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, 73 fourth- through eighth-graders in New York City sketched, plotted, wrote, and designed original comic books. The project involved 16 teachers at 13 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 using 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 artists' 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 literate in building literacy skills. Rather, they wanted to create comics, share their final designs, and witness their work displayed in schools and online.

The 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 highlights 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 (Bartoe, Horowitz, & Sholes, 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 (Opreck, Burns, & McCarron, 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

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Whereas professional comic books are traditionally focused on superheroes and fantastized 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 young elementary and middle school children was explored in a research project by Lauenfeld (2007), who identified stages of artistic development. In particular, the "Outlining Baseline" stage (ages 6-11) and the "Peaking Cognitive" 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 "expressionist," "style," "and "mimetic." By focusing on social issues, stylists, and meaning, this project was highly successful.

MeLo (1996) and Thompson (2002, 1997) have explored the important relationship between children's art and their real-life contexts and cultures. Moreover, research by Brent Wilson and others demonstrates that art derived from popular models such as comic books enables children to investigate meaningful dimensions of the world that are typically absent from traditional art education. Wilson et al. (1997, 1998) and Wilson & Wilson (1997, 1997) found that art education projects focused on traditional art, popular art, and comic books 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 1990s (Garett, 1995). Rollins and his collaborators—high school students from the South Bronx—created works based on a story 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 programs identified most of the children as low-performing, and some were referred to special education. By using a template called the Manuscript Stencil, 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 stencil called the Comic Book Covers. These templates were used to create the final product of the comic books.

Overall Trends
Of the 731 children who participated in The Comic Book Project, 75% found themselves in their comic book stories. While this fact may not be surprising given the size of the participants, it does demonstrate the children's desire to express what they experience in their daily lives. The authors were often present as facilitators, but they rarely acted as heroes. They were often at the mercy of uncontrollable circumstances, such as a car crash 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. Some of the comic book plots included stories such as "Don't do drugs," but among many other tales, one that stands out was about a group of main characters who decided to devote their efforts to overcoming their drug problems.

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 houses were also rarely included in the stories. The scenes generally occurred on streets corners or in the woods. Even the children who created science fiction stories set them in the inner-city and not on distant planets or in distant universes. The most of the stories focused on a single setting: the one of a few select settings, such as a particular occurrence, conversation, or decision that led to a life-altering experience.

The most prominent themes were gang violence, drug abuse, and interpersonal relationships. The following story descriptions and figures serve as mini-case studies of the comic book plotlines highlighting a few scenes from the children's original work.
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 her room, the author berates himself for telling his mother about the gang member, and prays so move out of the neighborhood (see Figure 2). The police officer arrives, but is atheistic (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 men been goes 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).
FROM an untitled comic book by a 507 Jr. grade six.
Figure 9

Figures 10-12

Figure 13-16
The Big Fight" represents the fear that children feel due to the presence of drugs among them by gang members. In the story, the author does not use drugs as an example of membership, but he tells his mother, who speaks with a police officer—yet he never escapes serious harm. Neither the parent figure nor the police officer has a viable solution to the situation, and the author hereby avoids "the big fight" by seeking 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 girl's 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 normal 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 6). 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 the 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. It all foreshows as though he is going to come out of jail unscathed. However, the character is suddenly shot and killed by another inmate (Figure 16).

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 seeking another boy's help. The comic book drew out below was created by a fifth-grade girl. It is called "The Date That Went Up in Smoke." It is about one girl's struggle with using 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 summon the courage to ask him to the dance, and she 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 lighter cigarette. She is appalled, saying, "I didn't know you were a smoker!" (see Figure 20). She chides him for his habit and tells him he should not be the one who smokes (see Figure 21). Outside, her friend consoles her and tells her that she would not want to be like her, who smokes (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 the author is the over the issue—one might predict that without the advice of the friend, the author would return to the smoking. This comic book, and many of the others created by girls, also demonstrate the importance of opposite-sex relationships in the lives of young adolescents and pre-adolescent females. While boys may not have the same thoughts at this age, we are not interested in 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 represent the reactions of 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 58% of the panels (n = 22,735) included a background of any kind, usually a hill or area. In only a few instances did the background 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 the comic book, but the color of the character's 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 covers, and these were often inconsistent with the level of artistic skill exhibited throughout the body of the comic book.
Conclusions

The concept 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 status and perceptions about life and occasionally showed predispositions for success. To be honest, the comic books that these 783 children created are at the very least, mirrors of urban life in New York City. They serve as a window into society as a whole particularly in terms of issues such as street 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 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 children young people in struggling neighborhoods, art is more than just a fun activity. Art can be a pathway to understanding one's environment and social 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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REFERENCES


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