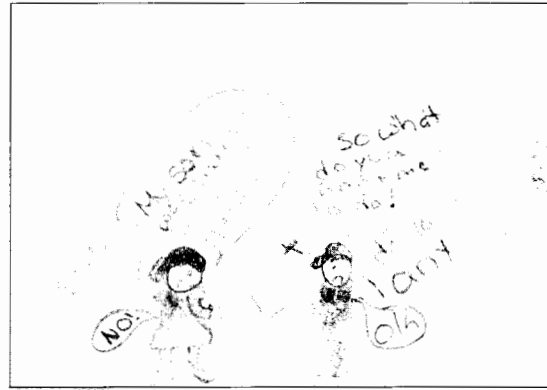
Most of the action took place outside of school. The school building often served as the backdrop, but only one of the children designed a story that actually took place in school. The children's homes were also rarely included in the stories. The scenes generally occurred on street corners or in schoolyards. Even the children who created science fiction stories set them in the inner-city and not on strange planets or many leagues under the sea. Also, most of the stories focused on a single setting or a few select settings where a particular occurrence, conversation, or decision led to a life-altering experience.

The most prominent themes were gang violence, drug abuse, and opposite-sex relationships. The following story descriptions and figures serve as mini-case studies of the comic books, highlighting panels from the children's original work.



From "The Big Fight: Bloods vs. Latin Kings" by a boy in grade seven.

Figures 1-3.

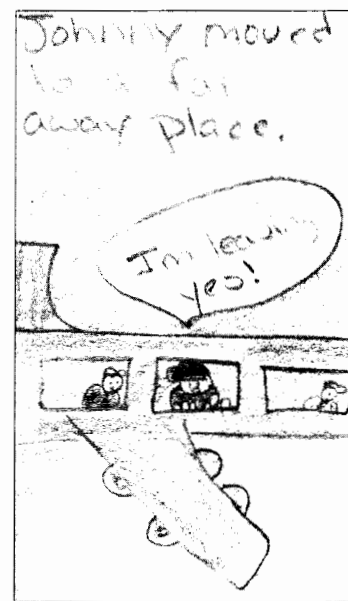
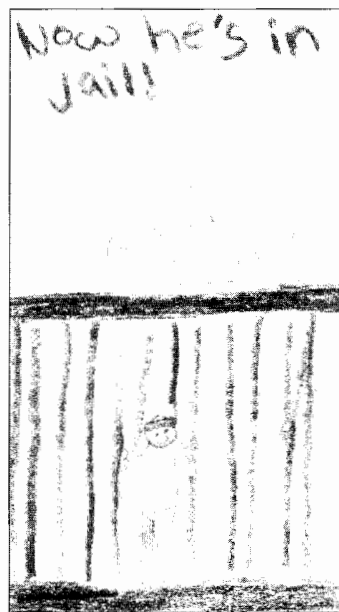


Figures 4-6.

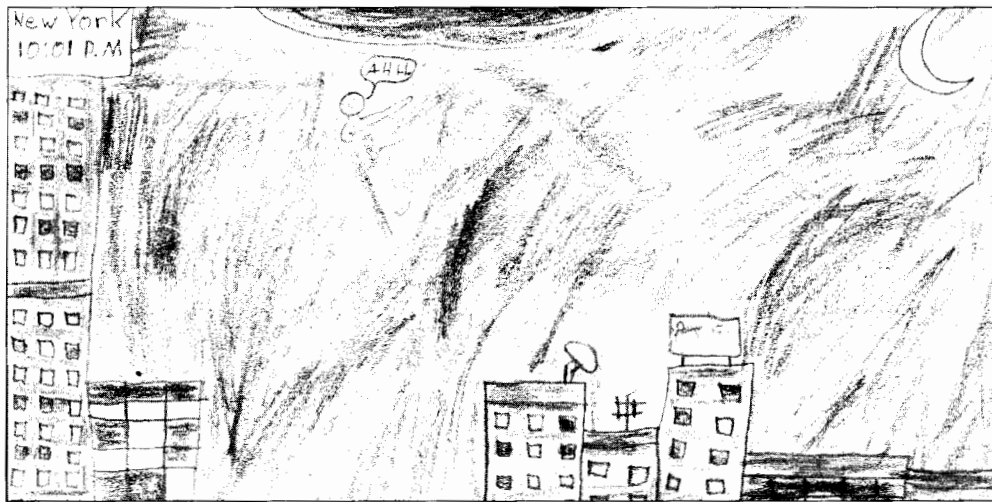
Gang Violence

Gang violence is a major concern in New York City and urban areas across the United States. A comic book by a boy in seventh grade titled "The Big Fight: Bloods vs. Latin Kings" demonstrates the enormous pressure placed on young children.

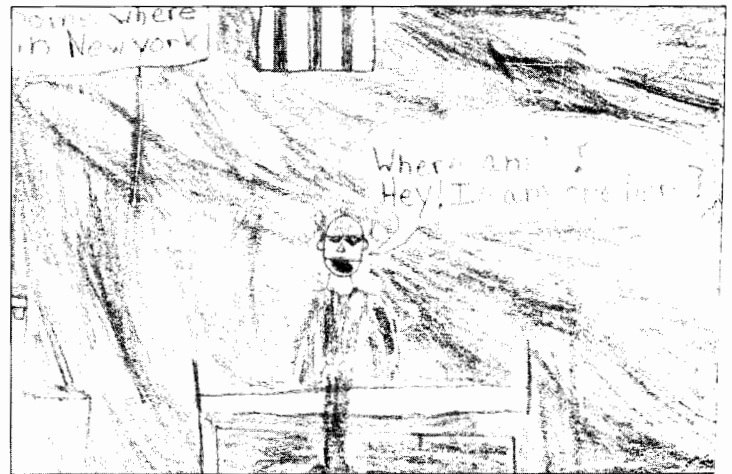
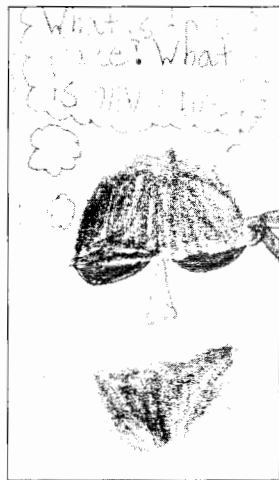
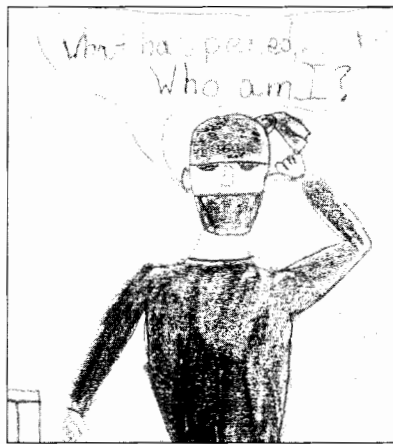
Confronted by a gang member, the author has the courage to resist the leader's overture to join the gang (see Figure 1). The author tells his mother about the experience and she becomes frantic. Despite the author's pleas against it, the mother insists on calling the police. In his room, the author berates himself for telling his mother about the gang member, and prays to move out of the neighborhood (see Figure 2). The police officer arrives, but is apathetic (see Figure 3). The next day there is a street fight between the Bloods and the Latin Kings (see Figures 4-6). One of the gang members gets killed and another ends up in jail (see Figure 7). The last panel of the comic book shows the author in an airplane, moving to a faraway place (see Figure 8).



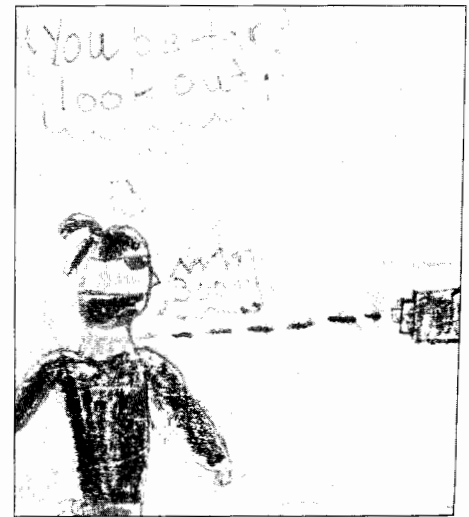
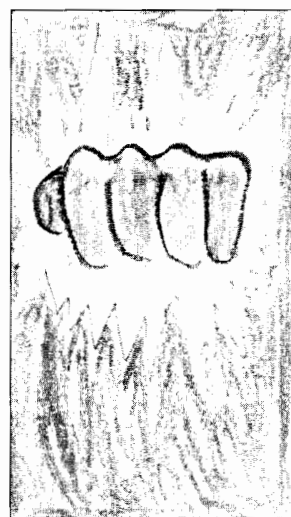
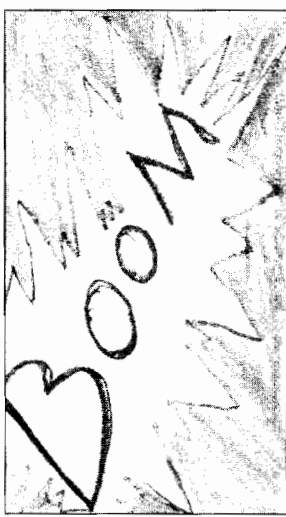
Figures 7-8.



From an untitled comic book by a boy in grade six.
Figure 9.



Figures 10-12.



Figures 13-16.

"The Big Fight" represents the fear that children feel due to the pressure put upon them by gang members. In the story, the author does all the right things—he refuses membership, he tells his mother, he speaks with a police officer—yet he narrowly escapes serious harm. Neither the parent figure nor the police officer has a viable response to the situation, and the author luckily avoids "the big fight" by ducking inside a store. In the end, leaving the neighborhood is the ultimate dream and the only way to avoid entanglement with a gang.

Gangs were prevalent in many of the girls' comic books as well. These girls highlighted the same issues as in "The Big Fight," and the results were just as violent. In some comic book stories created by girls, the gang members spent several pages passing personal insults about body type, weight, and skin color before the violence erupted. As in "The Big Fight," in the books created by girls, there are few alternatives to gang membership and not many support systems for those who have the courage to refuse.

Drug Abuse

Many of the comic books that had a moral to the story were focused on drug abuse and its effects on young people. A well-designed, untitled comic book by a sixth-grade boy is the highlighted example.

After doing drugs, the main character gets high—literally and figuratively (see Figure 9). The drugs start to have a negative effect, and the character suddenly cannot recall who or where he is (Figures 10 and 11). After a struggle with the authorities he is incarcerated (Figure 12). Without showing the actual violence, the author uses words and pictures to demonstrate a fight that the character has in jail (Figures 13-15). As the character starts to become sober, he questions his decisions in life related to drug abuse and violent crime, and it looks as though he is going to turn his life around. However, the character is suddenly shot and killed by another inmate (Figure 16).

Interestingly, none of the children in seventh or eighth grade wrote about drug abuse.

As in this example, the use of drugs usually led to arrest or death in the children's comic books. The drug users almost never recovered from their habits; it is the people around them who learned the lesson. Like the untitled example, the children did not show their characters actually taking the drugs; they showed people buying or selling drugs and the altered state of mind after drug use. Interestingly, none of the children in seventh or eighth grade wrote about drug abuse. It was a prime theme, however, for the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders. One possible reason for this dichotomy is that elementary-school children in New York are typically involved in school-based substance abuse prevention programs, whereas middle schools do not always offer such programs to their students. Another possible explanation is that drug abuse may seem like a common aspect of urban life to middle-schoolers, while younger children may be more conscious of drugs and their negative effects.

Opposite-Sex Relationships

Many of the girls, on every grade level, who were involved in The Comic Book Project wrote about dating boys. They created comic books about tearful breakups or about one girl stealing another's boyfriend. The comic book described below was created by a fifth grade girl. It is called "The Date That Went Up In Smoke" and is about one girl's struggle with dating a boy who smokes.

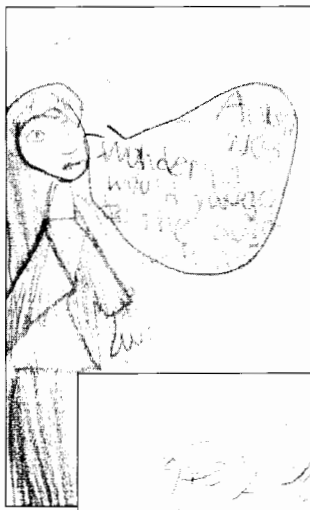
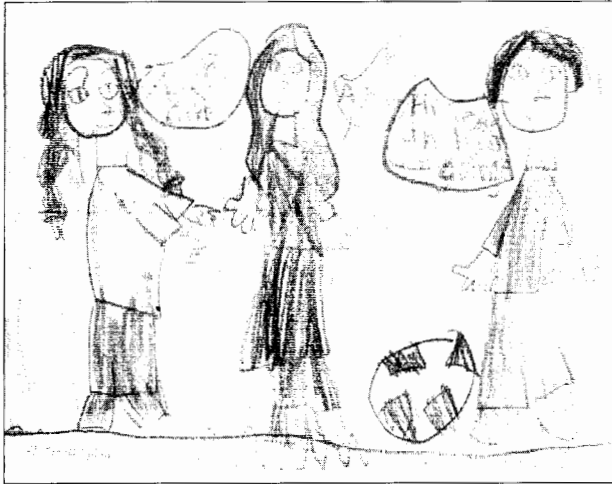
The author wants to ask a certain boy to the school dance. During a conversation with her friend, the boy appears, and a friend pushes the author towards him (see Figure 17). She finally musters enough courage to ask him to the dance, and he shyly agrees (see Figure 18). Talking to herself in her bedroom mirror, she is excited about the dance (see Figure 19). As they walk to the dance, the boy

gives her a rose, but suddenly he lights a cigarette. She is appalled, saying, "I didn't know you were a smoker!" (see Figure 20). At the dance, the two have a fight over his smoking habit (see Figure 21). Outside, her friend consoles her and tells her that she should not date boys who smoke (see Figure 22). The author eventually agrees and tosses the boy's rose into the river (see Figures 23-25).

"The Date That Went Up In Smoke" highlights the importance of supportive friends who can help steer a young person in the right direction. Notice in Figure 22 how torn the author is over the issue—one might predict that without the advice of the friend, the author would return to the smoker. This comic book, and many of the others created by girls, also demonstrates the importance of opposite-sex relationships in the lives of young adolescent and pre-pubescent females. While boys may not have the same thoughts at this age, or are not interested or willing to express those thoughts in this forum, the issue of dating is nonetheless an important one for these urban youths.

Artistic Devices

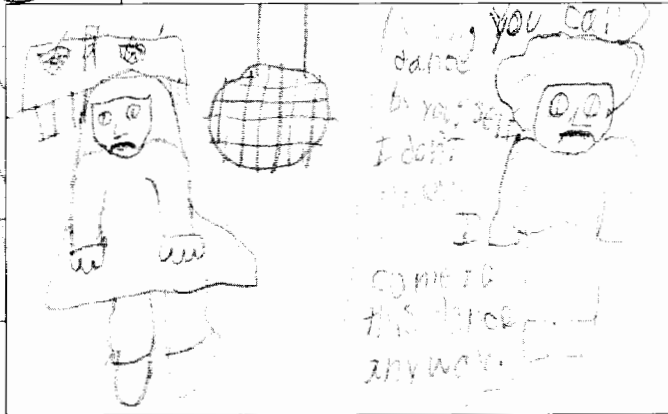
There were several artistic devices—such as use of color, perspective, and detail—that reappeared throughout the children's comic books. One was the focus on foreground. The characters in the comic books usually appeared in the center of each panel, and only 56% of the panels ($n = 22,575$) included a background of any type, usually a cloud or a tree. In only a few instances did the backgrounds influence the story line. Another artistic device was the use of color to represent characters. The facial and body compositions of characters often changed throughout a comic book, but the color of the characters' clothes, hair, and skin remained relatively constant throughout. ("The Date That Went Up In Smoke" is an exception.) Finally, many of the children clearly took pride in the design of their comic book covers. Even the simplest comic books featured painstakingly detailed artwork on the cover, and were often inconsistent with the level of artistic skill exhibited throughout the body of the comic book.



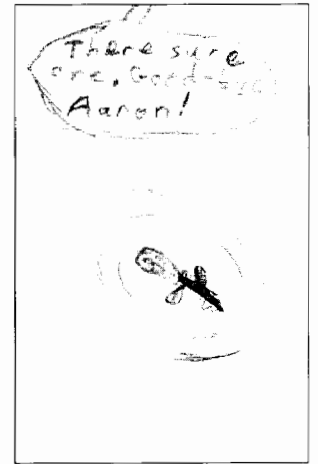
"The Date That Went Up In Smoke" by a girl in grade five. Figures 17-19.



Figures 20-22.



Figures 23-25.



Conclusions

The conjunction of building literacy skills, being artistically creative, and expressing oneself in a healthy manner is a powerful combination realized through the comic book format specifically and the process of making art in general. The children in the project asserted their thoughts and beliefs, particularly their fears and perceptions about life and occasionally dismal predictions for their own futures. To be sure, the comic books that these 733 children created are at the very least, mirrors of urban life in New York City. They serve as a wakeup call to society as a whole, particularly in terms of issues such as gang violence and substance abuse, and the general ways in which urban youth tend to view themselves and their prospects for success. It is important to remember that the children were not coached on the content of their work. They chose the topics and the content that they believe reflect their experiences and insights into the inner city.

Just as the research literature demonstrates the value of art in the academic lives of urban youth, The Comic Book Project highlights the importance of art in urban life in general. The after-school directors were amazed at how much their children were able to express through art, and many of the children themselves were inspired by their own work. When it comes to young people in struggling neighborhoods, art is more than a fun activity. Art can be a pathway to understanding one's extraordinary surroundings, and a way of enabling others to learn from and hopefully act upon the messages that urban youth put forth.

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