

# The Comic Book Project: Forging alternative pathways to literacy

Michael Bitz

In this arts-based literacy initiative in urban after-school environments, children brainstormed, outlined, sketched, wrote, and designed original comic books that represented their lives as urban youth.

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Many deep-rooted problems in urban areas of the United States—including crime, poverty, and poor health—correlate with illiteracy. The statistics reported by organizations such as the National Alliance for Urban Literacy Coalitions are telling. Urban citizens who cannot read sufficiently are at a clear disadvantage in life. They are more likely to be poor (see Barton & Jenkins, 1995), to be incarcerated (see Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor, & Campbell, 1994), and to have health problems (see Baker et al., 2002). Meanwhile, another body of research shows a strong correlation between arts-rich environments and children's academic performance (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999). Of course, the jury is still out on the conundrum between the chicken and the egg: Do the arts make kids smarter, or are smart kids involved in the arts?

While the debate continues in the academic community, the fact remains that most urban schools are not "rich" in arts or anything else. Most urban schools cannot make a connection between their arts and academic programs be-

cause there are simply too many other issues to worry about, particularly budgets and standardized test scores. Even in an arts-oriented program, urban youth face extraordinary challenges: family situations, safety concerns, lack of affordable or appropriate instructional opportunities, and peer resentment (Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 1999). As urban schools continue to struggle, many now look to after-school programs as the future of education in the city. The need for and development of after-school programs are on the rise, and many after-school programs are attempting to reconnect children with the arts.

In an effort to launch an arts-based literacy initiative for youth in urban after-school programs, The Comic Book Project went from small concept to large-scale pilot in a matter of weeks. As the project founder, I partnered with colleagues from Teachers College, Columbia University; teachers, students, and administrators from the after-school community; and artists and designers from Dark Horse Comics, a professional comic book design and publishing house.

Between October and December of 2002, 733 children at 33 after-school sites in New York City brainstormed, outlined, sketched, wrote, and designed original comic books. The focus was on reading, writing, and vocabulary skills, but the project went further. The children's work represents their lives as urban youth—what they experience, how they view themselves, how they

interact with peers, and how they struggle with daily hardships.

## Why comic books?

Comic books are extremely popular because of their relationship with popular movies (Wax, 2002) and the surging popularity of Japanese animation (Toku, 2001). However, our decision to use them in this project goes beyond those facts. The concept of connecting comic books to academic skills has been around for quite some time, and the connection is fairly obvious. Infuse a comic book story into a grammar exercise, and children may work on the exercise...at least a few seconds longer. However, a more thorough connection between the arts and literacy is formed when children create their own comic books. That connection was highlighted in an article in this journal by Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat (2002), and the focus on the artistic process is upheld by the past decade of arts-education research (see Fiske, 1999).

Along with addressing specific skill areas, The Comic Book Project was designed to explore the social contexts of literacy, from a reading and writing perspective and an artistic perspective. From a reading and writing perspective, Dyson (1993, 2003) emphasized children's need and tendency to explore their own social worlds when they read and write, and that approaches to literacy must offer them opportunities to do so. Dyson stressed the importance of children's life experiences as well as their interactions with popular culture, the latter of which has been explored by many others (Alvermann, Hagood, & Moon, 1999; Morrell, 2002; Newkirk, 2002). Parallel connections between artistic literacy and culture have been made most notably by Wilson (Wilson, 1997; Wilson, Hurwitz, & Wilson, 1987; Wilson & Wilson, 1977, 1979), who demonstrated that children discover meaningful dimensions of their worlds when they can explore them through creative arts, including comic books.

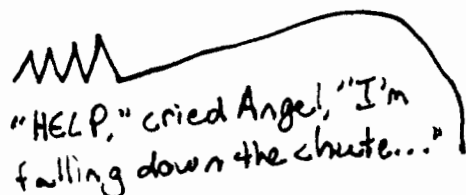
It was time to put the research to the test. With the help of The After-School Corporation, The Partnership for After-School Education, and The Fund of the City of New York, after-school programs volunteered and were selected for participation in The Comic Book Project. The participating children were in grades 5 through 8 from inner-city areas of New York city. Most were identified by their sites as low performing, and more than half of the participating children had limited English proficiency according to the criteria put forth by the New York State Board of Regents.

## Goals of the project

After-school education is founded on a unique paradox: Learning is mandatory but attendance is usually not. Therefore, the main goal of The Comic Book Project was to build literacy and artistic skills while motivating children not only to attend the sessions but also to take ownership of and pride in their work. In addition, I entered the pilot with many questions in mind, which acted as guides for implementing the project:

- Can children with limited English proficiency make literacy connections through pictorial representations?
- Will children who are not performing well in English or who are struggling in all their academic classes stay engaged in a project if it involves an extensive reading and writing component?
- Can inexperienced after-school staff, who may have little or no background in literacy or the arts, successfully implement a project geared toward reading and writing skills?
- Will children who have not been identified as artistically talented, or who have never had artistic experiences, react positively or negatively to the project?

**Figure 1**  
**Sample Line Sentence**  
**from instructor at**  
**training session**



"HELP," cried Angel, "I'm falling down the chute..."

## Staff training workshops

Before the project began with children, it was essential for the instructors at the after-school sites to understand the goals and procedures of The Comic Book Project. The training was an especially important component of the project because after-school instructors are often young and inexperienced (though very enthusiastic) volunteers between the ages of 18 and 22. Therefore, the 46 participating instructors attended a two-hour training workshop on site or at a central training location. The workshop leaders were literacy specialists from Teachers College who explained The Comic Book Project, discussed how to integrate the project with the sites' current curricula, introduced the project components, designed an implementation schedule, discussed the background research, and distributed the project material.

The training session was divided into three parts and began with an open discussion about comic books. It became apparent that many of the instructors had been avid comic book readers as children and that many of their current students read, design, and collect comic books as a hobby. This discussion led into the introduction of comic books as a learning tool, specifically on the visual, textual, creative, and motivational connections that they would aim to build with their students through The Comic Book Project. The

first part of the training also introduced some educational research that has been conducted on comic books as literacy tools.

The second part of the training session was devoted to making connections between traditional literacy and artistic "literacy." This connection focused on basic drawing techniques related to line, shape, color, and perspective—many of which are paralleled by basic writing elements such as tone, grammar, and purpose. One training activity focused on Line Sentences—attendees wrote sentences reflecting the shape of a line, or they drew lines reflecting the shape of a sentence (see Figure 1). The attendees also played a game of Visual Password—the people at the board created visual clues to enable their teams to guess the vocabulary word. The purpose of these activities was to encourage the instructors to make explicit connections between art and writing, which they would convey to their students through The Comic Book Project.

In the last part of the training workshop, the instructors engaged in the process of writing and designing comic books. This enabled them to realize firsthand the challenges that might arise during the process, as well as to discover the many potential benefits of the project. The instructors were divided into groups of four. Each group chose one of four activities to create a minicomic book of four panels. The activities were titled *You Are a Superhero*, *Your Neighborhood as a Comic*, *Mysterious Planet*, and *A Current Event*. The groups first planned their comic books, wrote their manuscripts, and then created their final products (see Figure 2). By the end of the process, the instructors were boisterously creating original comic books, and they were getting very excited about bringing the project into their classrooms.

## Starting the project

After the training session, the instructors brought the project to their after-school sites. Because the project was designed to be flexible, the

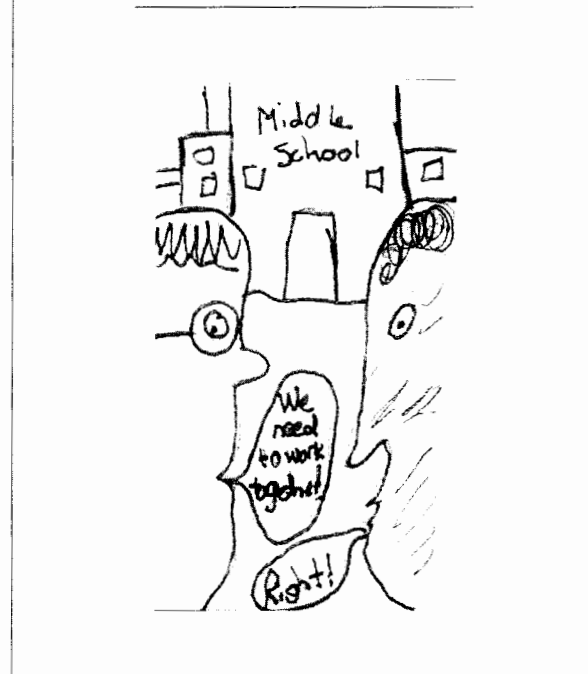
implementation models varied widely from site to site. Many sites elected to start a comic book club, which met once or twice a week in one- to two-hour blocks. Other sites used the project as a "literacy intensive," running 15 consecutive days for one hour each day. The instructor who attended the training session conducted the project with children and acted as the point person and contact for the site.

Most instructors introduced the project with a general class discussion about comic books. Anticipating the project, some of the children brought in their own comic books, and the instructors used these as models for discussion. The instructors pointed out the visual images *and* words in every comic book panel; the children learned the importance of those two factors and how the story would be incomplete without one or the other. The instructors also introduced the games and activities that they learned in the training session. Some instructors, especially those with artistic backgrounds, focused on basic drawing techniques. To highlight the dynamics of the opening session, one site coordinator stated,

I think the kids were skeptical at first about the project, because they didn't believe that they were going to be able to make their own comics. But after spending some time talking about what was going to happen, and also seeing that they really could do it, they got really excited. We have kids who are normally bouncing off the wall, but this really helped them focus. And some of those kids produced incredible work.

In the next session, the children created minicomics on the topics that were introduced in the instructor training workshop. Working in teams, the children planned the comic books by writing outlines. On a separate sheet of paper, they drew four boxes to be the comic book panels. They designed the characters, wrote the dialogue, and colored the backgrounds and foregrounds. The instructors oversaw the process and guided the children based on their own experiences during the training session. Most instructors reported that children learned two things

**Figure 2**  
Sample comic book panel  
from instructor at training  
session



from these minicomic books. First, making a comic book is fun. Second, making a comic book is definitely not easy.

During these first two sessions, some children who did not consider themselves artists had difficulty getting over their inhibitions about creating art. Many of these children were self-conscious about their abilities, particularly the seventh and eighth graders. The instructors reminded the children that some of the most interesting art is the simplest, and they showed some examples of line drawings and minimalist paintings. Some instructors decided to group children based on their interests and abilities, making sure, however, that every child was involved in both the literary and artistic components of the project.

Another challenge at this early point in the project was that some site instructors were themselves uncomfortable with making art, which had not bothered them during the training session. However, when it came time to work with



The manuscript process was by far the most challenging component of The Comic Book Project, and it was cause for 58 children (approximately 9%) to drop out of the project. Yet most children stayed on board. Because participation in the project was not mandatory, the fact that so many children completed their comic books is a testament to the power of the arts (and the abilities of the after-school staff and administrators who executed the project).

The attrition of students can be considered in light of the thoughts of one instructor speaking about a particular child:

He really wanted to do it, but he just got scared when he saw how much writing he was going to have to do. He kind of freaked out. He's been told he's a bad writer for so long that he just doesn't want to try anymore. Somebody suggested to me that I should try to get him to make a comic book with just pictures, and then we could add the words later or as a class or something. But it was too late. He didn't want to come back.

The project was subject to another typical aspect of after-school education: high staff turnover. Out of the original 46 instructors, 12 left their sites during the project (approximately 26%). As one might imagine, the departure of the trained instructors decreased the chances of success for the project and for the children involved. The project developers conducted emergency training workshops for new instructors who joined in the middle of the project. The training focused on the work that children had created to that point in the project and how to guide children to bring that work to completion.

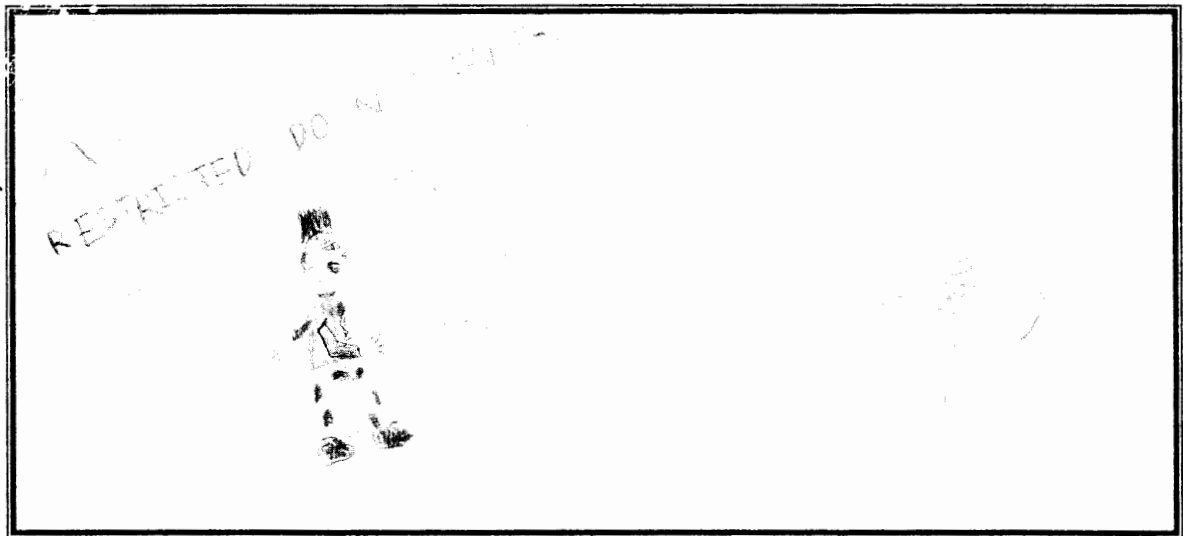
One site had the children "train" the new staff member. In other words, the children brought the new staff member up to speed in terms of the manuscript process and into the comic book creation phase. As the ones who were most invested in the project, the children had excellent ideas for how to see the project to completion.

## Creating the comic books

Once the manuscripts were complete, children spent the next six to eight sessions creating the actual comic books with the aid of a template called the Comic Book Canvas (see Figure 4). Like the Manuscript Starter, the Comic Book Canvas was an eight-page, paper-and-pencil template designed by the project development team at Teachers College and Dark Horse Comics. In some cases, the after-school programs had children work in groups. The group members decided which manuscript to use in creating a comic book, and then they assigned one another jobs. Some groups decided that each member would be responsible for an entire page of the comic book. Other groups assigned each member a character. When it came time for the character to appear, the appropriate team member created the art and wrote the dialogue. Still other groups worked as a production team with an artist, an "inker," a writer, and an editor. Other sites had children work on comic books individually. In doing so, the child used his or her manuscript as the model for the comic book.

During this stage of the process, the children let creativity and teamwork guide them. The instructors found themselves doing very little "teaching," but they remained active mentors and guides in the process—especially when conflicts arose among team members. The instructors did continue to provide literacy coaching and aid in artistic concepts related to perspective and color. Some instructors used this time to create comic books themselves, and they shared their thought processes with the students. As in the manuscript stage, the design stage was reinforced through class discussion and presentation. These discussions prompted some teams to start their comic books over; the children learned how important the planning stage was in relation to the final product. Once the bodies of the comic books were finished, the children designed covers for their comics and provided them with representative titles.

**Figure 4**  
**Sample of student work on Comic Book Canvas**



The results were full-color, eight-page comic books originated and completed by the children. As soon as the comic books were complete, it was obvious that the children had created something very special and that they relished the creative process. Words appeared alongside the art in almost every panel, and the children took great pains to finish every detail of design, color, and text. Many of the children had become so attached to their work that it was difficult for them to hand it over for review.

One site coordinator recalls her inability to keep a straight face as she played comic book tug-of-war with one of her sixth-grade students:

She just didn't want to give it up! I told her that she would get it back, but she really wanted to keep it. I asked her what she was going to do with it. She really didn't know, but I think she never created something like that before. She was afraid that if she gave it up, she wouldn't believe she actually made it.

## **Outcomes**

One surprising outcome of The Comic Book Project arose in the themes about which the chil-

dren wrote. While professional comic books have traditionally been focused on superheroes, science fiction, and fantasized stories, many of the children's comic books were based on the hard reality of living in an inner-city environment. The children's work represents their lives as urban youth. They wrote about themes of drug abuse, gang violence, and harsh family situations, and in some cases the stories had very sad, yet very real, conclusions.

For example, Jose (all student names are pseudonyms), a fifth-grade boy, created a comic book titled *The Competition* in which two gangs compete over territory. One gang member hears the enemy coming and gives a warning (Figure 5, Panel 1), but his friend is asleep (Panel 2). The sleeping gangster is unprepared for the attack (Panel 3), and he gets badly injured (Panel 4). Ten days later, the retaliation occurs (Panel 5), and a big fight ensues (Panels 6, 7, & 8). The gang members who were not killed in the fight get arrested, and they spend the rest of their lives in jail (Panel 9).

Other children's work was more positive and carried a message for their peers, such as a

Figure 5  
Panels from *The Competition*



Panel 1



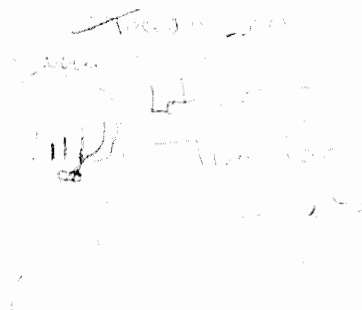
Panel 2



Panel 3



Panel 4



Panel 5



Panel 6



Panel 7



Panel 8



Panel 9



comic book by Jackie, a sixth grader, titled *Truth or Dare*. In her comic book, a group of three girls is in the park with nothing to do (Figure 6, Panel 1). One suggests playing Truth or Dare (Panel 2), and the dare is to buy a pack of cigarettes and smoke one. The girl assigned the dare works up enough courage to go into a store and ask to buy a pack (Panel 3). Despite the store clerk's misgivings, he eventually sells the cigarettes to her (Panel 4). She smokes a cigarette in front of her friends and gets very sick (Panels 5, 6, & 7). Then she has to go to the hospital (Panel 8) where her friends apologize for making the girl smoke. They all promise to never smoke again (Panel 9).

## Responses to the project

Every student and instructor who completed the project received a one-page survey developed by associates at Teachers College. The student survey consisted of 15 multiple-choice items on a 1–5 Likert scale and three open-ended items. The items were focused on perceived literacy impact and perceived motivational impact. The following are some examples of literacy-focused and motivational items on the survey:

- As a result of The Comic Book Project, you are getting better at writing (86% of students responded "agree" or "strongly agree").
- As a result of The Comic Book Project, you look at pictures for clues to a story (88% of students responded "agree" or "strongly agree").
- As a result of The Comic Book Project, you like to write your own stories (92% of students responded "agree" or "strongly agree").
- As a result of The Comic Book Project, you like to draw pictures to go with stories (94% of students responded "agree" or "strongly agree").

The open-ended items asked students to explain what they learned from the project, what they liked most about the project, and what they liked least about the project. Some representative responses included the following:

- I liked drawing my characters and making them up. (fifth-grade girl)
- I was able to tell my own story, and my friend drew the pictures. (sixth-grade boy)
- It was fun, so we had a good time. (seventh-grade boy)
- It was hard to plan the comic book. I liked drawing better. (sixth-grade girl)
- I learned about drawing and writing, and my teacher put my comic up in the class. (fourth-grade boy)

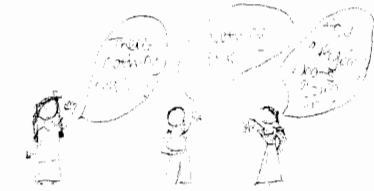
The staff survey paralleled the student survey, and it too focused on literacy and motivational issues. The following are some sample items:

- As a result of The Comic Book Project, your students are getting better at writing (90% of instructors responded "agree" or "strongly agree").
- As a result of The Comic Book Project, your students look at pictures for clues to a story (90% of instructors responded "agree" or "strongly agree").
- As a result of The Comic Book Project, your students like to write their own stories (92% of instructors responded "agree" or "strongly agree").
- As a result of The Comic Book Project, your students like to draw pictures to go with stories (90% of instructors responded "agree" or "strongly agree").

The open-ended items asked instructors to explain what they learned from the project, what they liked most about the project, and what they liked least about the project. Some representative responses included the following:

- Living in the city, these children see a lot of things that aren't so positive. A project like this gives them the chance to express what's happening around them.
- This was the first time that I got my kids to write without complaining about it.
- They were so proud of what they had at the end. Most of them didn't want to give up their comic books.
- This was a time-consuming project. We needed more time for homework help.
- I had some kids who just wanted to draw. I had to work very hard to get them to write, too.

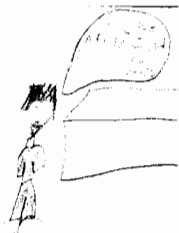
Figure 6  
Panels from *Truth or Dare*



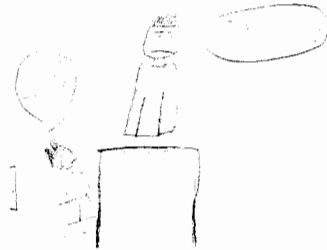
Panel 1



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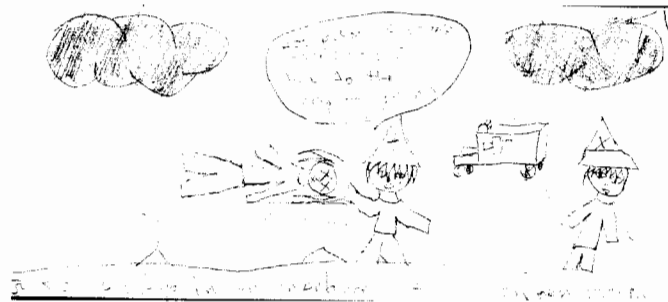
Panel 5



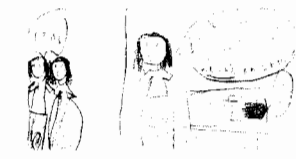
Panel 6



Panel 7



Panel 8



Panel 9

## Meeting the standards

Most after-school educators are just as accountable to state learning standards as are everyday classroom teachers. Even if The Comic Book Project proved to be fun and engaging, it would not be very useful for the students or instructors had the project not met the four New York State Learning Standards for English Language Arts:

- Standard 1: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.
- Standard 2: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.
- Standard 3: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.
- Standard 4: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction.

An analysis of the children's work, along with site observation reports, showed that the project did, in fact, help the children meet the standards, although perhaps in untraditional and unexpected ways. The reading and writing components of all four standards were achieved through their introductory activities, comic book manuscripts, and final comic book productions. The listening and speaking components were achieved through class discussions and group work. Because many children worked in groups, the analysis pertains to the work of the participating children as a whole rather than to individual students.

Regarding Standard 1 (information and understanding), children processed a wealth of information related to the creation of a comic book. Along with absorbing a production process parallel to the traditional writing process, they learned new vocabulary inherent to comic books (e.g., *panels* and *inking*) and art (e.g., *perspective* and *design*). The children who created comic books on themes related to history, current events, and science researched the information

and demonstrated their understanding through the comic book format. Regarding Standard 2 (literary response and expression), the children wrote their stories as a means of literary response and expression, and the art they created supported and bolstered their efforts. Class discussions encouraged further expression as the instructors delved into the reasoning and emotional content behind the stories. Standard 3 (critical analysis and evaluation) was evident toward the end of the manuscript stage. Children took a critical look at their own work and the work of their peers through class discussions and instructor-guided writing sessions. Often this analysis and evaluation led to revision, another important step of the writing process.

Standard 4 (social interaction) was evident throughout The Comic Book Project, and it is a foundation for after-school education itself. Children who worked in groups achieved this standard the most because they had to negotiate their own skills and interests in relation to the other group members. In many cases, this component of the project moved from the realms of literacy and the arts into problem solving, conflict resolution, and social development. The children who created comic books individually achieved the standard through group discussions and class presentations. The children were encouraged to analyze their own work along with that of others. The effect seemed to be children's better understanding of themselves and those around them—a positive result of social interaction.

## Implications for practice

Judging by the students' work, their dedication to the project, and their instructors' observations, many of the children seemed to make progress, particularly in the area of writing. Many of the manuscripts highlighted how students corrected and revised their own work, or demonstrated opportunities for instructors to show students where mistakes were made on a small scale (grammar and mechanics) or a large scale (story

structure and thematic consistency). Also, one can observe a noticeable improvement in writing from the manuscripts to the final comic books—mechanical errors were fixed, story structures were tightened, and character voices were honed.

Instructors and children reported a better understanding of the writing process. Many comic book teams learned the hard way how important it is to plan, and instructors were excited to make the explicit connection to writing an essay. According to the instructors, the children's understanding of and involvement in the process fostered motivational benefits. The children who remained in the project demonstrated interest and a willingness to participate, keeping the goal of their very own comic books in mind. Some of the children who dropped out wished they had stuck with it after seeing their classmates' final products.

The Comic Book Project seemed to have the most marked effect on children with limited English proficiency. These children used the project to tell their own stories, many of them revolving around their first introductions to the United States. Although the children struggled through the manuscript stage, they were able to rely on the pictorial components of the project. According to the instructors, these children's manuscripts and comic books represent more writing than they had produced in English class throughout the entire school year.

Another noticeable impact of the project was on the instructors. Without education degrees and with very little experience working with children, many of the instructors were able to use The Comic Book Project to bridge their experiences and interests with those of the students. Some administrators reported that the project kept more instructors from leaving the after-school education sites than normal, and some instructors had the same impression. Also, the project put the world of teaching into a positive light for several individuals who were considering going into education as a profession. Given today's shortage of qualified, dedicated teachers in

struggling neighborhoods, this side effect of the project was inspirational.

Although the pilot of The Comic Book Project was a fairly large undertaking, individual classroom teachers can replicate the process and results fairly easily. It is important that students understand why they are making comic books, particularly if the project is accomplished in an English language arts class. Some introductory activities help children understand the process and get over any inhibitions they may have. The manuscript is the skeleton of the work, and it is where students may need the most guidance. The final comic books can be created on simple construction paper. The students in The Comic Book Project benefited greatly from discussing their work along the way and learning about other students' work as well.

Literacy means many things to many people, and The Comic Book Project covered many areas of literacy. However, communication and expression are key components of any definition of literacy. The conjunction of building communication skills, being artistically creative, and expressing oneself is a powerful combination realized through the comic book format specifically and the process of making art in general. The process can not only lead to learning pathways but also pathways to life skills, both of which are integral to the success of young people—especially those in the inner city.

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